

CULTURE

## Work from Home Woes: How Remote Work Can Foster Workaholism

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*In the remote work era, the blurring between work and home risks creating conditions for workaholism.*

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“It haunts me,” says Carrie Johnson, a Global Shipping and Logistics company Director, as she describes her experience working from home after COVID-19 accommodations transitioned to a long-term working-from-home situation. “I walk by my home office on the way to my kitchen and see my laptop and monitors, and it just draws me in. Every notification, every ding – I feel like I have to respond, and I wind up working until 9:00 – 10:00 most nights.”

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This is very different from her experience working in the office. “Pre-COVID, when we were in the office full-time, I would bring my laptop home, but I would only open it up and work on something if it was necessary. Now working from home full-time makes it a lot harder to separate work and home life and find a healthy balance.”

Johnson is not alone in finding it hard to separate work from home life in this new era of remote work. Many employees who are new to working from home (as opposed to working in an office setting) report feeling the “blurring of boundaries” between work life and home life and “always feeling on” (Cutter, 2021). Research indicates these feelings may be justified. The National Bureau of Economic Research examined email and calendar data from over three million workers in 2020. The average workday grew by 48 minutes, and the number of meetings increased by 13% (Jackson et al., 2021). In addition, from March to September 2020, commuters collectively gained 60 million hours by not traveling to the office. However, over 35% of these additional hours were applied to additional work activities (McGinty, 2020). Technology like video conferencing software and smartphones

enables a relatively seamless transition from the office to remote work arrangements. However, these applications have also created an environment where employees are always reachable and tethered to their work (Ishmael, 2021).

Based on data like this, anecdotal stories from friends and colleagues, and our own experiences of working from home permanently even after COVID restrictions ended, we decided to investigate if working from home can lead to workaholism under certain conditions. To that end, we collected time-separated data from approximately 150 remote work professionals (who previously worked in an office environment before COVID-19). Our results suggest that when highly conscientious employees are in low situational strength environments, this can foster conditions that trigger workaholic behavior.

## Understanding Workaholism

The traditional definition of workaholism describes an individual whose compulsion to work is so excessive that it negatively impacts their health, happiness, and relationships (Oates, 1971). Newer definitions describe workaholics as individuals who tend to work harder than necessary and exert more effort than necessary, which leads to negative outcomes in their personal lives (Schaufeli et al., 2008). From an employer's perspective, it is essential to understand this phenomenon to safeguard the well-being of their workforce. Employees who struggle with workaholism report experiencing negative impacts on their physical and mental health as well as burnout (Clark et al., 2016).

Understanding how working from home can lead to workaholism is also important, given that many employees still work remotely. This trend does not appear to be reversing anytime soon. While several high-profile employers like JP Morgan, Boeing, and UPS are requiring workers to return full-time to the office, they are in the minority. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article noted that only 38% of employers at the end of 2023 required employees to spend five days a week in the office compared to 49% that required it at the beginning of 2023 (Cutter, 2024).

# Understanding Situational Strength

Situational strength is best described as the cues received both implicitly and explicitly in a given situation that help individuals understand and undertake the appropriate behavior called for in the situation (Meyer et al., 2010). A hiking trail is an apt metaphor. When situational strength is high, the hiking trail is well-marked and easy to navigate, and getting lost is difficult. When situational strength is weak, the trail is not well marked, hard to traverse, and it is difficult to know if you are even on the right path.

In the workplace context, situational strength comes from three organizational forces: coworkers, supervisors, and top management (Dalal et al., 2011). Coworkers serve as a source for confirming broader organizational norms and information sharing (Morrison, 1993). In addition, coworkers help their peers conceptualize their roles in the organization, provide cues and feedback on work prioritization, reduce role ambiguity, conflict, and overload, and provide emotional support (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Supervisors provide situational strength through task allocation and executing operational goals (DeChurch et al., 2010). Top management is generally removed from regular interaction with most employees, but they provide situational strength by clarifying strategic direction (Alaybek et al., 2017).

Workers who work onsite and can interact with coworkers and supervisors benefit from this strong situational strength environment. Expectations and priorities are better communicated, and workers can understand how their peers handle organizational demands. For example, workers in the office notice when their coworkers leave for the day, which informs their ability to determine when it is acceptable to stop working. However, employees in the work-from-home environment do not benefit from these interactions and cues. Instead, workers rely more on their preferences and judgments to make decisions about their job demands, like deciding on the prioritization of tasks and the appropriate level of effort (Mischel & Peake, 1982). Our research suggests that workers who are high in the personality trait of conscientiousness struggle more with determining the appropriate level of effort their role requires.

# Conscientiousness is Good Until It Isn't

Highly conscientious employees are organizational “MVPs.” This personality trait is characterized by responsibility, reliability, dependability, and the need for achievement (Costa & McCrae, 1992). These workers are more attentive to detail and are highly organized, goal-driven, and committed to the organization (Jackson, 2016). They also tend to be innovative and creative when completing tasks, with high independence (Judge & Zapata, 2015). These traits, in the right organizational contexts, lead to positive outcomes for these individuals and the organizations. However, having too much conscientiousness may not always be advantageous. Research has found curvilinear relationships between conscientiousness, positive health, and job performance (Carter et al., 2014; Carter et al., 2016). This implies that while a certain level of conscientiousness is beneficial, an excess of this trait could lead to negative personal and work outcomes. For example, research has established connections between conscientiousness, perfectionism, and workaholism behavior (Clark et al., 2010; Jackson et al., 2016). Perfectionism in individuals predicts impatience, a compulsion to work, and very high standards (Clark et al., 2010). Furthermore, very high standards are significantly associated with conscientiousness (Clark et al., 2010).

Our research findings suggest that individuals high in conscientiousness may be particularly susceptible to workaholism behavior when going from an office setting to a work-from-home environment. In such cases, the vulnerability to workaholism increases when there is limited guidance on job expectations and an excessive amount of freedom to make decisions without much input from supervisors or coworkers. Our results indicate that the triggering mechanism for this behavior arises from the uncertainty of low situation-strength environments. In these environments, highly conscientious individuals tend to experience guilt, shame, and anxiety about their work due to the ambiguity of their job demands, which triggers the compulsion to work well beyond the demands of their role.

# Embracing Practical Strategies to Prevent Workaholism

In the context of remote work and the prevention of workaholism behavior, it is incumbent for supervisors to create and maintain high situational strength environments where expectations are clear and well communicated. Back to the hiking trail example we used to describe situational strength, supervisors should think of themselves as a “trail guide” who helps their employees stay on the right path by providing detailed instructions, clear timelines, and task-specific templates. By providing this clarity, employees – especially those high in conscientiousness – are empowered to work effectively without feeling overwhelmed or uncertain and avoid the negative outcomes of workaholism.

We recommend some practical strategies supervisors can use to increase situational strength and prevent workaholism:

## ***1. Identifying Workaholism Vulnerability***

Identifying workers who are highly conscientious and thus may be susceptible to workaholism is a crucial first step in prevention. Personality assessments that aid in this determination are available. However, from a practical standpoint, supervisors close to their workers can almost certainly identify their most conscientious employees from their demeanor and the quality of their work output. Once these employees are identified, supervisors can be on the lookout for workaholism behavior.

## ***2. Enhancing Task Clarity***

Employees vulnerable to workaholism can benefit from supervisors driving clarity on task expectations through detailed instructions and desired output. For example, if the supervisor asks for an analysis of an issue, it would be helpful to specify the desired level of detail and the response length. This would help prevent the situation where a workaholic-prone employee toils over a request and produces a lengthy (and time-consuming) analysis when the manager would have been satisfied with a very brief



explanation. Creating a task-specific template would aid in clarity by specifying details about the requested info, desired output, and what format the requestor would like it in (for example, slide format).

### ***3. Defining Timelines***

Ambiguous timelines can catalyze workaholic behaviors by allowing vulnerable workers to believe everything is due immediately. By specifying a clear due date and time for a task, employees know better how to plan their workflow and help alleviate a sense of being overwhelmed. In conjunction, supervisors should also implement a permission structure for employees where it is acceptable to negotiate due dates for a task. For example, suppose a supervisor asks for an analysis to be completed by a date that an employee believes is unrealistic due to other competing priorities or the length of time necessary to complete the task with quality. In that case, employees should feel empowered to communicate this to their supervisor. This gives supervisors greater insight into the demands on their employees so they can decide and communicate the prioritization of tasks. By providing clear deadlines but allowing employees to “push back,” supervisors foster a collaborative environment between themselves and their team.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In conclusion, the rise of remote work experiences sheds light on the complex relationship between situational strength, conscientiousness, emotion, and workaholism. As remote workers navigate an environment of blurred boundaries between their professional and personal lives, it is imperative for managers to mitigate the risk of vulnerable employees becoming workaholics. Supervisors can do so by first recognizing highly conscientious workers who may be prone to this behavior. In addition, supervisors can take practical steps to reduce workaholism vulnerability by creating a supportive culture enhanced with clear and consistent communication, task clarity, and mutually agreed deadlines. By embracing these practical strategies to reinforce situational strength and promote a healthy work-life balance, organizations can safeguard the well-being of organizational “MVPs” in the ever-evolving landscape of remote work.

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