

# Time escapes me: Workaholics and time perception

by Leslie-Anne Keown

*Work is more fun than fun* – Noel Coward

**W**ork, regardless of how we define it and whether we are paid for it or not, is a core element of our lives. It adds structure to our waking hours – we have somewhere to be, something to do – and it gives us a sense of identity in the larger world outside the personal circle of family and friends. However, there are some people for whom we think work occupies an even more central place in their lives. And if we think the importance they give their work has become exaggerated, we often call these individuals workaholics.

Workaholics are a stereotype of modern life, and they are both praised and criticized. On the one hand, working to the exclusion of all else may be seen as an asset in the corporate world, and in some professions it may be the accepted way of earning promotion. On the other hand, workaholics may be viewed as neglecting aspects of life such as family and leisure that are important for maintaining a healthy equilibrium.

But perhaps more important in any discussion of workaholics is how they perceive themselves. Being a workaholic – over-dedicated and perhaps overwhelmed by their jobs – is part of their identity. The perceived demands of the job has

become the lens through which they view all their other priorities and the time available to fulfill them.

Using data from 2005 General Social Survey on time use, this article looks at those who identify themselves as workaholics and asks if this self-identification affects their quality of life as measured by the balance between work and family time, time pressure and general life satisfaction.

## **Almost one-third of working Canadians say they are workaholics**

Almost one-third of employed Canadians aged 19 to 64 (31%) identify themselves as workaholics. This percentage has not changed since the General Social Survey (GSS) first began collecting these data in 1992.

Since they are so numerous, it is not surprising that real workaholics don't match the pop culture presentation of workaholics as an elite group of high octane over-achievers. They are no more likely than non-workaholics to be young, highly educated, city dwellers or high-income earners (Table 1). With so little actual socio-demographic difference between workaholics and non-workaholics, we must search somewhere else to find the

distinguishing characteristics that separate the two groups.

## **Workaholics have a different work profile**

Although the popular picture of a workaholic may be one of the high-profile professional, this profile appears to be somewhat inaccurate. Only two broad occupational categories showed a higher percentage of self-reported workaholics than the average – management and trades. Professionals and people in technical and clerical occupations had a significantly lower percentage of those who identify as workaholics among their ranks.

The lower level of workaholics amongst those in a professional occupation is somewhat puzzling. Why would managers be workaholics and professionals not be? Perhaps professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, accept that working longer hours are an integral part of their professional role, whereas managers view these conditions as uncompensated but necessary conditions of their position. As for the higher incidence of workaholics in the trades, an over-abundance of work, coupled with a labour shortage in the skilled trades, might be a contributing factor to this phenomenon.

**Table 1 The occupational profile of workaholics and non-workaholics differs but other demographic differences are not evident**

	Non-workaholics	Workaholics
Average age	40.7	39.8
	(% distribution across)	
Male	56	59*
Female	44	41*
<b>Education</b>		
High school diploma or less	29	27
College diploma/some postsecondary	45	45
University degree	26	28
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married/Common-law	69	67
Other	31	33
<b>Household structure</b>		
Alone	11	11
Couple only	24	23
Couple and children	39	40
Single parent and children	6	6
Other	20	20
<b>Live in a census metropolitan area</b>		
No	33	33
Yes	67	67
<b>Personal income</b>		
Less than \$30,000	28	26
\$30,000 to \$60,000	45	45
More than \$60,000	27	29
<b>Occupation</b>		
Management	8	12*
Professional	21	18*
Technical	8	6*
Clerical	17	12*
Sales and service	23	24
Trades	13	17*
Industry	10	11

\* Significant differences between workaholics and non-workaholics at p < .05.  
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2005.

that they were dissatisfied with their work-life balance, compared to about one-fifth of non-workaholics.

This perceived imbalance between the demands of home and work reflects itself in related areas. A much higher percentage of workaholics than non-workaholics report worrying that they do not spend enough time with friends and family, and that they feel under stress to accomplish more than they can handle.

A sense of disequilibrium is echoed in other aspects of the workaholic's life. People who self-identified as workaholics are more likely to report that they have fair or poor health than non-workaholics. A higher percentage also have trouble going to or staying asleep, perhaps because they are more likely to cut back on sleep when they do not have enough time to finish their other goals during the day.

Not only do workaholics report more negative health effects than non-workaholics, they also indicate lower levels of satisfaction with their life overall. Workaholics are also more likely to report being unsatisfied with the way they spend their non-work time, implying that they know this aspect of their lives could be improved.

Interestingly, workaholics are not different than non-workaholics in terms of their satisfaction with their financial situation. This suggests that the drive to work as they do may arise from some other factor than the need to earn more income.

**Workaholics do not enjoy work more but they are less satisfied with life**

The perception of the workaholic as always working does distinguish workaholics from non-workaholics (Chart 1). Workaholics were twice as likely to report they usually worked 50 or more hours per week, at 39% compared with 20% for non-workaholics.

However, they found no more pleasure and satisfaction in their work than non-workaholics. According

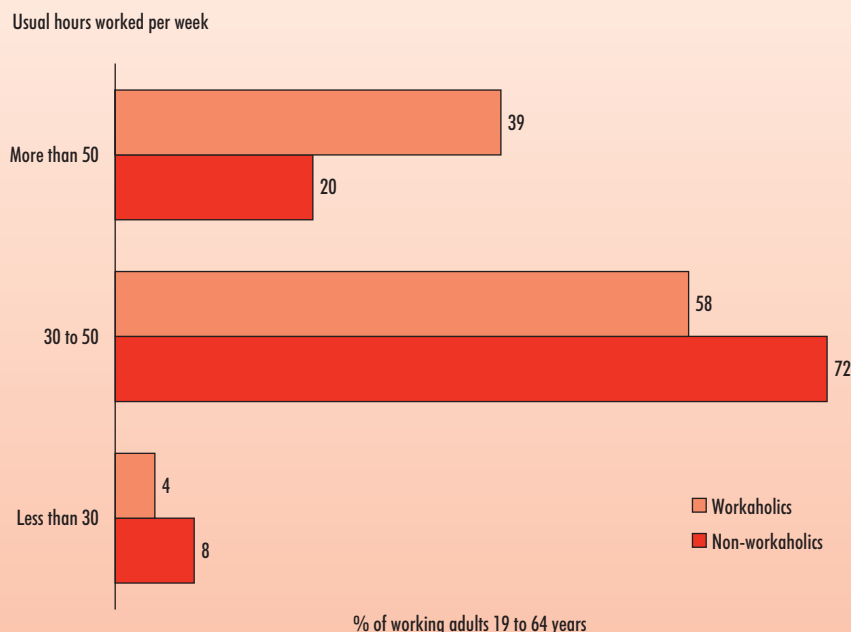
to the 2005 GSS, self-reported workaholics did not report that they enjoyed work more than non-workaholics (Table 2). Nor were they more satisfied with their jobs than other workers. This finding does contradict the results of some previous research.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, a key difference between workaholics and non-workaholics is that workaholics are more likely to say that their work and home lives were out of kilter. One-third of workaholics reported

**Workaholics see time slipping through their fingers**

The differences between people who see themselves as workaholics and those who do not carry over into their perceptions of time pressures. Overall, workaholics appear to find the unsatisfactory way that time is divided between the priorities in their lives is a source of concern; specifically, they seem to believe that the way they spend their time is somehow beyond their control (Table 3).

**Chart 1 Workaholics tend to work more hours than non-workaholics**



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2005.

A higher proportion of workaholics report that they usually feel rushed trying to get through the day (86% versus 73% of non-workaholics). Over half indicate that they feel trapped in a daily routine. More workaholics than non-workaholics feel that they do not accomplish what they set out to do at the beginning of the day (56% versus 44%). Over one-third of workaholics would like to spend more time alone.

Workaholics seem to recognize that they have a problem using their time effectively. With 56% of workaholics saying they feel they do not have time for fun anymore (much higher than the one-third of non-workaholics), many plan to change their ways. One-third of workaholics reported that they plan to slow down in the coming year, compared to one-fifth of non-workaholics. Whether or not they will be successful in gaining more control over their time is not known.

**Table 2 Workaholics are less satisfied with their work life balance and feel more stressed than non-workaholics**

	Overall	Non-workaholics	Workaholics
<b>Average level of satisfaction with...</b>			
		(Maximum = 10.0)	
Life overall	7.7	7.8	7.5*
Non-work time	7.1	7.3	6.6*
Finances	6.6	6.6	6.5
Work	7.4	7.4	7.4
<b>Average level of enjoyment of work</b>			
	3.8	3.8	3.9
<b>Satisfied with work-life balance</b>			
		(% distribution downward)	
No	24	19	34*
Yes	76	81	66*
<b>Self-rated health</b>			
Fair/Poor	10	9	12*
Good/Excellent	90	91	88*
<b>Experience trouble going to or staying asleep</b>			
No	72	74	66*
Yes	28	26	34*
<b>Cut back on sleep when you do not have enough time</b>			
No	45	50	35*
Yes	55	50	65*
<b>Feel under stress to accomplish more than you can handle</b>			
No	59	67	42*
Yes	41	33	58*
<b>Worry that you do not spend enough time with family or friends</b>			
No	49	55	35*
Yes	51	45	65*

\* Significant differences between workaholics and non-workaholics at  $p < .05$ .

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2005.

**Table 3 Workaholics and non-workaholics differ in their perception of time and workaholics feel more stressed about time**

	Overall	Non-workaholics	Workaholics
	(% distribution downward)		
<b>Feel rushed</b>			
Usually	77	73	86*
Occasionally	20	23	12*
Never	3	3	2
<b>Feel under stress when you do not have enough time</b>			
No	38	42	29*
Yes	62	58	71*
<b>Feel trapped in a daily routine</b>			
No	57	61	48*
Yes	43	39	52*
<b>Feel you do not have time for fun anymore</b>			
No	59	66	44*
Yes	41	34	56*
<b>Would like to spend more time alone</b>			
No	70	73	65*
Yes	30	27	35*
<b>Feel like you have not accomplished what you set out to do</b>			
No	52	56	44*
Yes	48	44	56*
<b>Plan to slow down in the coming year</b>			
No	76	80	68*
Yes	24	20	32*

\* Significant differences between workaholics and non-workaholics at  $p < .05$ .  
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2005.

But given that being a workaholic is now part of their identity, we might guess this is an elusive goal.

**Summary**

Almost one-third of working adults perceive themselves as workaholics. Yet discovering what differentiates the workaholic from the non-workaholic is more difficult than it may first appear. Workaholics and non-workaholics do not differ from each other in any socio-demographic way. Workaholics work more hours and have a slightly different occupational profile than non-workaholics, but this is not the distinguishing characteristic between the two groups.

Rather, self-reported workaholics and non-workaholics have distinctively different ways in which they view their time and the way they allocate

that time to their various priorities. Time appears to slip through the workaholic’s fingers. They devote more effort to work, but they derive no more satisfaction or pleasure from it than do non-workaholics. They are dissatisfied with their work-life balance and wish they could spend more time with family and friends. Alternatively, they would like to spend more time alone. Perceived lack of time is a bigger stressor in their everyday lives than it is for non-workaholics. It leaves them feeling rushed, trapped in their daily routines and unable to finish everything they think needs to be done. Overall, time seems to escape them.



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1. Bonebright, C., D. Clay and R. Ankenmann. 2000. "The relationship of workaholism with work-life conflict, life satisfaction, and purpose in life." *Journal of Counselling Psychology*. Vol. 47, no. 4. p. 469-477; Spence, J. and A. Robbins. 1992. "Workaholism: Definition, measurement, and preliminary results." *Journal of Personality Assessment*. Vol. 58, no. 1. p. 160-178.

Data used in this article come from the 2005 General Social Survey on time use, which interviewed Canadians aged 15 and over living in the ten provinces. This study is focused on adults 19 to 64 years old whose main activity during the year was working. The target population is based on approximately 9,700 respondents and represents over 13.4 million Canadians.

**Workaholic:** All respondents who answered "Yes" to the question "Do you consider yourself a workaholic?" This self-identification is based purely on the respondent's perception of time, and not on the actual number of hours they work.

The term "workaholic" is used in the popular literature more than in the field of psychology, where the term "work dependency" is often preferred. The word itself came into use in the 1970s and has become an enduring term in common language. Previous research has suggested that about 1 in 4 individuals perceive themselves as workaholics,<sup>1</sup> and a number of different subtypes have been identified in the

academic literature.<sup>2</sup> Depending on their responses to screening questions, workaholics may be classified as anything from a "work enthusiast" to an "unengaged worker."<sup>3</sup>

For further information on classification of subtypes of workaholics, and on the concept as a whole, see J. Spence and A. Robbins, 1992. "Workaholism: Definition, measurement, and preliminary results." *Journal of Personality Assessment*. Vol. 58, no.1. p.160-178.

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3. Spence and Robbins. 1992.