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Work addiction is serious



by **Piet Naude**: Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic Affairs, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and Business LIVE columnist.

Industrial psychologists tell us that work has both an objective and a subjective meaning. The first relates to the visible and invisible outputs arising from your work; you derive pleasure and pride from a completed task, product or project.

That is why Karl Marx was so critical of early industrial capitalism: workers work on an assembly line and do not own the means of production. But more - they are alienated from the product as they play a small part in its manufacturing without ever feeling attached to the final product. This leads to monotony and loss of objective meaning.

The subjective meaning of work relates to the inner satisfaction of being able to work. In SA this is indeed a great privilege. We know the unemployment figures are sky high. That is why the loss of a job is much more than the loss of income. In a society driven chiefly by material values and the prestige associated with power, job loss constitutes a serious personal loss of status and meaning.

The problem arises when you derive meaning chiefly and only from work: You focus so exclusively on work and work-related matters that it starts to occupy your whole life and all your available time. There is thus not space to practice other meaning-creating activities: no sport (except to energise for work again); no hobby (this is a waste of time and will get a chance "one day"); no friends (except those required for a business network).

Because you spend enormous physical and emotional energy at work, you return home empty-hearted. Those closest to you - you spouse and your children who did not ask to be born - are footnotes in the big story of your life and career. Women are particularly vulnerable as they live in the constant tension of social expectations and fighting the glass ceiling in a man's world. Men are increasingly suffering too as new expectations and role confusion set in.

The relational price for advancement and success are very, very high and you only pay that after the fact.

The addiction to work has the same structure as any other addiction. You cannot do without the substance - your Blackberry is always on and you feel anxiety if you are not "in touch" or busy with work related matters. Check the anxious people on the airport buses.

Increasingly your conversations become work-only matters. You are so obsessed that you do not even realise how boring and one-track minded you are. You feel smart and you think you impress others, but in fact you are socially quite stupid.

What is more: If you are "off duty", you do not enjoy it. Firstly, because no other activity - no matter how good in itself - provides meaning to you. Good things that other people enjoy make no sense to you. Deep inside you detest them "for doing nothing" and for "not being focused".

Secondly, you cannot enjoy free time because you are filled with feelings of guilt and remorse that you do not

work. Even if you do not really have to work, you think of a reason to create work. Are you not an over-achiever compared to others who do just what is expected of them?

Like with all addiction, denial is the name of the game. When your wife or children or good friends warn and plead with you to restore and keep up healthy relations, you flatly deny that you work too hard. There is always a rationalisation: "I just got promotion and need to settle in. This big project is going to make or break us." And so forth. There is always a good reason.

The biggest and best rationalisation is to mask the deep selfish nature of your lifestyle by presenting what you do as if it were for others. "I do it for you to go to private schools", you tell the children. "I do it for us to have a good standard of living and pension", you tell your wife. But in the meantime life and its most significant moments silently and surely pass you by.

Like all addiction this is also a road to physical self-destruction. Your GP warns you to slow down and not to ignore the vital signals. Your psychiatrist makes clear it is a life-style choice. But deep inside you are so far down the road that you consider a by-pass operation as an honour. You even open your shirt to show people the long cut, and you tell with glee that "I already walked about the ward on the third day".

At your funeral people praise you for your commitment and loyalty to the organisation. A month later, no one even mentions your name.

Life - so that was it...



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