



# print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: WORK HABITS

## Workaholics need to keep it all in perspective

**SUSAN PINKER**

spinker@globeandmail.com

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**Dear Susan,**

Christmas coming on top of the financial crisis means I feel more stressed than usual. I'm a senior manager in an essential division and there's not much risk of losing my job. However, I feel pressure to put in even more hours than I did before and have stopped working out at the gym to get work (and Christmas errands) done. I'm pushed to the max but those reporting to me don't seem as motivated. How should I react?

- *I'm Committed*

Print Edition - Section Front



**Dear Committed,**

Work a little less and go to the gym a little more. Do not put the thumbscrews to your employees - it will do no good. Punitive measures and threats are more likely to turn off or burn out your best workers than motivate them. When you turn up the heat, your best talent - the people you trained and groomed and who, therefore, have the most options - will be most likely to defect at the first opportunity. And that will likely increase your stress, not reduce it.

Second, your workaholicism is particular to you. If working more doesn't give you a greater sense of productivity and being in control, why do you think it will have this effect on others?

Feeling overdedicated and overwhelmed by one's job is common enough - about one third of Canadians say they are workaholics, according to a Statistics Canada survey, and those who identify themselves as such are more likely to work in management or the trades than anywhere else. Yet, despite being twice as likely to put in more than 50 hours a week, workaholics do not enjoy their work more, the survey found. Although they tend to earn more, they're not more satisfied with their lives. They're not happier. They simply feel compelled to work those hours, even if they know it's a bad habit.

This pattern makes workaholicism more like an addiction than most of us recognize, according to two economists, Daniel Hamermesh at the University of Texas at Austin and Joel

Slemrod at the University of Michigan. In a recent paper, they showed how workaholism is the mirror image of smoking, alcoholism, binge-eating and gambling, because these self-destructive behaviours persist despite the costs. Heart disease, compromised family relationships, reduced joie-de-vivre - not to mention a shorter lifespan - are hardly disincentives to the addicted, one reason why these two economists propose that governments consider taxing people who overwork the way they tax cigarettes and alcohol. Plainly put, in the short term, working extreme hours might feel like a right thing to do, but in the long term this behaviour costs society money.

It seems counterintuitive in the midst of the downturn to advise you to work a little less. But no matter how much you work, you still feel that there aren't enough hours in the day, right? In this environment, the only way to seize control is to decide how you want to spend your most limited resource of all - your own time.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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