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A study of workaholism in Irish academics

Abstract

Background Workaholism is recognised as a health risk for academics given the open-ended nature of academic work; however current prevalence rates of workaholism in the academic setting are unknown.

Aims To assess the prevalence of workaholism within academics and determine the impact of workaholism on psychological well-being, work-life conflict, work-life fit, job satisfaction and perceived work effort.

Methods Academics in three Irish universities completed a survey including measures of workaholism, psychological well-being, work-life conflict, and job satisfaction. Analysis of variance tests were used to compare workaholism types on the outcome measures.

Results A total of 410 academics completed the survey and were categorised by workaholism type: workaholics (27%), enthusiastic workaholics (23%), relaxed workers (27%) and uninvolved workers (23%). Workaholics reported poorer functioning across all the outcome measures in comparison to the other three groups.

Conclusions This study demonstrates the high levels of workaholism within academia and highlights the negative impact of workaholism on work-related outcomes and psychological well-being. These findings are significant given the highly intensive nature of academic work today and reducing resources within this

sector.

Keywords Academics, workaholism, prevalence, well-being

Introduction

Research highlights many changes in the nature of work over the past few decades, including an increasingly prevalent culture of long working hours and increasing work intensity across many sectors [1]. For example, within academia recent research indicates a culture of increasing work intensity over time [2] often combined with decreasing resources and competing demands [3-4]. The current working situation for many academics differs dramatically from the entrenched public perception of academic work as being a low stress occupation. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that full-time academic work within the university sector involves long working hours [5], heavy work demands [4], high work intensity and considerable pressure to continually increase levels of productivity and performance [2]. Research has also shown that academics regularly use information technology in the work setting, the home setting and beyond to stay switched on to their work [6]. Working practices indicative of workaholism, such as working on weekends, bringing work home, and working in the evenings are also frequently reported in studies of academics [3]. Spence & Robbins [7], who conducted some of the earliest studies of workaholism, noted that academics experience working conditions that may be conducive to workaholism, in that academic work is open-ended and absorbing and each academic is largely responsible for deciding the scope of their workload. Despite greater research attention in recent years on the workaholism personality construct [8] few studies to date have examined the prevalence of workaholism within academia and the impact of workaholism on academics' well-being.

Workaholism is generally considered to be a stable individual characteristic [9]. However, there are numerous definitions of workaholism available, with some conceptualising workaholism by reference to the number of hours worked, while others

conceptualise workaholism as an attitude or an addiction [10]. Most definitions of workaholism agree on the fact that workaholics tend to work exceptionally hard [11] and have an obsessive inner drive to work [12]. Despite differences in how workaholism is defined across studies, research to date shows that workaholism is linked to negative health and psychosocial outcomes, such as burnout, sleep problems, stress, anxiety and depression, ill health, job dissatisfaction and poor performance [10,13]. While the prevalence of workaholism varies depending on the measures of workaholism employed and the samples surveyed [14], it has been estimated that between 5-25% of the working population are workaholics [15].

Given the culture of overwork within academia, where many factors known to be conducive to workaholism are present, an examination of the extent of workaholism within this sector is timely. To study workaholism within academia we employed a definition that treats it as a personal reluctance to disengage from work evidenced by the tendency to work (or to think about work) anytime and anywhere [16], and which derives from Spence & Robbins' [7] Workaholism Battery. These authors previously reported prevalence rates of workaholism of 8% in male academics and 13% in female academics [7].

Within this study, we also investigated the consequences of workaholism, in particular examining differences between workaholics and non-workaholics on measures of well-being, perceived work effort, job satisfaction, and work-life conflict. Potential consequences of workaholism, such as chronic lower job satisfaction and higher levels of work-life conflict, may be detrimental to health in the long term [18, 19]. Additionally, few researchers have examined how workaholism affects the work-family relationship [10]. Therefore within this study we employed two measures of the work-home interface; work-life conflict and work-life fit (the degree to which one's work schedule fits with one's home

life schedule). Based on the extant research on workaholism and our previous investigations [20] we predicted that workaholics would report poorer functioning on measures of psychological well-being, work-life conflict, work-life fit and job satisfaction than those with other working styles, and that workaholics would report higher perceived work demands than other worker groups.

Methods

Academics from three Irish universities were invited to participate in this study via email. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee. The entire base of those with academic appointments was contacted. The request to participate contained a link to an electronic questionnaire survey which was completed by the participants and downloaded into a survey database. Demographic and work-related information was collected, including sex, age, and marital status of the respondents, presence of dependents at home, academic position, hours worked per week, permanency of position (i.e. permanent versus fixed-term contract), length of service, and whether or not the respondent had a full or part time position.

A total of six measures of work characteristics were included in the questionnaire. The measures included were: the WorkBat-R [17], work effort [21], job satisfaction [22], work-life conflict [23], work-life fit [24], and psychological well-being [25]. For a full description of all scales and reliability and validity data, see [20]. In order to categorise the participants by workaholism type, we employed the WorkBat-R measure and categorisation scheme, derived from Spence & Robbins' [7] Workaholism Battery and recommended by McMillan et al. [17]. The WorkBat-R measures two factors: work drive and work enjoyment. Work drive is defined as the level of inner pressure to work, and work enjoyment is defined

as the level of pleasure derived from work. Dichotomization of the two factors at the mean generated four groups: workaholics (characterised by low work enjoyment and high work drive), enthusiastic workaholics (characterised by high work enjoyment and high work drive), relaxed workers (characterised by high work enjoyment and low work drive) and uninvolved workers (characterised by low work enjoyment and low work drive). The work drive factor is regarded as being “the heart of workaholism” and has been significantly associated with negative outcomes [14] therefore, both the relaxed and uninvolved worker groups were considered to be non-workaholics.

INSERT TABLE 1 – Questionnaire Measures

All descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted using SPSS, Version 21. Means and standard deviations were calculated for continuous variables, and frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical level data. Analysis of variance was employed to compare the four workaholism types on the dependent variables of psychological well-being, perceived work effort, job satisfaction, and work-life conflict.

Results

1889 academics were contacted and a response rate of 25% (N=477) was achieved. In total, 67 questionnaires were deemed incomplete, giving a usable sample of 410. Within the study sample men and women were evenly distributed (Table 2). The majority of the sample (69%) were between the ages of 30 and 49. The sample was largely composed of full-time employees (96%) on permanent contracts (89%). The sample fell into four job

categories: professors (14%), senior lecturers (16%), college lecturers (47%), and junior lecturers (23%).

Insert Table 2 – Sample characteristics

In this study, 50% of the academics reported workaholic (high drive) tendencies, with 27% classified as workaholics, 23% classified as enthusiastic workaholics. Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations between the construct measures derived from the questionnaire. Correlations ranged from weak to moderate in strength.

Insert Table 3 – Descriptive Statistics

One-way analysis of variance disclosed significant differences in measures of psychological well-being, perceived work effort, job satisfaction, work-life conflict and work-life fit across the four workaholism types. (Table 4). Post-hoc analysis revealed that both workaholics and enthusiastic workaholics reported significantly higher work effort than relaxed workers and uninvolved workers ($p < .001$). Workaholics reported significantly lower job satisfaction than enthusiastic workaholics and relaxed workers ($p < .001$) and uninvolved workers ($p < .01$). Enthusiastic workaholics also reported significantly higher job satisfaction than uninvolved workers ($p < .01$). In addition, workaholics reported significantly greater work-life conflict than the relaxed workers and the uninvolved workers ($p < .001$). Workaholics reported significantly poorer work-life fit than the enthusiastic workaholics ($p < .01$) and the relaxed workers ($p < .001$). Finally, workaholic academics also reported

poorer psychological well-being than enthusiastic workaholics ($p<.01$), relaxed workers ($p<.001$) and uninvolved workers ($p<.001$).

Insert Table 4 – ANOVA Results

Discussion

In this study, 50% of the surveyed academics reported workaholic (high drive) tendencies, with 27% classified as workaholics and 23% classified as enthusiastic workaholics. Although acknowledging that both groups differ on their scores on the work enjoyment factor, both groups reported high work drive, which is considered as underpinning workaholism. This level of workaholism is far in excess of both the 10% prevalence rate reported in the general population [13], and the prevalence rates previously noted in academia [7].

Academic work is highly vocational, involves significant work absorption and is time intensive. Indeed, total commitment and dedicating long hours to one's subject matter remains an ideal which is glorified in academia [2]. However, high levels of work enjoyment and the open-ended and increasingly intense nature of academic work may give rise to workaholic tendencies and behaviours. If workaholic behaviours are reinforced and rewarded within an increasingly managerial academic setting, this behaviour then becomes a model for new recruits to emulate, creating a self-perpetuating organisational culture conducive to workaholism. Workaholism is found to develop when employees possess predisposing personality characteristics while perceiving an overwork culture in their working environment [1].

Our findings on the consequences of workaholism in academia supported our hypotheses and are broadly in line with previous workaholism research [10]. Specifically, the workaholic academics in this study reported significantly lower levels of job satisfaction and psychological well-being than the enthusiastic workaholics or the non-workaholic groups. Furthermore, both the workaholics and enthusiastic workaholics reported significantly higher perceived work effort than the non-workaholic groups. Although enthusiastic workaholics reported similar levels of work effort when compared with workaholics, they did not report the same levels of negative functioning as the workaholic academics. These findings highlight important similarities and differences between the two workaholic groups.

Workaholics and enthusiastic workaholics can be distinguished by the degree to which they enjoy their work, with workaholics reporting lower work enjoyment. Although some maintain that enthusiastic workaholics are not real workaholics [26] and are more akin to engaged workers, Andreassen [10] argues that this distinction between the two workaholic types is “useful, topical and meaningful”. The pattern of results from this study supports this position. Workaholics reported significantly higher levels of work-life conflict than enthusiastic workaholics and uninvolved workers, and also reported significantly worse work-life fit than the enthusiastic workaholics and relaxed workers. Enthusiastic workaholics in this study appear to be buffered from the negative consequences of workaholism by their high work enjoyment; however, over the long term, in the face of increasing demands and work intensity and decreasing job control, work enjoyment may be threatened.

A number of limitations must be acknowledged in our study. The low response rate to the survey may raise concerns over self-selection and the generalizability of the results. However, the response rate was comparable to other studies conducted with academics; for

example, Cantano et al. [4] noted a 27% responder rate. Additionally we point to indications that “there is little empirical support for the notion that low response rate surveys de facto produce estimates with high non-response bias” [27]. Self-reported measures alone were used; therefore there is the potential for common method variance influencing the results. Finally, our data is cross-sectional; therefore causal inferences cannot be made

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results from this study are important as they highlight a potential threat to the well-being of Irish academics. There are a number of practical implications for the university sector, as a high proportion of the sample reported both workaholic tendencies and low well-being. For example, there may be significant potential for burnout to develop, because workaholics and enthusiastic workaholics perceive their workloads to be more demanding than non-workaholics [28], and such perceptions of high demands may increase the potential for chronic stress in these workers [29]. Furthermore, workaholic behaviour does not necessarily translate into increased productivity, indeed the reverse may be the case [8]. In order to avoid this, universities might consider not rewarding compulsive work behaviours, and helping academics to work more efficiently as opposed to longer [1]. However, this will require challenging existing organisational norms, such as the ideal-worker norm that are deeply embedded in the culture of the university sector [30].

A number of organisational interventions have been recommended to reduce the prevalence of workaholism [10], such as increasing work enjoyment, leadership training and communication, work-life balance and recovery interventions. However, there is a dearth of published studies on workaholism interventions. The implementation of such interventions may be important in order to ensure that universities remain desirable places to work, with the ability to recruit and retain high calibre faculty. Future research should concentrate on

the impact of organisational interventions designed to reduce workaholism and longitudinal analysis of organisational change initiatives on worker well-being.

Key points

- This study demonstrates a high rate of workaholism in Irish academics
- Workaholism in academic personnel is associated with lower job satisfaction, poorer psychological well-being and higher levels of work-life conflict.
- Organisational culture within academia may foster workaholic tendencies

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Table 1: Measures employed in the survey questionnaire

Construct	Number of Items	Example item	Scale	Internal Consistency*	Reference
Workaholism-Drive	7	I seem to have an inner compulsion to work hard	Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"	$\alpha = .75$	McMillan et al., (2002)
Workaholism-Enjoyment	7	My job is more like fun than work		$\alpha = .83$	
Work Demands	5	"I am often pressured to work overtime".	Likert scale ranging from "Disagree" to "Agree, and I am very distressed".	$\alpha = .78$	Siegrist (2006)
Job Satisfaction	10	Please indicate your level of satisfaction with your overall job	Likert scale ranging from "extremely dissatisfied" to "extremely satisfied".	$\alpha = .80$	Warr, Cook, & Wall, (1979).
Work-life conflict*	2	Stress at work makes you irritable at home".	Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"		Wayne, Musisca, & Fleeson, (2004b)
Work-life fit	6	"Taking into account your current work hours and schedule, how well is your work arrangement working for you?"	Likert scale ranging from "very poorly" to "very well".	$\alpha = .78$	Barnett, et al., (1999)
General Well-being	12	Have things tended to get on your nerves and wear you out?	Likert scale ranging from "never" to "all the time"	$\alpha = .71$	Cox, Thirlaway, Gotts, & Cox, (1983).

* Internal consistency (Chronbach's alpha) calculations only computed for scales with greater than 2 items

Table 2: Characteristics of the survey sample respondents

Sex (n=410)	N	%
Male	206	50
Female	204	50
Age (n= 410)		
60 or older	27	7
50-59	79	19
40-49	146	35
30-39	139	39
20-29	19	5
Occupation (n=392)		
Professor	55	14
Senior Lecturer	60	16
College Lecturer	182	47
Junior Lecturer	95	23
Workaholism Type (n=396)		
Workaholic	107	27
Enthusiastic Workaholic	90	23
Relaxed Worker	107	27
Uninvolved Worker	92	23

Table 3: Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations of questionnaire measures

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Job Satisfaction	Work-life Conflict	Work Enjoyment	Work Drive	General Well Being	Work-life fit	Work demands
Job Satisfaction	49.9	9.2		-.369**	.590**	-.231**	-.421**	.463**	-.464**
Work-life conflict	6.7	1.4			-.165**	.418**	.416**	-.451**	.527**
Work enjoyment	23.5	4.7				.020	-.179**	.319**	-.237
Work Drive	25.3	4.4					.342**	-.277**	.407**
General Well-being	31.0	6.7						-.353	.380**
Work-life fit	13.9	3.9							-.538**
Work demands	13.8	4.3							

Note: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$

Table 4: Workaholism type differences on questionnaire measures

Construct	Workaholics		Enthusiastic Workaholics		Relaxed Workers		Uninvolved Workers		F	P	Group Differences
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Work Effort	16.0	4.2	14.7	4.3	11.4	3.4	12.7	3.7	28.089	<.001	1,2 > 3,4 **
Job Satisfaction	44.7	8.5	52.9	8.7	54.7	8.4	48.9	7.8	30.39	<.001	1 < 2,3,4** 2 > 4**
Work-life conflict	7.3	1.3	6.9	1.5	5.9	1.2	6.5	1.4	20.690	<.001	1 > 3,4**
Work-life fit	16.1	4.7	18.5	5.2	21.8	5.1	18.0	5.7	21.253	<.001	1 < 2**, 3**
General Well-being	34.1	6.4	30.9	6.9	29.1	6.1	29.7	6.1	13.010	<.001	1 < 2, 3, 4**

Note: 1 = Workaholics, 2 = enthusiastic workaholics, 3 = relaxed workers, 4 uninvolved workers

** $p \leq .01$