Managing Workaholics: A 12-Step Program to Help Them Find Balance

Quick, think of the hardest working employee in your company.

Does he/she put in long hours … take minimal vacation time … stay connected 24/7? What sounds like a high-quality, hard-working employee may actually be a workaholic.

Should you care? Yes. And as a manager or HR professional, it's your job to know the risks and try to help the person find some work-life balance.

What is it? In his book *Chained to the Desk,* psychotherapist Bryan Robinson defines the problem "an obsessive compulsive disorder that manifests itself through self-imposed demands, an inability to regulate work habits, and an overindulgence in work to the exclusion of most other activities."

Maybe this person is always the first in the office and the last to leave, has difficulty delegating, hordes work, feels pressure to be perfect and skips breaks.

Beware the legal risks: in addition to the obvious risk of burnout, workaholics can become sleep deprived, which can result in shoddy work and on-the-job accidents.

"Work addiction" won't likely rise to the level of a disability protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). But employees could easily show that physical ailment triggered by their workaholic lifestyle—high blood pressure, carpal tunnel syndrome, anxiety disorders, etc.—could put the person in an ADA job-protected category. These ailments also lead to overuse of health insurance and workers' comp claims.

Plus, since smartphones and laptops let employees stay connected during all hours of the day, workaholics could spark unanticipated overtime costs or a pay-related lawsuit.

Finding balance: 12 tips

Suspect you're managing a workaholic? Here are tips to help the employee find balance, and your company cut costs and liability:

1. Don't praise or reward long hours. Performance results, not face time, should be the catalyst for rewards and accolades.

2. Create work boundaries. Don't let employees take work home without permission. Stress that they are prohibited from tending to work matters while on breaks or on vacation.

3. Establish an overtime policy. Require hourly employees to get a manager's approval for any overtime hours. But realize that you need to pay overtime, even if it's not approved.

4. Discipline those who cross established boundaries. Express appreciation for the employee's desire, but explain the importance of following staff rules. Start with a verbal warning.

5. Help set priorities. When workaholics know that A and B are must-do projects, but C and D are something for next month, they're more able to focus their time and energy.

6. Monitor employee workloads to ensure that taking work home or staying late isn't the only way for them to complete their assignments.

7. Ease the burden. If workloads appear to be the problem, do what it takes to lighten the load (delegate tasks to others, hire a new staff or help the employee prioritize assignments).

8. Celebrate work/life balance. When employees ask to leave early to attend a child's soccer game or take the dog to an obedience class, accommodate them if possible.

9. Lead by example. If you're an all-work-and-no-play person, employees may assume that it's the only way to get ahead.

10. Express your concern in terms of performance. Don't say: *"You're a workaholic. Stop working so much."* Say: *"I've noticed that you've been putting in 60 hours a week, but only producing 20 hours of work. Why?"* Then create an action plan for improvement.

11. Consult with IT to deny general employee access to the company network and work site after certain hours or on weekends/holidays.

12. Educate employees of the risks. Post information on a bulletin board. Workaholics Anonymous provides free materials and a 20-question risk assessment online (**www.workaholics-anonymous.org**).