
22 Passion for work: work engagement versus workaholism

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Introduction

Nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion.
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)

Is passion needed for excellent performance? The question of what predicts outstanding performance at work remains timely and relevant. The term “passion for work” emerged from qualitative research on entrepreneurs’ motivation, and has been defined as a selfish, passionate love for the work (Shane et al., 2003). Passion for work has been proposed as key to understanding entrepreneurial behavior and performance. Passion is “the enthusiasm, joy, and even zeal that come from the energetic and unflagging pursuit of a worthy, challenging and uplifting purpose” (Smilor, 1997, p. 342¹). However, few attempts have been made so far as to operationalize the construct, let alone relate it to entrepreneurial behavior.

The current chapter aims to fill this void, by focusing on work engagement and workaholism as two motivational concepts indicating “passion for work”. In doing so, we follow a dualistic approach analogous to that of Vallerand and his colleagues (Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand, 2008), who studied the psychology of passion toward activities in other life domains such as sports and gambling. We shall first clarify the concepts of work engagement and workaholism, and summarize new empirical evidence on the relationship between work engagement, workaholism and job performance among self-employed individuals versus salaried employees. Finally, we shall outline implications for future research and practice.

Work engagement versus workaholism

Passion towards activities has been defined as a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, find important and in which they spend time and energy on a regular basis (Vallerand, 2008). Two forms of passion have been identified: “harmonious passion” and “obsessive passion”. In the case of harmonious passion, the person controls the activity, and the activity occupies a significant, but not overpowering space in people’s lives. In contrast, in the case of obsessive passion, the activity controls

the person, because of which this activity eventually takes disproportionate space in the person's identity and causes conflicts with other life domains.

In the context of work, two motivational concepts have recently been introduced that bear strong similarities to these two forms of passion. The first concept is work engagement, which is theoretically linked to harmonious passion. Work engagement is defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2006, p. 195). Engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective connection with work activities. They work hard (vigor), are involved with a feeling of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge (are dedicated), and feel happily engrossed (absorbed) in their work. Engaged employees exercise influence over events that affect their lives – they are self-efficacious.

The second concept is workaholism, which can be conceptually linked to obsessive passion. Many conceptualizations of workaholism exist (see, for example, McMillan & O'Driscoll, 2004). In the present chapter, we follow Scott et al. (1997), who summarized three features of workaholism. The first feature is a behavioral component: workaholics are excessively hard workers who spend a great deal of time doing work-related activities. The second feature is a more private behavioral process: workaholics find it difficult to disengage from work, and persistently and frequently think about work when they are not at work. Third, workaholics follow an inner drive, a compulsion, because of which their behavior is quite consistent across situations. The third component can be considered a qualification of the first two (see Schaufeli et al., 2006). We therefore distinguish two aspects of workaholism based on these criteria: excessive working and compulsive working.

Two recent studies provided evidence for the empirical distinction between work engagement and workaholism (Taris et al., 2008, 2010). Confirmatory factor analyses showed that work engagement, working compulsively and working excessively can be distinguished as three separate factors. Moreover, both studies indicated that work engagement and workaholism may relate to an innate tendency to excessively allocate time and thoughts to work and get fully immersed. However, the crucial difference between workaholism and work engagement is that workaholism lacks the positive affective (fun) component of work engagement. In contrast, work engagement does not include the compulsive drive of workaholism.

There are several parallels between, on the one hand, harmonious and obsessive passion, and on the other hand, engagement and workaholism (see Vallerand et al., 2003). For example, people who have developed a

harmonious passion for an activity will likely feel positive affect before, during as well as after performing the activity. In contrast, people who have developed an obsessive passion will likely experience negative emotions during and after performing the activity – guilt or feeling hassled – and frustration and agitation when prevented from engaging in the activity. This would imply that engaged employees experience positive emotions during work, whereas workaholics experience negative emotions.

Work engagement, workaholism and job performance

The concept of work engagement has been coined quite recently in occupational psychology (see Bakker & Leiter, 2010). In addition, although expanding, literature on workaholism to date still predominantly deals with its conceptualization and operationalization (Taris et al., 2008). Hence, studies that provide insight into the relationships between work engagement, workaholism and job performance in an integrated manner are still scarce. Theoretically, there are several reasons why work engagement fosters excellent job performance (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). We mention two explanations here (see also Bakker, ch. 19, this volume). The first explanation relates to positive affect and emotions accompanying work engagement, which have been related to a broader scope of attention and an ability to build up one's resources. Thus, engaged business owners and employees may be more open to new opportunities, and may be better able to build social networks and personal resources than individuals low in engagement. Second, work engagement has been found to predict good health (see Bakker & Leiter, 2010). In turn, good mental and physical health has been found to predict employee performance (Demerouti & Bakker, 2006), and long-term financial business performance for the self-employed (for example, Gorgievski et al., 2000, 2009).

Some studies have indeed shown that engaged employees perform better than their less engaged colleagues (for an overview, see Gorgievski et al., 2010). For example, several studies related general work engagement to both higher self-reported task and contextual performance, and service quality as perceived by customers in the service industry. Furthermore, in a diary study, daily engagement had a positive effect on same and next day's objective financial returns of a fast-food restaurant.

Concerning workaholism, results are more equivocal (see Schaufeli et al., 2006; Taris et al., 2008). According to some authors, workaholics are extremely productive. However, other researchers have claimed that workaholics' performance would not necessarily be good and may even be poor, and comes at a high price for both the individual and the organization. For example, workaholics would have a tendency to make projects larger and more complex than necessary. In addition, they may

suffer from perfectionism, rigidity and inflexibility, and as a consequence would not delegate and potentially create conflicts and difficulties for their co-workers.

Unfortunately, virtually no empirical research has been carried out on the relationship between workaholism and job performance. In a qualitative study, Machlowitz (1980) found workaholics to be both satisfied and productive. In contrast, Burke (2001) found that workaholic behaviors were *not* associated with salary increases. It has been proposed that the conflicting findings can be attributed to differential effects of the two workaholism components (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Whereas working excessively may facilitate performance, working compulsively may impair performance – particularly performance influenced by positive emotions.

Two recent studies investigated relationships between work engagement, workaholism and job performance simultaneously.² The first study compared results of 1,900 Dutch employees and 262 Dutch self-employed individuals (Gorgievski et al., 2009). Study two replicated study one among 295 salaried employees and 196 self-employed individuals in Spain (Gorgievski, 2010). Both studies convincingly showed that work engagement relates positively to self-reported work performance. Using multi-group structural equation modeling, Study 1 showed positive associations of work engagement with task performance ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.05$), contextual performance ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.05$) and innovativeness ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.05$) for Dutch salaried employees, and with task performance ($\beta = 0.44, p < 0.05$) and innovativeness ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.05$), for the Dutch self-employed subsample. Using regression analyses, study 2 showed work engagement predicted task performance, contextual performance and innovativeness for Spanish salaried employees (respectively $\beta = 0.42$; $\beta = 0.37$; and $\beta = 0.33$, all $p < 0.001$) and self-employed individuals (respectively $\beta = 0.42$; $\beta = 0.37$; and $\beta = 0.33$, all $p < 0.001$).

Results concerning workaholism were more equivocal. For Dutch salaried employees, a positive association was found between working excessively and innovativeness ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.05$). However, a negative suppressor effect of working compulsively was found at the same time ($\beta = -0.13, p < 0.05$). For the Dutch self-employed, similar patterns of working excessively and working compulsively were found concerning contextual performance ($\beta = 0.63$ versus $\beta = -0.47, p < 0.05$) and innovativeness ($\beta = 0.53$ versus $\beta = -0.40, p < 0.05$). For Spanish salaried employees, excessive working positively related to contextual performance ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$). For Spanish self-employed, workers working compulsively positively related to task performance ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.05$), which was completely suppressed by working excessively ($\beta = -0.23, p < 0.05$). Working excessively was positively associated with innovativeness ($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.05$).

Future research agenda

From previous research it can be concluded that work engagement overall relates positively to work performance. In contrast, results for workaholism are still highly equivocal. If we want to further our understanding of work engagement versus workaholism and their link to performance, it is crucial to theorize and empirically investigate *how* and *why* they are related.

The role of affect and emotions

One key discriminating element of work engagement versus workaholism is positive versus negative affect. An interesting avenue for future research would therefore be to investigate the differential effects of engagement versus workaholism on different performance criteria that have been shown to depend on affect and emotions, and investigate possible mediation processes. Research could, for example, focus on the role that work engagement and workaholism play in the way people perform specific tasks which prior research has shown to be influenced by affect, such as decision-making strategies (for example, Forgas & George, 2001). Different pathways from work engagement versus workaholism to similar outcomes could be investigated as well, such as the dual pathway to creative performance, one involving positive valence of affect through cognitive fluency, and another involving a negative activation component of affect through persistence (De Dreu et al., 2008).

The role of recovery

Workaholics are willing to make many sacrifices to derive satisfaction from their work. They work excessively long hours, continue in the evenings, during weekends and on holidays. Hence, workaholics may have insufficient time for recovery and suffer poor relationship quality (see Bakker et al., 2010). This lines up with results that have been found for obsessive and harmonious passion. Whereas in case of harmonious passion, people will quit their passionate activities when the costs become too high, people with an obsessive passion will continue at all costs, and will not shift their focus towards recuperation. Indeed, a recent diary study (ibid.) indicated that employees who scored highest on workaholism were most likely to work in the evening, whereas at the same time, they showed the strongest negative relationship between time spent on working in the evening and vigor, recovery, and happiness. Not surprisingly, in several studies, workaholism has been found predictive of ill-health among self-employed individuals (Taris et al., 2008) and employees (Burke, 2001; Burke & Matthiesen, 2004). As already mentioned, poor health may predict poor performance.

Reversed causation

Finally, recursive processes would be an interesting avenue for further research. For example, based on the cognitive activation theory of stress (Andreassen et al., 2007) it can be proposed that 'enthusiastic' workaholism (comparable to work engagement) versus 'non-enthusiastic' workaholism results from high versus low performance expectancies, which may be based on feedback concerning current performance. Propositions concerning reversed causation could also build on conservation of resources theory (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008), which would typically focus on explanations centered on resource gains and losses. Positive gain spirals of work engagement and resources have been identified. Good job performance can be expected to be part of such self-enhancing gain spirals, because it may predict the gain of significant job and personal resources. Whether similar processes might occur involving workaholism remains tentative. The crucial issue may be that over a longer period of time, workaholics can be expected to persist longer in their work activities, despite prevailing evidence of performance deficiencies, than engaged workers do. Hence, they may get more deeply entrenched into negative spirals of poor work performance and resource loss in other domains. As a consequence, highly significant resources of belonging and self-esteem may become more and more dependent on their achievements in the work domain, which may be further ground for more severe workaholism.

Implications for research designs

Investigating processes demands the use of longitudinal designs. Excellent tools for studying daily processes centered on cognitions, affect and behavior on- and off-work would be diary studies and the day reconstruction method (Kahneman et al., 2004). This could be combined with a longer-term follow-up measurement of performance or ultimate goal attainment. Concerning possible reversed causal effects of performance on work engagement, both diary studies and long-term follow-up studies of a few months have proved useful, because such effects may occur both simultaneously and over longer time lags. Similar research designs might prove useful to investigate relationships between workaholism and job performance. However, because workaholism may be far more stable over time than work engagement, longer time lags of several years may be necessary in order to investigate whether work performance plays a role in how people develop workaholism. Researchers interested in investigating how workaholism develops may also wish to focus on specific samples, such as adolescents and people just entering the labor market.

Practical implications

To conclude, research on the relationship between work engagement, workaholism and performance to date shows that work engagement is indeed key to excellent performance. In contrast, there is no evidence showing that workaholism would improve (organizational) performance at all. Hence, for both employees and self-employed workers it is important not only to increase work engagement (see Bakker, ch. 19, this volume), but also to prevent workaholism. Interventions aimed at preventing workaholism are typically individual level. For example, in order to prevent negative feelings when not working, predictability and controllability may be increased through planning of activities. Workaholics may especially benefit from actively planning recovery activities, such as engaging in sports after work hours.

Notes

1. In order to keep the article short we have included a minimum number of references. A complete reference list can be obtained from the first author.
2. Details of both studies can be obtained from the first author.

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