

# Workaholics on site! Sustainability of site managers' work situations?

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## Abstract

Site-managerial practice in construction has been depicted as a 'muddling through', being everywhere at the same time and skilfully solving problems as these crop up. The purpose of this paper is to explore work patterns and related well-being implications of site managers in construction. Drawing on the work-life stories of 21 site managers, which have been analysed using narrative analysis we argue that muddling through put high demands on these managers' abilities and possibilities of coping with and balancing their work situations. In all the accounts, several features of workaholism were identified as driving forces, often leading to negative well-being symptoms. The site managers were passionate about their work, but deplored organisational and institutional constraints, which mostly obstructed rather than supported or facilitated their work. This resulted in periods of exhaustion and stress, leaving little energy over for family and life outside work. We conclude that the warnings we perceive concerning the unsustainable work situations of site managers warrant further research.

**Keywords:** muddling through, site managers, stress, well-being, workaholism

# 1. Introduction

Recent studies (Styhre, 2011; 2012) have depicted the work of construction site managers as a “muddling through”; they skilfully solve problems as these inevitably crop up, and they try to be everywhere at the same time. It is argued that this behaviour is produced by the masculine culture in construction and puts high demands on managers’ abilities to cope with their work situations. These and other studies witness that over the last two decades, little has changed in the behaviour and attitudes of site managers (e.g. Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015). What has changed, however, is the nature of site managers’ work: more areas of responsibility and stricter accountability seem to be prevalent trends. Seen from a social sustainability perspective, the scenario does not bode well for the well-being of these managers. Research in the late 90s and early 2000 warned that apart from being one of the most demanding jobs in the construction process, requiring particular skill sets and experience, job dissatisfaction and stress among site managers seemed to be higher than among other middle managerial categories (e.g. Djerbani, 1996; Fraser 2000; Haynes and Love, 2004; Lingard and Francis 2004). These conditions are widespread still today (Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Dossick and Neff, 2011; Styhre 2011; Mäki and Kerosuo 2015), and warrant qualitative studies of the lived work-life situations of middle managers in the industry.

Drawing on the studies cited above and on interviews with site managers in several representative large and SMEs constructors in Sweden, we explore the work patterns and related well-being implications for site managers. Our data show that all the site managers interviewed exhibit one common characteristic: they are over-achievers, or as we argue workaholics. The aim of this paper is to examine the site managers’ experiences of work and well-being, and reveal possible connections between (i) involvement with work, drive and work enjoyment and (ii) well-being.

## 2. Framing: well-being and workaholism

Research on well-being, especially within psychology is extensive. Journals such as *Personality and Individual Differences* report on its connections with personality (Garcia, 2011), attachment (Karreman and Vingerhoets, 2012), connectedness to nature (Howell et al, 2011) and emotional intelligence (Extremera et al, 2011), among other interesting themes. Well-being is also one of the core concepts in sociology and public policy (Jordan, 2008). Within business and management, and HRM specifically, it is a relatively new area of interest. The ‘business case’ has tended to trump the ethical or moral argument about ‘employee welfare’ or ‘employee focus’ (Van Buren III et al, 2011). While some models of HRM, such as the Business Partnering approach (Ulrich, 1997) perhaps began as an attempt to redress this imbalance, practice quickly revised the ideas, and so Ulrich’s complete model became the three-legged stool. The business focus came to dominate, pushing well-being to the side.

Recent developments in the HRM literature have begun to engage more seriously with concepts such as well-being. The justification or rationale for this interest may stem from practical

concerns about absenteeism and also presenteeism, and stress in particular (CIPD, 2013), but also renewed importance of ethics (Losey et al, 2005: 332). The practitioner press has become inundated with reports and papers on stress as a key concern in the modern workplace, and well-being initiatives are designed to address this issue (see for example the many CIPD resources, including reports and 'how to' guides on well-being at [www.cipd.co.uk](http://www.cipd.co.uk)). However well-intentioned organisational well-being initiatives may just be treating the symptoms of much more severe concerns within the contemporary workplace instead of addressing the actual problems that lead to experiences of stress. On the level of the individual, 'workaholism' is one relevant construct that may explain workplace behaviours related to presenteeism and maintenance of patterns of work that lead to stress.

Workaholism is a term that refers to an employee's strong, irresistible inner drive that tends to result in working excessively hard (Spence and Robbins, 1992; Schaufeli et al, 2008:175). Behaviour patterns typical for workaholics include: compulsive-dependency, perfectionism and achievement-orientation (Burke, 2000). Over the past decades, workaholism has often been seen in a positive light, characterising the corporate ideal worker: "an employer's dream" (Bonebright et al, 2000; Burke, 2000). This view is based on the workaholic-triad that consists of work involvement, drive and work enjoyment (Spence and Robbins, 1992; Burke, 2000; Schaufeli et al, 2008). Different combinations of these three elements are said to produce six types of workaholism as shown in Table 1 below.

More recently increasing concerns over excessive work and related stress and potential burnout have initiated interest in examining the downsides of workaholism. Studies that consider workaholism and well-being outcomes tend to fall into two types: those that closely link workaholism and related well-being outcomes (e.g. Bonebright et al, 2000; Burke, 2000), and those that argue that the six types of workaholism and different types of well-being outcomes are best considered separately (e.g. Schaufeli et al, 2008).

The studies that closely link workaholism and related well-being outcomes (e.g. Bonebright et al, 2000; Burke, 2000) tend to argue that work context and managers play a significant role in developing workaholism and maintaining such behaviours (e.g. Burke, 2000), and that specific types of workaholism can be linked to particular well-being outcomes (Bonebright et al, 2000). For example the non-enthusiastic workaholics have been found to have significantly more work-life conflict and significantly less life satisfaction and purpose in life than non-workaholics (ibid). Also, enthusiastic workaholics have been found to have significantly more life satisfaction and purpose in life than non-enthusiastic workaholics (ibid).

In contrast, those that argue that the six types of workaholism (after Spence and Robbins, 1992) and different types of well-being outcomes are best considered separately (e.g. Schaufeli et al, 2008) show that workaholism and burnout (possible negative well-being outcome) and work engagement (possible positive well-being outcome) are not intrinsically linked. The relationships between the three concepts depend on

- working hours,
- job characteristics,
- work outcomes,
- quality of social relationships, and
- perceived health (ibid).

Table 1: Types of workaholics (after Bonebright et al, 2000; Spence and Robbins, 1992)

Type of workaholics (Bonebright et al, 2000)	Type of workaholics (Spence and Robbins, 1992)
Enthusiastic workaholics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Real workaholism</i> – high in involvement, high in drive and low in work enjoyment</li> <li>• <i>Enthusiastic workaholics</i> – high on involvement, drive and enjoyment</li> </ul>
Non-enthusiastic workaholics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Work enthusiasts</i> – high in involvement and enjoyment, low in drive (resembling engaged workers)</li> <li>• <i>Relaxed workers</i> – low on involvement and drive, high on enjoyment</li> <li>• <i>Unengaged workers</i> – low in involvement, drive and enjoyment</li> <li>• <i>Disenchanted workers</i> – low in involvement and enjoyment, high in drive (resembling burned-out workers)</li> </ul>

In this paper, we use this framework to explore site managers’ experiences of their work role.

### 3. Study design and method

An interpretative approach was chosen, based on interviews. The data included in-depth interviews with 21 site managers. Most of the typical construction contexts and projects were represented, e.g. infrastructure, residential and commercial development projects. The data collection strategy was purposive: since we wanted to understand the unfolding of lived, everyday managerial practices on site, we asked CEO’s and top managers from large and mid-sized contractors in Sweden to name their “best” site managers. We did not define what we meant by “best”, but left it to them to decide. The result was 21 site managers of whom 3 were women aged 30 to 50. The rest were men: half of them aged 50 to 65 and the other half 25 to 40. The respondents were ensured anonymity in that all specificities enabling identification would be neutralised, and we offered them the possibility of reading the transcripts should they wish. The interviews were informal, taking the form of casual conversations lasting from 60 to 90 minutes each. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The location for the

interview was either a meeting venue or the respondent's office on location. A brief interview guide was used to keep interviewer intervention at a minimum.

The respondents were asked to provide the essential bio-data concerning career trajectories. After these preliminaries, they were encouraged to talk freely. Our prompts were open-ended; we wanted them to tell us about their workdays, how they generally went about planning and managing site activities, what issues arose and how they dealt with them. 'Free' storytelling has been suggested as an appropriate interview technique for the purpose we had in mind where interviewees' personal stories are allowed to evolve, and in which their underlying assumptions and beliefs guide the conversation (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Drawing on Polkinghorne (1995) and Lindebaum and Cassell (2012), narrative analysis was applied on the data in order to identify and code the various fragments that made up the narratives. These fragments were then sorted under themes that linked to the overall plot concerning the narrators' coping with their work situations. *It is important to note here that the theme 'workaholicism' emerged during our data analysis.* They were not asked to identify themselves as one type of workaholic or another, nor did we employ specific instruments to collect data to determine the respondents' involvement with work, drive and work enjoyment. During the data analysis we drew on the workaholic framework to sort the respondents' behaviours and associations to their well-being into workaholics types.

## 4. Findings

Three core themes emerged as central to the site managers' narratives of their work days: coping with their work situation, with their work-life and family, and their associations to their feelings of well-being. Overall the managers depicted their work situations as highly demanding with multiple expectations both from others and on themselves. They described how they were constantly being pulled between planning tasks, administration duties and the solving of countless ad-hoc problems, large and small, serious and trivial. Simultaneously, the respondents showed remarkable commitment and motivation for their work. They all took pride in the products of their labour, the final constructions.

... seeing it [the construction] grow in front of me ... that is something that can never be taken away from a site manager ... that when I drive past the construction I can say 'I built that'.

Within these three themes, the two different types of workaholics: enthusiastic and non-enthusiastic according to Bonebright et al (2000) could clearly be identified. We have chosen to allow the voices of the respondents to be heard in this section since they express their views and feelings much more directly than we ever could.

## 4.1 Coping with work situation

The respondents described incredibly high workloads and very long working hours. Their work situations were demanding and fragmented. One manager mentioned a several-year long period when she worked practically 24/7.

During the whole of last year, I got up at 4.30 am and left work at 7 pm, and went to bed at 9. How does one count work time from such a schedule? During the weekends I sat with the budget. During this period, I easily worked a 100 hour week. But that is extreme and isn't always the case [...] on average, maybe I work 55 hours per week.

The respondents described how they developed ad-hoc strategies to cope with the abundance of work tasks, which differed significantly from the standardized approaches they were supposed to avail themselves of.

You do what you can to make things work ... you don't pay much attention to the role description, you just do...

We have a business system and decision structures that we are meant to follow but there is no time for that. I have to take many shortcuts in order to get my workweek anywhere near to 40 hours.

There was a general consensus among the respondents that their managers in turn understood and accepted that they carried out their duties and responsibilities as best they could.

They [superiors] understand that one does the best one can. But if there was to be an internal audit I would have to fill in the papers afterward so I don't get smacked on my fingers.

At the same time a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to work reveal a tendency among the managers to take on too many tasks, thus further straining their already heavy workloads.

It is all about the projects. As long as I can work with what I want in the way I want, I enjoy working here. Today I am definitely in such a position.

[the most tasking job is] ... all the paperwork ... but I have only myself to blame, for I let go of nothing. The purchasing I keep for myself, the economy I keep for myself... (...) It would have been a relief to get rid of the economy (Laughing)

Despite everything, I enjoy the responsibilities I have ... and of course you build your own indispensability ... that's how it is. You're not indispensable in any way, but you make yourself memorable and see yourself as extraordinary in some sense.

A female respondent described the high demands on site managers in construction, and why it was difficult to fill managerial positions at the production level.

What stops civil engineers from becoming production managers ... or rather why we can't appoint them is that they are often on parental leave [days off when children are ill] especially when they have two children. We have some staff that are on parental leave approximately 50% of the time. No one on site has a clue about his or her planning and decisions. What materials are coming in, what cranes have been ordered etc ... this is a huge problem for production.

Simultaneously, as another respondent stated, the managers felt guilty when they had to take parental-leave days:

It is very tough for the site manager who is absent. We know that if we are at home things become difficult as hell for the others. You have to be really cold not to care about what's happening on site.

## **4.2 Coping with work-life-family balance**

The respondents convey a mixed; yet rather negative view of their work-life balance situation.

I have this work-family puzzle that needs to be managed, especially if a child becomes ill. During the weekday it works out ok. I leave at preschool and she picks up. Then you take care of children until they fall asleep and then you try to watch some TV before falling asleep. It is pretty hectic!

As a site manager you are never free on weekends. You have maybe ten weekends per year where you don't open your computer and work. Most of us start on Sunday to plan for the workweek ahead.

It has happened that I have slept at my desk waiting for a morning meeting ... with work charts and drawings as covers to protect me from the cold.

I have sat in front of Bollibompa [children's TV program] and worked. I see myself as there for my daughter even when I am working. That is something I am satisfied with.

The respondents complained about their work-life imbalance, and in some cases even expressed sorrow over how work has obscured their needs of recreational time and spending time with family and friends. One manager even went so far as to describe these impediments as collateral damage of work.

I don't have any alone time. I definitely don't have time to meet friends. My family I hardly see at all ... so these bits are the collateral damage. I never go to the

cinema; I don't have time for those kinds of things. But I do travel a lot ... that is my breathing space ... that I always know that I will be travelling somewhere within a few weeks. That is when I switch off completely.

### 4.3 Well-being

The respondents' reported worrying consequences of their hectic work lives on their health and well-being

The previous year was chaotic. Then I was on the verge of quitting my job ... I couldn't cope. Then I worked ... uhm ... it was still at the time when I dropped of at day care. In principle I worked my 9 hours, every day, and then I also often worked [at home] from 8 pm until 12 pm many days a week ... several weekends as well to get it to work. I was close to burnout then.

The respondents felt that there was little support from the organisation for their plight, and they felt that they had a large responsibility in procuring jobs for their subordinates.

I have coped with it [the stress], but it was really a lot of work ... I'm really tired. Time to train ... I never bloody well have time for physical training. That is why I don't lose weight. Now I have to because I have a bad hip

I can say this much. I had my second blood clot last year and had salmonella at the same time. I had a vomiting bucket with me when I went to work ... that's the way it is. So I go to work, and I have a bucket. It functions. I'm not that ill!

## 5. Discussion

All the respondents in our cohort exhibited evidence of workaholism, of which the six types are represented in the quotes. They showcase a representative sample. Specifically where we present the respondents' experiences of their work situation, a diverse range of all six types of workaholism is identifiable. In our sample we thus include both enthusiastic workaholics and non-enthusiastic workaholics (after Bonebright et al, 2000), and find evidence of real workaholism, enthusiastic workaholics, work enthusiasts, relaxed workers, unengaged workers and disenchanted workers (after Spence and Robbins, 1992). There were many respondents that showcase high work involvement and work enjoyment. These respondents resemble engaged workers and can be categorised as *enthusiastic workaholics* or work enthusiasts. However, not all respondents talk of their work experiences in a positive light, hence these respondents have been sorted under the category *non-enthusiastic workaholics*.

With regards to 'coping with work-life-family balance' an interesting trend emerges: it is the respondents who fall under Bonebright et al's (2000) broad category *enthusiastic workaholics*



that reported most concerns with coping with work-life-family balance. This is not that surprising given that these workers were likely to prioritise work in balancing aspects of work-life-family blend and thus found it challenging to manage the balance. What is interesting is that they did consider and talk freely about their work-life-family balance concerns, which shows that these issues were of importance to them.

Those respondents who reported the most worrying consequences of their hectic work lives on their health and well-being all fall under the category *disenchanted worker*. Spence and Robbins (1992) identify this type of workaholicism to be connected with low involvement with work and low work enjoyment, but high drive. This is a group that is clearly in the risk zone for ill health and burnout. Here a link with the organisational circumstances and job context emerges as a significant variable that influences the respondents' views, and therefore would warrant much more research and attention from HRM. The respondents referred to lack of organisational support, long working hours and presenteeism. Burke (2000) argues that it is these kinds of contextual circumstances that play a significant role in individuals developing workaholicism and thereafter maintaining such behaviours.

The link between the job context and the managers' experiences can be understood through Styhres (2012) concept of 'muddling through'. The respondents expressed a lack of social support from superiors that they felt strained their work situation. These conditions caused them to work long hours, and bear responsibility for practically all the processes and relations on site, which further increased their feelings of stress. Styhre (2011, 2012) has argued that these conditions are due to the loosely coupled configurations in the construction industry, which increase expectations on self-sufficiency, autonomy and presenteeism of the manager. The site managers, thus, become the centre of all the activities on which the success or failure of the project revolve. Such conditions inevitably put considerable pressure on site managers.

The respondents complained about long work hours and referred to their job characteristics as both demanding and stressful. Work outcomes, however, tended to be described in positive terms, particularly in terms of organisational performance, yet this positive performance was often attained at the expense of strenuous and challenging effort by the individuals. The overall quality of social relationships and recreational outlets were unanimously seen as difficult to achieve. Many sacrificed time with friends and/or family as well as time for training to dedicate time to work or they referred to situations where they were multitasking, e.g. spending time with children while working. Several respondents conveyed that this caused them to neglect their individual and social needs, and in some cases this gave rise to poor health and well-being.

Besides the effects on the individual site managers, their workaholicism may also have had negative effects on their subordinates and the organization. Site managers have formal responsibility for subordinates and for the work environment on site. They are responsible for preventing accidents and injuries. Our data indicate that site manager often work when they are ill, and they often have to take "shortcuts" to keep up with their workload. This raises concerns regarding safety issues on site, which would need to be further investigated. Furthermore, the industry is in need of recruiting new competent construction workers. In our data the ideal site

manager is portrayed as a person who devotes his or her life to work and often neglects family and private life. This raises questions regarding the ability to attract a younger generation of workers more keen in upholding a balance between work and private life.

## 6. Conclusion

Using a practice lens, this paper has examined the work situations and possible related well-being implications of site managers in the construction industry. Site managers talked freely about their day-to-day activities, tasks and responsibilities, their interactions and interpersonal relationships with their subordinates, superiors and suppliers, and the difficulties they perceived in balancing work, family and personal life. All their accounts describe an all encompassing work context and managerial duties that put considerable mental and physical strain on them. Yet, these same accounts articulated a strong commitment to their work and sense of responsibility for all the workers on site. Their criticism concerning their excessive workload was mainly directed toward the organisational level and the increasing demands and control from the top down. The data indicated that the site-managers work conditions has and does lead to negative implications on their health and well-being, which in the long-run may prove costly for the organisation. The question which needs to be asked is how much of the strain is the result of organisational demands and how much is due to the demands the individuals put on themselves.

Inspired by the framework of workaholic types, we found representations of all the types described in the framework: both enthusiastic workaholics and non-enthusiastic workaholics (after Bonebright et al, 2000), and real workaholism, enthusiastic workaholics, work enthusiasts, relaxed workers, unengaged workers and disenchanted workers (after Spence and Robbins, 1992). An important finding is that linkages to negative well-being could be found in most of the site managers' accounts despite their strong feelings of involvement, drive and enjoyment in their work. High *enthusiastic workers* tended to experience increased work-life conflict and decreased time for recreation, which can be seen as negative well-being in terms of social relationships and health. It should be noted though that their high enjoyment of their work signalled positive experiences of psychological well-being. The data also indicated that *non-enthusiastic workers* are a risk group for ill-health and stress. Especially the group characterized as *disenchanted workers* are in a high-risk zone for burnout. Long working hours, lack of organizational support and presenteeism seem to be the reasons for these negative perceptions. These findings raise warning signals for the unsustainable work situation of site managers in the construction industry. This situation warrants further research on how an organizational context may 'force' managers to develop workaholic behaviours as a defence and/or rationalisation mechanism. It would also be very interesting to explore both the site context and individuals from a social psychological perspective: what is it that makes individuals fall into one or the other of these categories, and what can be done to prevent and support them? To sum up, what our data tell us is that 'muddling through' seems to be a lot more complex than the concept may lead us to expect.

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