

Driven to excel: A portrait of Canada's workaholics

by Anna Kemeny



Whether it's paid work at the office, volunteer work at the library or unpaid work at home, work is essential for our well-being. Through work we define ourselves, develop our strengths, and take our places in society. Work provides us with direction and gives us goals to reach and hurdles to overcome.¹

Work addiction — better known as workaholism — is a different matter entirely. Like other extremes of behaviour, working excessively long hours does not generally lend itself to a healthy, balanced way of living. Workaholics tend to invest all their energies into their particular area of work to the exclusion of many other parts of life.

According to popular perception, workaholics tend to be middle-aged men in white-collar occupations — the very people who are least likely to be driven to overwork by economic necessity. Many are described as "Type A" personalities. In their search to excel, they often ignore their

1. Killinger, B. 1991. *Workaholics: The Respectable Addicts*. Toronto: Key Porter Books. p. 5.

Data in this article come from the 1998 General Social Survey on time use. The survey interviewed a representative sample of nearly 11,000 Canadians aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces.

Workaholic: In this article “workaholic” refers to all those who answered “yes” to the question “Do you consider yourself a workaholic?” Because the survey did not ask why people felt this way, we do not know what type of workaholics the respondents represent. What we do know is simply that, for whatever reason, they perceived themselves as such.

Researchers divided about dangers of workaholism

Given its derivation from “alcoholic,” the term “workaholic” has understandably negative connotations. But although it has become a household word denoting someone who works unreasonably long hours, no widely accepted definition exists in the literature. Most writing has been clinical or anecdotal. Basic questions of definition have not been addressed and measurement concerns have been avoided.¹ Nonetheless, some of the more common types of workaholics covered in the literature are described below.

Experts’ opinions often conflict about the elements and consequences of workaholism. For example, Barbara Killinger, a clinical psychologist in Toronto, is one of many who see the workaholic personality as obsessive-compulsive and fraught with problems. She describes workaholics as “people who gradually become emotionally crippled and addicted to control and power in a compulsive drive to gain approval and success. For these people work is the fix, the drug that frees them from experiencing the emotional pain of anger, hurt, guilt and fear.”²

Others, for example, researchers Scott, Moore and Miceli, claim that workaholism is not necessarily a negative attribute. They have identified several different types of workaholics. One, the “achievement-

oriented” workaholic, is productive, happy, has a high self-esteem and is driven by enjoyment of work.³ Although these people also put in very long hours, work beyond what is expected, and think about work a lot, they do so because of the challenge it poses and the satisfaction they derive from it. For them work is not an obsession or an escape from a damaged sense of self, and they do not suffer from the same host of problems that their obsessive-compulsive counterparts do.⁴

In addition, many people, although not workaholics in the above two senses, find themselves — perhaps because of financial reasons — caught in a workaholic lifestyle that creates some of the same physical and psychological symptoms that obsessive-compulsive workaholics have. They are exhausted, emotionally burdened, and suffering from stress and relationship problems because of the disproportionate amount of time and emotional energy they put into their jobs.⁵ Still others may be forced into a workaholic lifestyle by the corporate culture of the organizations they work for and by society’s tacit approval of this way of working.

1. Burke, R.J. 1999. “Workaholism in organizations: gender differences.” *Sex Roles* 41, 5/6: 333-345.
2. Killinger, B. 1991. *Workaholics: The Respectable Addicts*. Toronto: Key Porter Books. p. 6.
3. Scott, K.S., K.S. Moore and M.P. Miceli. 1997. “An exploration of the meaning and consequences of workaholism.” *Human Relations* 50, 3: 287-314; Machlowitz, M. 1980. *Workaholics: Living with them, Working with them*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
4. A 1992 study identified one cluster of workaholics characterized by above-average work involvement, who were being driven by an enjoyment of work. Spence, J.T. and A.S. Robbins. 1992. “Workaholism: Definition, measurement and preliminary results.” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 58: 160-178.
5. Robinson, B.E., Ph.D. 1998. *Chained to the Desk: A Guidebook for Workaholics, their Partners and Children, and the Clinicians who Treat them*. New York: New York University Press.

physical and mental health, and inadvertently compromise relationships with family and friends.

This is how the world sees them. But do they really fit this picture? Who are Canada's self-proclaimed workaholics? This article will use the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) on time use to provide a brief profile of people who describe themselves as workaholics and then to investigate how they rate the quality of their lives.

More than one in four Canadians report being workaholics

In 1998, 6.6 million Canadians, or 27% of the population aged 15 and over, considered themselves workaholics. This proportion agrees with studies done in the United States, which estimate that approximately 27% to 30% of the U.S. population is "addicted" to work.² There is, however, no way to establish which types of workaholics these people may be. Some of them are likely to be obsessive-compulsive; others may need to work long hours in order to make ends meet. And still others may be motivated by the satisfaction they derive from their jobs.

Despite the popular myth that workaholics are mostly men, approximately one-quarter of both men and women report thinking of themselves as workaholics.³ And although it tends to occur more often in paid jobs, workaholism is not related exclusively to paid employment; it can occur in many unpaid activities when carried to extremes.

Children make a difference

The proportion of Canadians living alone who report being workaholics is similar to those who are married (including common-law) but have no children: 23% and 25% respectively. Rates of workaholism climb substantially among those with children; for example, 35% of respondents in lone-parent and 34% in two-parent



Parents of children between 5 and 18 years are most likely to perceive themselves as workaholics

		Workaholics
		%
Living arrangements		
Alone		23
Spouse ¹ only		25
Spouse and child(ren)		
Age of youngest child		
Less than 5 years		31
5 to 14 years		34
15 to 18 years		32
18 and over		31
Lone parent		
Age of youngest child		
Less than 5 years		23
5 to 14 years		35
15 to 18 years		36
18 and over		26

1. Includes common-law.
 Note: Percentages refer to population aged 15 and over who reported being workaholics.
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

families with children aged 5 to 14 years profess being workaholics. Of course, children generate considerable amounts of unpaid work in childcare, cooking, cleaning, running errands and many other activities. In addition, most parents of school-aged children also work in the labour force and thus are faced with long-term juggling of work and home responsibilities.

The years from the mid-20s to the mid-50s are the prime working years during which most people are busy investing in their careers and increasing their earning power. Despite this, there are no significant differences between the rates of perceived workaholism of various age groups. It appears that workaholism does not vary on the basis of age.

High-income Canadians more often claim to be workaholics

High levels of income and work addiction seem to go hand in hand. In 1998, 23% of Canadians with personal incomes under \$10,000 reported being

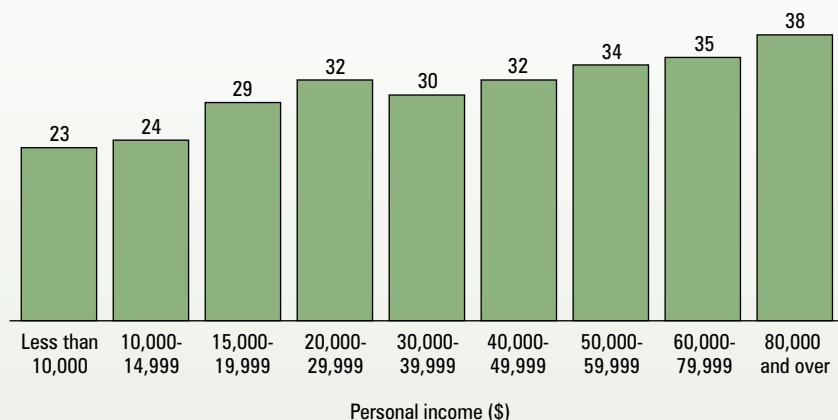
workaholics compared with 36% of those whose income was \$60,000 or over. Because jobs with higher pay often confer more responsibility, it is possible that people in these positions are under more pressure to work long hours and hence develop workaholic tendencies. It may also be that those with innate workaholic tendencies pursue careers that yield more income.

Nonetheless, it is clear that workaholics are represented in all walks of life. Surprising as it may sound, 22% of Canadians with no income also consider themselves workaholics. On closer examination, however, this is not as startling as it first appears. Most

2. Robinson, B.E., Ph.D. 1998. *Chained to the Desk: A Guidebook for Workaholics, their Partners and Children, and the Clinicians who Treat them*. New York: New York University Press. p. 2.

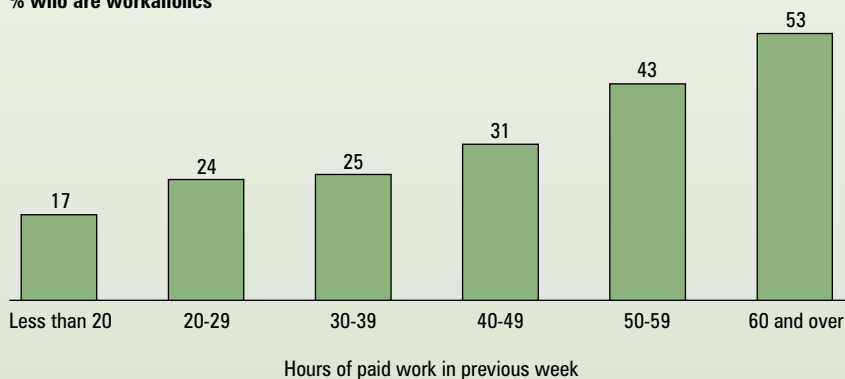
3. In the United States, the number of female workaholics has been climbing as women enter more traditionally male-dominated jobs. Robinson. p. 55.

% who are workaholics



... as well as people who work long hours for pay

% who are workaholics



Note: Percentages refer to population aged 15 and over who reported being workaholics.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

Canadians with no income consist of homemakers, students, retired people, individuals looking for work, and those who are ill. Individuals in each group may have their own reasons for claiming to be workaholics.

For instance, homemakers face a multitude of tasks, such as bringing up children, running errands, cooking, scheduling and keeping house, while students carry out research, perform experiments, take notes and study for exams. In a quest for perfection, it is possible to carry any of these activities to extremes. As for retired people, those looking for work and people who

are ill, their claim to be workaholics may be a reference to their previous work habits or simply a general personality trait that affects their lifestyle regardless of circumstances.

Although work addiction can happen to anyone in any setting, Canadians in management occupations (38%), trades (36%), and processing, manufacturing and utilities jobs (36%) were most likely to consider themselves workaholics. Workers in clerical occupations were least likely to do so (27%). These findings indicate that workaholics are not always in corporate or office jobs.

Over half of people working more than 60 hours a week are workaholics

Although long hours spent at work are in themselves not enough to qualify someone as a workaholic,⁴ the more hours GSS respondents put into paid work, the more likely they were to consider themselves workaholics. Fifty-three percent of those who had worked 60 hours or more at a paid job during the past week report being workaholics compared with 43% who spend 50 to 59 hours on the job and 31% of those who work between 40 and 49 hours.

While workaholics tend to work more hours than others, it's a myth that they work all the time. Work addiction manifests itself in many work styles, patterns, and types. Some workaholics work incessantly, while others go through peaks and valleys or even procrastinate.⁵ Still others spend their time relentlessly obsessing about work regardless of where they are — during family gatherings, at the theatre, on holidays or while at the gym. They may not be at work, but they are working.

Nearly 6 in 10 workaholics worry about lack of family time

Worry, guilt and feelings of anxiety tend to characterize work addicts to a larger degree than other people. While more than half (57%) of self-identified workaholics say they worry about not spending enough time with family and friends, only 35% of non-workaholics feel this way. Clearly,

4. Scott et al. identified three elements of workaholic behaviour patterns: discretionary time spent in work activities, thinking about work when not working, and working beyond organizational requirements. Scott, K.S., K.S. Moore and M.P. Miceli. 1997. "An exploration of the meaning and consequences of workaholism." *Human Relations* 50, 3: 292.

5. Robinson. p. 55.

Do you...	Men		Women	
	Workaholics	Non-workaholics	Workaholics	Non-workaholics
	% who answered "yes"			
Plan to slow down in the coming year	33	21	36	23
Cut down on sleep when you need time	65	46	61	43
Feel that you're constantly under stress trying to accomplish more than you can handle	55	26	61	32
Worry that you don't spend enough time with family and friends	59	35	53	35
Feel trapped in a daily routine	49	33	58	36
Feel that you just don't have time for fun any more	55	28	58	32
Experience a lot of stress ¹	24	13	38	20
Describe yourself a very happy person	34	42	39	42
Feel very satisfied with your life as a whole	30	40	31	37

1. Refers to the 2 weeks preceding the survey.
 Note: Percentages refer to population aged 15 and over.
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

workaholics are aware of the disruption their work style causes in the lives of those around them. This realization, however, is often difficult to translate into action. Achieving balance requires more than cutting back on hours; for obsessive-compulsive workaholics, in particular, it involves deep personal introspection and insights as well as attention to the parts of life that have been neglected.⁶

Psychologists who treat them and researchers who study them point out that families of workaholics often pay the price for this behaviour. According to Diane Fassel, "Workaholics are not emotionally available to their loved ones. They are often preoccupied and make promises they don't keep."⁷ Children frequently grow up without being able to establish a solid relationship with the workaholic parent, while spouses suffer from a sense of abandonment and loneliness. According to many psychologists, workaholism is a major source of marital breakdown.⁸ In addition, because workaholism is accepted and frequently encouraged by society, families of workaholics often receive very little support or understanding

from relatives and friends, who see only a hard worker trying to provide for his or her family.

For obvious reasons, time spent — or not spent — on other areas of life was also of concern to workaholics. They are nearly twice as likely as other Canadians to feel somewhat or very dissatisfied with the way they spent their other time: 26% versus 14%. When work dominates to the exclusion of all else, there simply may not be any time or energy left for other interests or activities.

Workaholics twice as likely as others to feel stressed

In addition to worries about time, notable differences also show up in other areas of emotional well-being. Stress, feelings of helplessness and a life without fun appear to be more of an issue for workaholics than for others. For example, workaholics are twice as likely as other Canadians to report feeling constantly under stress trying to accomplish more than they could handle (58% compared with 29%). Over half feel trapped in a daily routine compared with just one-third of their non-workaholic counterparts,

and nearly six in 10 state that they just don't have time for fun any more, versus three in 10 others.

According to researchers and psychologists, true workaholics are seldom happy. Many are driven by some inner compulsion, or work to overcome low self-esteem and feelings of emptiness. Some say they will feel happy when their tasks are accomplished, but since the work is never done, happiness is always the next project away.⁹ Those who owe their workaholic lifestyles to financial difficulties may not have any of the above problems, but still lead unbalanced, hectic lives which often get in the way of happiness. Indeed, the GSS data show that workaholics are

6. Robinson. p. 37.
 7. Fassel, D. 1990. *Working Ourselves to Death: The High Cost of Workaholism and the Rewards of Recovery*. New York: Harper-Collins. p. 14-15.
 8. Robinson, B.E., Ph.D. 1998. "The workaholic family: a clinical perspective." *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 26: 65-75.
 9. Fassel. p. 16.

significantly less likely than others to report feeling very happy: 36% versus 42%, respectively.

Closely related to happiness is satisfaction with life as a whole. It is, therefore, to be expected that people who are less happy would also be less satisfied. When asked by the GSS if they were very satisfied with their lives, 31% of workaholics compared with 38% of non-workaholics answered "yes". It's not difficult to see why this may be so. People whose identity has been consumed, time and energy robbed and thoughts seized by work are unlikely to feel that life is very satisfying.

Workaholics rate their health worse than others

A variety of health problems ranging from exhaustion and anxiety to high blood pressure are attributed to workaholism.¹⁰ In fact, working longer than the standard 35 to 40 hours a week is thought to be detrimental to health regardless of workaholic tendencies. While Statistics Canada's 1996-97 National Population Health Survey has linked longer work hours with increased chances of weight gain, smoking or alcohol consumption, studies in Japan have associated them with high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.¹¹ It is, therefore, not surprising to find that in 1998 self-reported workaholics were less likely to rate themselves as very satisfied with their health: about 36% compared with 40% of non-workaholics.

Researchers also differ on how much satisfaction workaholics actually get out of their jobs. While most claim that workaholism is an addiction that has nothing to do with pleasure or satisfaction, others maintain that some workaholics are motivated by the pleasure of doing a job well. Data from the GSS indicate that workaholics derive as much satisfaction from their careers as other workers: nearly four in 10 of both

workaholics and other Canadians report feeling very satisfied with their job.

The two groups are also equally likely to report being very satisfied with their finances: 18% of workaholics versus 19% of non-workaholics. At the other end of the spectrum, however, workaholics are more likely to be very dissatisfied with their finances (12% versus 9%).

Self-esteem presents another finding that contradicts some of the research which claims that workaholics have low levels of self-esteem compared with others. GSS data show no difference between workaholics and non-workaholics: around 4 in 10 of both groups report being very satisfied with their self-esteem.

Summary

More than one-quarter of Canadian adults identify themselves as workaholics, with men and women reporting this trait in nearly the same proportions. Certain socio-demographic characteristics appear to be linked with work addiction, among them high levels of income, working very long hours in paid jobs and having children aged 5 to 18.

Those who report being workaholics worry more and are less likely to feel happy or satisfied with life than other Canadians. They feel under

constant stress trying to accomplish more than they can handle, speak of being trapped in a daily routine and complain of never having time for fun. They are also concerned about not spending enough time with family and friends, and feel dissatisfied with the way they spend their other time. On the other hand, workaholics are just as likely to enjoy their jobs, and equally likely to be happy with their finances and their self-esteem as other adults.

10. Haymon, S. 1993. "The relationship of work addiction and depression, anxiety, and anger in college males." (Doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 1992) *Dissertation Abstracts International* 53, 5401B; Oates, W. 1971. *Confessions of a Workaholic*. New York: World; and Spence, J.T. and A.S. Robins. 1992. "Workaholics: Definition, measurement, and preliminary results." *Journal of Personality Assessment* 58: 160-178.

11. Statistics Canada. November 16, 1999. *The Daily*. "Long working hours and health."



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