WORK ADDICTION: The “Acceptable” Method of Avoiding Emotions
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We are a “doing” culture that admires accomplishment. Unfortunately, we often achieve at the expense of health, relationships, safety and productivity. Even the community suffers as we spend longer hours at work and devote less time to community service and other volunteer activities (See, for example, Bowling Alone by Putnam). Some individuals, however, are not necessarily the victims of our demanding 24/7 society. Instead they suffer from work addiction, a form of process addiction that looks much like obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Work addiction results in a mood change gained by staying at work to accomplish yet another task. This addictive behavior can be co-morbid with mood disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder and even contribute to suicidal ideation. Unfortunately, acceptance, even admiration, of work addiction is common in our “doing” society. It often becomes the “acceptable” method of burying emotions and avoiding relationships.

Individual motivations leading to work addiction include low self-esteem, “mid life” crisis, depression, unresolved childhood issues, compulsive personality and an unhealthy equation of self-worth to performance. Work addicts cross that fine line between appropriate achievement and a compulsive, driven and often cheerless approach to work. Work addicts are actually inefficient priority abusers who frequently waste time through procrastination and indecisiveness. Work becomes the drug of choice for these addicts who use excessive work to mediate emotional pain, control life and anesthetize unpleasant feelings. Work addicts appear to be dedicated employees
but instead are subtly selfish addicts whose dedication may be attempts to gain approval or control.

Organizations may act as the “pusher”, much like other dysfunctional systems that enable addictions. This occurs when organizations value time on task rather than outputs by attempting to throw time at problems. Work addicted employers encourage emulation, especially among employees who confuse activity with results. As a result organizations suffer because work addiction impedes innovation, creativity and critical thinking. Organizations and individuals should both ask: “at what point does work become an unproductive compulsive behavior lacking both joy and meaning?”

COSTS

The costs to individuals include health and safety risks, inefficient work behaviors, cognitive problems, disrupted relationships and symptoms similar to other addictions (e.g., rigid thinking and progressive involvement). Individual health costs may represent the most significant risks. For example, failure to address disease symptoms, lack of proper diet and exercise, suppressed immune system, inappropriate coping strategies for stress and reduced overall quality of life. Safety risks to individuals result from decreased physical and cognitive reaction times due to fatigue, distraction and lack of focus.

Organizational costs include reduced alertness, safety problems (most industrial accidents result from badly managed stress), absenteeism, higher health costs, increased errors and diminished productivity. Moreover, personality problems, such as work addiction, can create volatile and difficult to manage work issues. Harrison and
Horne (2000) make a compelling case in describing the effects of fatigue and extended hours on productivity, creativity, overall communications and safety.

**SOLUTIONS**

Balance is the key to managing both our work and personal lives. The following tips may help restore that balance.

**Personal Strategies**

♦ Set both realistic and flexible goals at work and in your personal life.

♦ Create and honor healthy boundaries.

♦ Develop and maintain relationships and networks, especially outside of work.

♦ Practice a healthy lifestyle through exercise, proper diet, relaxation techniques and fulfilling hobbies and interests.

♦ Practice moderation.

♦ Seek spiritual and emotional healing.

**Professional Strategies**

♦ Review your job description.

♦ Discuss your duties with your supervisors.

♦ Don’t confuse activity with results.

♦ Practice assertiveness.

♦ Prioritize your activities.

♦ Don’t be afraid to ask for help.

It is in the best interest of organizations to encourage a healthy approach to work. Managing a balanced and productive work force requires emphasis on outputs rather than inputs or activities. Unfortunately, many organizations often reward activity
and time-on-task at the expense of actual output and creative innovation. Organizations need to reframe the work ethic and support employees in working smarter rather than longer. The effective employer is careful to reward production not addiction. Who would you prefer as an employee – a burned out addict or a balanced and creative innovator?

Finally, ultimately this rush to do more may a have more significant impact on overall health than we realize. Again, balance is the key to human physical and emotional well being. Balance includes proper rest, time for family and time for ourselves. Have you ever heard anyone on their death bed express the wish that they had spent more time at work?