

Workaholics: hidden time bombs

THEY reply to emails at midnight, think nothing of a 16-hour day and slam-dunk their KPIs every time. But workaholics can also be moody, impolite and irrational warns Kate Hennessy, and, like it or not, it's your responsibility as the boss to ensure their stress doesn't overcome them.

The Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act states that employers must ensure the health, safety and welfare of all employees. Doing nothing while your best team member slides from hard-working to workaholic may breach your duty of care, particularly if their health suffers as a result.

"The focus on psychological health and wellbeing in the OHS legislation is forcing workplaces to take health matters more seriously," says Ingrid Ozols, Managing Director of Mental Health at Work.

Ensuring workaholic behaviour does not cause stress is especially important in accident-prone workplaces, or those where decision-making has big consequences.

What causes workaholism?

It's important to rule out the possibility that the job is simply too big. Employers should regularly examine employees' workloads, decide if they are excessive and re-allocate the overload. If the requirements of the job seem reasonable, however, and your employee continues to burn the midnight oil, there may be other reasons they are overdoing it.

If workaholism is defined as an unhealthy addiction to work, it makes sense that those with addictive personalities are prime candidates. According to Ozols, people who struggle with moderation in other areas, or have struggled in the past, can be at risk of developing a similar addiction to work.

Monique Leibovitch works with Holistic Services Group Australia, which helps businesses implement work-life balance programs and manage employee stress and morale. Leibovitch depicts varying profiles of people who may develop workaholic tendencies. People likely to exhibit workaholic tendencies:

Enjoy great job satisfaction such that they derive their sense of worth, confidence and belonging from work, rather than the outside world.
Have little job satisfaction but seek praise and approval through work due to self-esteem issues. Use work to escape a difficult home situation because work can seem more 'controllable' than life.

According to Barbara Holmes, Managing Director of Work-Life Balance International, smaller business owners often establish a culture of long working hours, sometimes unintentionally.

"Business owners know they'll reap the rewards of their hard work in the future," says Holmes. "But they are setting the tone and employees might feel they also need to be seen working late."

The signs of workaholism: A quick diagnosis

Holistic Services Group offers the following tips on spotting workaholics:

They put work at the centre of their life and continue to talk and worry about it after hours with friends and family. Their outside interests are not as meaningful as work and they identify primarily as their occupation - for example, "I am a lawyer" not "I am a father".

They are perfectionists who sweat the small details more than other team members. They seem emotionally charged, which might manifest through anger, tears, moodiness, depression, insomnia or acting "wired". They react erratically rather than responding logically.

They are so caught up in their job they don't notice social cues or what's going on around them. Workaholics can also become manic and poor at delegating, adds Holmes. "They might become short-tempered or less tolerant and polite," she says.

Remedies to help workaholics get a life

To help workaholics get a life, managers can take simple first steps, says Leibovitch, such as walking around at five or six pm to switch off lights

and encouraging staff to go home, or chat with them about why they are staying back.

Some other steps to deter workaholic behaviours are:

- Give praise and recognition for working smarter not harder
- Establish an Employee Assistance Program that provides access to counseling or coaching if required
- Encourage outside interests or hobbies that build confidence in other parts of life
- Encourage breaks and discourage eating at desks
- Provide access to stress relief classes at lunchtimes or before or after work, such as yoga, Tai Chi or massage

<http://www.news.com.au/business/story/0,23636,23962068-5012425,00.html>

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