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ADDICTED TO THE GRIND

History, social expectations
and new ways of working have laid the
groundwork for an increase in work
addiction. Here's how HR can help.

BY KATE NEILSON

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Between 12 and 15 per cent of the employed population suffers from work addiction – an uncontrollable inner compulsion to work excessively hard, says Audrey McGibbon, a chartered occupational psychologist and co-founder of EEK & SENSE.

“The legal profession, finance, health service sectors and those working as entrepreneurs have particularly pronounced levels of work addiction. They’ve been identified at around 25 per cent.”

McGibbon’s data is drawn from statistics published in the *Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* and academic papers cited during her doctorate studies.

The question HR leaders need to ask, she says, is not just, “What can we do to look out for this?” but, “What is our obligation to prevent this from happening?”

Last year, Safe Work Australia introduced a model Code of Practice called Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work, expanding the guidance on risks of harm at work from purely physical to psychosocial for the first time. There’s now more of an onus on employers to address problematic levels of work addiction, especially in at-risk industries.

“Those working in HR can’t afford *not* to know this stuff,” says McGibbon.

“We’re constantly talking about burnout, but burnout is the outcome of unmanaged chronic work-related stress, and work addiction often underpins both stress and burnout. If we’re measuring burnout, it’s already too late.”

History of workaholism

You might think workaholism is a by-product of our ‘always-on’ culture. While that certainly fuels many of the unhealthy behaviours employees exhibit, the history of work devotion goes back further than that – much further.

In the book *The Good Enough Job: What Do We Gain When We Don’t Put Work First*, author Simone Stolzoff outlines how workaholism dates back to the 16th century.

He points out that the Latin word for ‘business’ – *negotium* – translates as ‘not-enjoyable activity’.

“The labour force wasn’t designed to support us in our path to self-fulfilment... to entrust the labour force with such an important part of who we are is really risky.”

ERIN CECCH, SOCIOLOGIST, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, AND AUTHOR

“[And] the ancient Greeks saw work as a curse that prevented people from engaging in the more sublime and worthwhile pursuits of the mind and spirit,” writes Stolzoff.

A few centuries later, the Catholic Church sold ‘indulgences’ pardoning people of their sins and, essentially, allowing them to buy their way into heaven. It was a German theologian named Martin Luther who changed the narrative of work, with his view that humans must work their way into heaven and use their profession as a means to show their dedication to God. French theologian John Calvin expanded on Luther’s thinking, stating that one’s ability to work hard was evidence of “eternal salvation”. Work became akin to a virtuous act and the concept of ‘finding your calling’ was born.

“The thing that differentiates the notion of a calling in the 16th century and what we see today as a calling was that it was tied to a sense of community-building,” says Erin Cech, sociologist, Associate Professor at the University of Michigan and author of *The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfilment at Work Fosters Inequality*.

“There’s a sense that we have to have a self-reflexive project in our lives – that our lives are a narrative we’re crafting, telling the story of who we are, as though it was the narrative arc of a movie.

“As part of that, people often draw on what they do for a job. As we’ve moved from a religiously oriented society, where community-based organisations tied people to a sense of community-based self, we’re now in a

post-industrial, capitalist society. We don’t have those same traditional anchors for who we’re supposed to be.”

This is why so many of us go in search of a professional calling; it’s linked with our innate need to belong to something larger than ourselves.

“This is clearly reflected in the fact that when we ask small children, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’, the answer is a job,” says Cech. “They’re not saying, ‘I want to be a good community member,’ or ‘I want to be kind.’ There’s this deep centrality of what we’re doing in paid employment for our sense of identity.”

Workaholic traits

As well as belonging to certain industries, there are certain personality traits, such as extroversion, that make people more prone to work addiction, says McGibbon.

“Extroverts often crave validation from others, thrive on social interactions and need engagement and recognition, so they’re driven to get these things and are more likely to overcommit and not have good boundaries.”

Research also shows, unsurprisingly, that people who identify as perfectionists and those who struggle to delegate are also at risk.

People’s mood tendencies also contribute, she says – for example, people who have a more pessimistic disposition or are self-critical or critical of others are more at risk.

In addition to recognising individual risk factors, HR managers and leaders should be aware of the culture people are operating in. ➤

“Is it an environment where there’s a high workload? Are they working within really short deadlines? Is it an environment where hard work and long hours are rewarded? These factors immediately heighten the risk, so that’s where an HR manager should be on high alert.”

HR also needs to pay attention to the type of leadership people are exposed to, says McGibbon. Often, we think of toxic leadership as being a catalyst of these types of concerning wellbeing risks. While that’s often true, you also need to be wary of the “really lovely and supportive boss”.

“When you give people a manager who is a joy to work with, a work addict really wants to keep them happy. And what often comes with a lovely manager is lots of autonomy. But in a high-risk environment, having a high level of control and a close supervisory relationship can heighten the risk.”

These people have a high need to please and a high fear of failure, she says.

“Autonomy is being cast in the psychosocial health management space as the panacea of all ails, but if you give too much autonomy to perfectionistic, self-critical, highly motivated extroverts, you could be in trouble.”

Aaron McEwan FAHRI, Vice President of Research and Advisory at Gartner, agrees.

At AHRI’s National Convention in August, he said the typical approach HR leaders and managers have taken is to empower high-performing employees to take ownership of their own performance.

“But we learned from the pandemic that too much autonomy can be damaging,” says

McEwan. “When we remove the guardrails and just let people go, particularly in a performance context, sometimes they don’t know when to stop.”

Gartner research showed 57 per cent of respondents believe that high performers don’t need guidance on how to work.

“Many of us have this inbuilt belief that high performers know what they’re doing and we’re best to just get out of their way,” he says.

Glorifying busyness

One of the most common things you’ll hear when raising your concerns with a work addict is that they don’t mind the workload. They might say, “This is just how I like to work.”

“This mirrors the language of addiction,” says McGibbon. “Everyone else knows they have a problem, but they can’t see it themselves.”

It’s often challenging to bring up, as we tend to talk about work addiction in a flippant manner. We palm it off as ‘caring too much’ or being ‘too dedicated’ to our work. But McGibbon says work addiction should be taken seriously.

“A lot of bosses will still say stuff like, ‘I’ve got this woman who’s a bit of a workaholic, and it’s great because I know I can always get her at short notice and always get what I need.’”

Not only is that bad for the individual’s health, it’s also bad for the company.

McGibbon cites a study which suggests that the most effective managers and leaders work an average of 52 hours a week, and those exceeding 70 hours are rated as less effective.

And that’s not all. Those at 55+ hours are more at risk of work addiction.

“There’s another study that clearly links high levels of workaholism to lower levels of business growth and performance,” she says.

“The messaging should be, ‘We want you to do a good job and to have commitment, but we don’t want dedicated slaves.’”

She hopes to help employers have these important conversations by conducting a wide-scale study in 2024 with industry and academic partners that will assess work addiction in Australia.

Problematic passion

Employees who are driven by a purpose deemed greater than themselves are often aware of the physical and mental implications of overworking – such as a higher risk of heart disease and stroke, and greater rates of depression – but are willing to overlook them.

“We support a Women in Science program where passion can manifest as, ‘I can’t stop. I’d rather sacrifice my life in pursuit of saving the planet,’” says McGibbon.

When ‘passion’ is woven into expectations for how we work, a culture may be ripe for work addiction, says Cech.

“This feeds into a culture of overwork, encouraging white-collar workers to tolerate precarious employment and sacrifice time, money and leisure for work they’re passionate about. Potential employers covet, but won’t compensate, passion among job applicants.”

Cech’s research found two in three people with a college degree rate passion-fuelled work as more important than pay and stability.

This is often more beneficial to employers than workers, she says, as some leaders exploit a passionate employee’s efforts and ignore their obligations to create boundaries around how long and often people are working.

“It can be particularly pernicious when we link passion with competence. Then there’s a general sentiment that people who are passionate about work are better at it.”

Internal versus external

Cech’s research has shown that employers tend to have a preference for passionate job »

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AUDREY MCGIBBON, CHARTERED OCCUPATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND CO-FOUNDER OF EEK & SENSE

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FACTORS OF ADDICTION

Audrey McGibbon, chartered occupational psychologist, co-founder of EEK & SENSE and author of GLWS, says HR and managers should draw parallels with the traditional factors of addiction when assessing if people in their team might be developing an unhealthy relationship with work.

Addiction factor*Salience*How this might look in a work addict

Preoccupied, motivated and willing to expend intense energy and time on work.

Addiction factor*Tolerance*How this might look in a work addict

Work hours creep up over time, they feel a sense of guilt for signing off on time and are irritated if forced to stop work by others.

Addiction factor*Mood Change*How this might look in a work addict

Once they get into their work, their mood shifts. Perhaps they feel more settled, focused or energised, which can be risky if they can't get this feeling from other aspects of life.

Addiction factor*Conflicts in other parts of life*How this might look in a work addict

Work interferes with or prevents engagement in almost every other part of life, such as missing family time or dinners and cancelling social plans.

Addiction factor*Withdrawal*How this might look in a work addict

When on annual leave or at weekends/in the evenings, they can't stop responding to emails or working on a project.

Addiction factor*Relapse*How this might look in a work addict

The best way to treat addiction is abstinence, but not all professionals would have the opportunity or leave balance to take extended time off work to recover.

That's why it's important for employers to step up and put preventative measures in place and to recommend professional support where necessary.

applicants, even for jobs that don't necessarily require passion to perform well.

"I was in Cape Town at a coffee shop. On my coffee cup it said, 'Passionately made by' and then the person's name. They couldn't just offer customer service by making a good latte. They had to perform it in such a way that demonstrated their love and passion for coffee," says Cech.

"[That's] a different level of expectation around the emotional labour of the work."

But work devotion isn't always extrinsically driven. An internal propensity to be overly passionate about work can be equally problematic, she says.

"I'm not saying it's bad to love the work you do, but if work is such a big centrepiece of your sense of identity, there can be a deep, existential risk [for people] given the precarity of the labour market. You may lose that job and, with that, a core part of your sense of self," says Cech.

The antidote to this is to diversify your 'meaning-making portfolio', she says. That means investing time and energy into finding a sense of self outside of paid employment.

"You need to be completely militant about making time and space in your work for that, because the labour force wasn't designed to support us in our path to self-fulfilment. It's designed to support the owners and stakeholders of the places we work for. To entrust the labour force with such an important part of who we are is really risky."

In-built wellbeing

Pre-pandemic, only 15-20 per cent of organisations had a wellbeing strategy, according to Gartner. In 2023, that has jumped to 87 per cent. Yet over a third of employees now feel exhausted, he says.

"The problem is, our employees aren't using the programs we've spent all this money developing," says McEwan. "Why? Well, it could be because we're asking people to attend these 'wellness sessions' during their lunch breaks. We make these things an addition to people's existing workloads.

"When we try to encourage wellness, ironically, we end up creating more fatigue."

"When we ask small children, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?', the answer is a job. They're not saying, 'I want to be a good community member.'"

ERIN CECHE, SOCIOLOGIST, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, AND AUTHOR

Baking wellbeing into your workflow looks like asking questions such as, "Does this approach put any additional pressure on employees?" and "Are we appropriately resourced to take on this project?"

We need to "shrink the footprint of work in our life" from the perspective of time, energy and attention, says Cech.

"From a time perspective, ask questions like, 'How many hours a week are you spending on work?' and 'Are you working into the evenings?' The attention perspective is asking, 'Are you focused on friend and family time, or are you always distracted by [work] emails?'"

"And energy is about, 'To what extent are you expending all the energy you have on work-related things and not saving time for things outside of work?'"

"The more space we allow to have a sense of self outside of work, the more we can be inoculated against the potential devastation from losing a job, or even just having a day or week that doesn't go well."

McGibbon says one of the best ways to keep an eye out for signs of overworking and work addiction is to treat it as you would any other type of addiction – about which she says there are six factors (see page 17).

She also notes that, as with other addictions, people tend to build up a tolerance level, so they have to do/get more and more to feed their addiction. You might notice an employee has started to normalise working until 8pm each night because a 'big day' for

them would mean working into the early hours of the morning, for example.

Awareness training

McGibbon also suggests employers engage in training around awareness of work addiction, as part of existing wellbeing or psychosocial safety training, to help managers understand who might be susceptible.

"Lots of people work long hours. That doesn't make them work addicts. What makes you a work addict is that you can't stop working long hours when there's no justification to do it.

"[We know from] many studies that people who have a compulsive drive to keep working are more prone to poor sleep, depression, heart disease and lower life satisfaction, and more likely to get a divorce. And the kicker is that you can't say it was all worth it, because the data suggests you're viewed as a worse performer in the long run." •••

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