

When Hard Work Ends

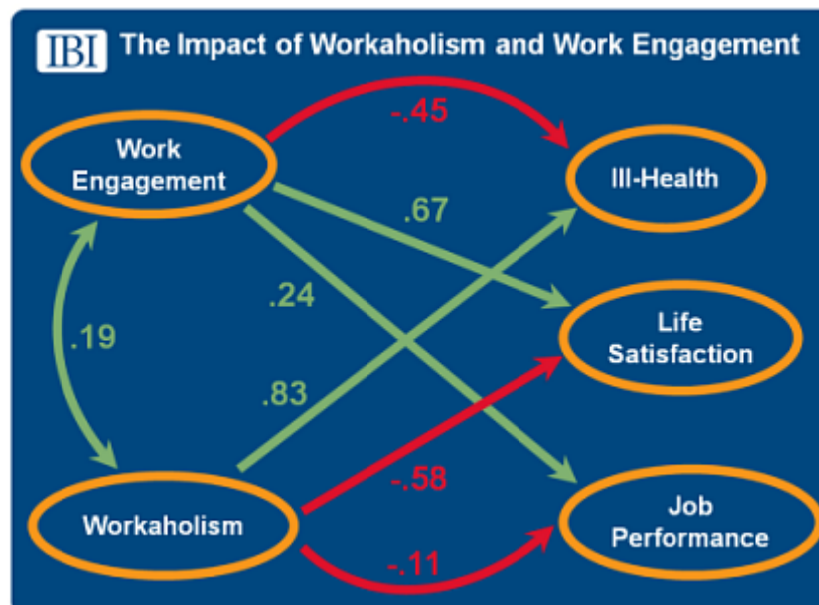
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Background. A decade ago, I was traveling on business and flipped on the television in my hotel room when I returned from dinner. An IBM commercial materialized on the screen: a woman, at the end of the workday in her hotel room, rather harried, papers strewn everywhere, working on an IBM laptop computer. The message to employers: this is the kind of dedicated employee you want and we're going to help maximize her productivity. I wondered: "What happened to the down time you used to have during business travel?"

Pressures flowing from a challenging economy, downsized workforces and growing work demands might lead us to believe that the ideal employee is the one who can put in the 60-hour work week month after month and be maximally productive without a hitch. New research¹ from Japan provides a sobering view: there is a significant difference between "workaholism" and "employee engagement". Those differences have a strong effect on the employee's health, job performance and life satisfaction.

The Study. Workaholism² is characterized by spending a great deal of time on work activities when given discretion to do so, reluctance to disengage from work, and going beyond what is reasonably expected to meet organizational requirements. Work engagement³ is characterized by a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind, dedication and absorption. Highly engaged employees tend to work hard, are involved and fully engrossed in their work. However, they tend not to be compulsive about work.

Researchers surveyed 977 Japanese employees at a construction machinery manufacturing company (the survey response rate was 95%; 776 surveys with complete usable responses). The investigators were particularly interested in how employee engagement and workaholism are related to dimensions of ill-health, job performance and life satisfaction.⁴



The researchers used structural equation models to identify the relationships among the key variables (the strength of the association between each pair of variables is shown in the exhibit above⁵). On every measure, high-levels of work engagement produce more desirable levels of health, satisfaction and job performance than high levels of workaholism. Specifically, researchers found:

1. A weak but positive relationship between workaholism and work engagement; the researchers concluded that the two concepts can be differentiated from one another. Such differentiation is furthered supported by the findings that work engagement and workaholism have opposite relationships to ill-health, life satisfaction and job performance
2. Workaholism has a positive impact on ill-health (that is, it drives poorer health) and is negatively related to job performance and life satisfaction. Workaholism has a stronger influence on health than on either job performance or life satisfaction.
3. Work engagement is negatively related to ill-health (that is, it is associated with better health) and is positively related to job performance and life satisfaction. Work engagement has a stronger influence on life satisfaction, followed by health and job performance.

Commentary. This research challenges the ideal of "workaholic as organizational hero." With increasing pressure on employees to work harder to meet demands of their jobs - particularly as workforces have shrunk - this research provides an important distinction between the compulsion of workaholism and the positive effects of employee engagement. Employers in the short-term may see gains in the early stages of workaholism due to increased work hours bringing greater output, but the research suggests negative consequences of such behavior in the longer term through poorer health and lower job performance.

While this study doesn't include measures of absence lost time, it does investigate job performance (or presenteeism) as it relates to workaholism and to employee engagement. We do know from existing research⁶ that ill-health is a precursor to both absence and presenteeism lost time, and their lost-productivity consequences. The research featured in this Research Insight suggests that employee engagement can be a health-enhancing and job-performance improvement strategy. Employers should consider how these approaches may fit into their more traditional health promotion and health-improvement practices. By minimizing workaholism and maximizing engagement, employers may foster improved employee health and productivity.

Finally, there are some limitations to this work. The survey is a cross sectional design and therefore only contains information for a single survey administration which limits the researchers' ability to prove true "causal" relationships among the items studied. Rather, the research highlights correlational associations among the key factors examined. Nevertheless, it points out the limits of what we should expect from employee work commitment and takes a step in beginning to quantify the downside of workaholic behavior.

1. Shimazu A, Schaufeli B. "Is Workaholism Good or Bad for Employee Well-being? The Disincentiveness of Workaholism and Work Engagement among Japanese Employees." *Industrial Health* 2009, 47, 495-502.

2. The workaholic employee tends to agree with statements that indicate working excessively ("I stay busy and keep many irons in the fire") or compulsively ("I feel guilty when I take time off work").

3. High work engagement is indicated by stronger agreement to questions such as "at my job I feel strong and vigorous," "I am enthusiastic about my job," and "I am immersed in my work."

4. "Workaholism" was measured with the Dutch Workaholism Scale; "work engagement" with the short form of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale; "ill-health" with the Brief Job Stress Questionnaire; "life satisfaction" with a single item on a 4-point Likert scale; and "job performance" with the Health and Work Performance Questionnaire (HPQ). Controls for age, gender and job section were applied in the structural equation models.

5. A value of +1.0 would indicate a perfect positive association - as the value of one variable increases, the other variable increases by the same amount; a value of -1.0 indicates a perfect negative association; and a value of 0 indicates no relationship. We represent negative relationships with a red arrow and positive relationships with a green arrow)

6. For research on the relationship between employee health and lost time outcomes (absence, presenteeism, lost productivity) see IBI's research page <http://ibiweb.org/do/PublicAccess?documentId=792>