Workaholism: a fatal attraction

Anxiety, distress, high blood pressure and the risk of mental health effects. The psychophysical costs of workaholism are the subject of a paper published in the “Journal of Management” by psychologists Franco Fraccaroli and Lorenzo Avanzi of the University of Trento and their colleague Cristian Balducci of the University of Bologna. Researchers recommend to avoid intense workload to prevent addiction.

Trento, 4 August 2016 – (e.b.) Enough is enough. If you work too hard you might get addicted. And if you keep going, you will get hurt. You will forget about your life and interests and your obsession with work will find its way in your holidays, spare time, private life, relationships. With bad consequences on your mental and physical wellbeing. In recent years, the causes and effects of workaholism have been the subject of many studies, and scientists are trying to identify prevention and treatment strategies.

“In modern working life – say Franco Fraccaroli, Lorenzo Avanzi and Cristian Balducci – workers are increasingly exposed to an intensified workload that is almost impossible to manage, and demands for flexibility, initiative taking, and continuous learning. This encourages conditions that lead to a heavy work investment, not only for managerial jobs. Workaholism is a negative type of heavy work investment in which workers work too hard (often well beyond their required hours), but also become work-obsessed, to the point that they can’t take a break from work and experience a sense of discomfort when they do so».

Research by Franco Fraccaroli and Lorenzo Avanzi (respectively full professor and research fellow of Work and Organizational Psychology at the University of Trento) with Cristian Balducci (professor of Work Psychology at the University of Bologna, who earned his PhD from the University of Trento) proves that the outcomes of work addiction are not only psychological (with symptoms of mental distress, anxiety, depression), but physiological too (high blood pressure, for instance). Their studies, with Balducci as leading author, have been published in the Journal of Management, one of the most authoritative journals in the world as concerns applied psychology, management and business. The paper presents the results of two different studies.

The first study

The first study focused on a sample of 311 workers, mostly self-employed people, managers and entrepreneurs; researchers found that participants with strong
workaholic tendencies experienced negative emotions more frequently (for instance, anger, pessimism, discouragement). This happened both when the participants self-reported these feelings and also when a third party (in most cases, the participants’ partners) reported on the affective wellbeing of their partner of family member. The negative impact of workaholism on affective wellbeing was particularly significant among women. It can be said that workaholism does not improve work-family balance, and therefore distress is more pronounced among women. In a subsample of participants, the researchers found that workaholism was positively related to a high systolic blood pressure.

The second study

The second study focused on a group of 235 employees and revealed that a marked workaholism tendency implied a negative impact on mental health after one year, as to point out that the consequences of work addiction can be clinically relevant. The study also found that a workload perceived as excessive strengthened the workaholism tendency. This shed new light on the origins of the phenomenon, which has been so far primarily connected to personality dispositions. It seems therefore that a chronic exposure to intense working conditions and workload, which is increasingly common among workers, leads to workaholism. Balducci and colleagues in fact believe that high job demands make workers invest more resources in their work, and this translates in a stronger mental bond between people and their jobs, making it difficult to take a break.

The researchers’ conclusions

«In conclusion - the authors say – organizations should not encourage workaholic tendencies among their staff and indeed strongly oppose them, to safeguard the wellbeing and vitality of human resources».

The paper, published in the “Journal of Management”, with the title “The Individual "Costs" of Workaholism: An Analysis Based on Multisource and Prospective Data”, is available here: 
http://jom.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/07/21/0149206316658348.full.pdf?ijkey=EREF5bwtFxCUoF4&keytype=finite