



Umbrella Summary

Workaholism

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is workaholism?

The term was coined 50 years ago and referred to the uncontrollable need to work incessantly (Oates, 1971). Since then, many different definitions have emerged, with variations related to what exactly workaholism looks like (e.g., degree of enjoyment and engagement), why it occurs (e.g., personality), and its outcomes (e.g., on health, work-life balance), among others (Clark, Smith, & Haynes, 2020). Because many of these approaches confuse workaholism with related but distinct concepts (e.g., causes and effects), the following definition has recently been suggested as a more pure description: 1) an inner pressure or compulsion to work, 2) persistent, uncontrollable thoughts about work, 3) feeling negative emotions when not working or when prevented from working, and 4) excessive working that goes beyond what is required and expected (Clark et al., 2020). These four aspects describe the motivation, cognition, emotion, and behavior of workaholism.

Because of the various definitions, there have been several different measures in use. Most of the research thus far has been done using one of the following three measures: (a) *Workaholism Battery* (Spence and Robbins, 1992), (b) the *Work Addiction Risk Test* (Robinson, 1999), and (c) the *Dutch Workaholism Scale* (Schaufeli, Shimazu, & Taris, 2009). To address various limitations of these measures, the 16-item *Multidimensional Workaholism Scale* (MWS) has recently been developed (Clark et al., 2020). The MWS assesses workaholism in a manner consistent with the four-factor definition above. Example items of the four factors include, “There is a pressure inside of me that drives me to work,” “It is difficult for me to stop thinking about work when I stop working,” “I feel upset if I cannot continue to work,” and “I tend to work beyond my job’s requirements” (Clark et al., 2020).

Why is workaholism important?

Workaholism is important because it is associated with many job attitudes, stress indicators, and behaviors. More specifically, workaholism is strongly associated with job stress; moderately associated with burnout, poor physical and emotional health, work-life conflict, and counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., theft, misuse of time or resources, harassment); and modestly connected to organizational commitment and lower job satisfaction (Clark, Michel, Zhdanova, Pui, & Baltes, 2016). Surprisingly, it is moderately and positively related to work enjoyment (Clark et al., 2016). It is unrelated to job performance (Clark et al., 2016), and the connection to turnover is unknown. Thus, even though workaholics enjoy their work to some

extent, they are more likely to have a number of negative experiences, and despite the extra time they invest in working, that additional effort does not result in better performance.

Why contributes to workaholism?

Meta-analytic research on workaholism thus far has focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with workaholism, not on what factors cause workaholism or what strategies can prevent or improve it. Among the many dispositional variables studied, workaholism is most strongly related to being a perfectionist, being unwilling to delegate, having a type A personality (i.e., being aggressive, competitive, and ambitious), and having a tendency to be anxious, upset, or guilty (i.e., negative affect) (Clark et al., 2016). Among work-related variables that have been explored, workaholism is most strongly related to work overload and role conflict (Clark et al., 2016). Finally, people who are workaholics tend to be high in job involvement, which refers to a person's job being a big part of their identity, which is consistent with the inherent mental, emotional, and physical investment they have in their work.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Workaholism is strongly associated with job stress.
- ▶ Workaholism is moderately associated with burnout, poor physical and emotional health, work-life conflict, and counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., theft, misuse of time or resources, harassment).
- ▶ Workaholism is modestly connected to organizational commitment and lower job satisfaction.
- ▶ Workaholism is moderately and positively related to work enjoyment.
- ▶ Workaholism is unrelated to job performance, and the connection to turnover is unknown.
- ▶ Research is needed to understand what factors cause workaholism or what strategies can prevent or improve it.
- ▶ Among the many dispositional variables studied, workaholism is most strongly related to being a perfectionist, being unwilling to delegate, having a type A personality (i.e., being aggressive, competitive, and ambitious), and having a tendency to be anxious, upset, or guilty (i.e., negative affect).
- ▶ Among work-related variables that have been explored, workaholism is most strongly related to work overload and role conflict.
- ▶ Workaholics tend to be very high in job involvement.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers who would like to assess workaholism should consider the 16-item *Multidimensional Workaholism Scale*.

References

Clark, M. A., Michel, J. S., Zhdanova, L., Pui, S. Y., & Baltes, B. B. (2016). All work and no play? A meta-analytic examination of the correlates and outcomes of workaholism. *Journal of Management, 42*, 1836–1873.

Clark, M. A., Smith, R. W., & Haynes, N. J. (2020). The multidimensional workaholism scale: Linking the conceptualization and measurement of workaholism. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 105*, 1281–1307.

Oates, W. E. (1971). *Confessions of a workaholic: The facts about work addiction*. New York: World.

Robinson, B. E. (1999). The Work Addiction Risk Test: Development of a tentative measure of workaholism. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 88*, 199–210.

Schaufeli, W. B., Shimazu, A., & Taris, T. W. (2009). Being driven to work excessively hard, the evaluation of a two-factor measure of workaholism in The Netherlands and Japan. *Cross-Cultural Research, 43*, 320–348.

Spence, J. T. & Robbins, A. S. (1992). Workaholism: Definition, measurement, and preliminary results. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 58*, 160–178.

Author(s)

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Suggested Citation

Paul, M., (2021, January 6). *Umbrella summary: Workaholism*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/workaholism>

For general information about Umbrella Summaries, visit <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella-summaries-faq>

For more information about the QIC-WD, visit qic-wd.org or contact: Michelle Graef, Project Director, at mgraef1@unl.edu.

This Summary was developed with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Grant #HHS-2016-ACF-ACYF-CT-1178. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services.