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Burnout: A Survey of Library Directors' Views

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ABSTRACT
              The survey described in this report was designed to
test whether or not library directors are able to recognize the
existence of the problem of burnout (the emotional and physical
exhaustion due to continued stress on the job) and how, if at all,
top management of the institutions of which the library is a part
view and deal with the issue. Survey data were gathered by means of a
one-page questionnaire mailed to the heads of 90 libraries in New
York State that were selected on the basis of their being part of
larger institutions; 40 replies were received. The survey's main
finding was that 65% of the library directors perceived burnout among
their professional staff. In addition, stress and frustration were
most frequently selected as very important warning signs of burnout;
and the administrative techniques ranked as very important in dealing
with burnout were: (1) to provide realistic job expectations, and (2)
to establish clear lines of communication. It is concluded that
burnout definitely exists among library professional staff and that
the majority of administrators are in need of, or would find useful,
some central program sponsored by their organization to address the
issues related to job burnout among their employees. Survey
statistics are presented in 5 tables; 23 references are provided; and
the questionnaire is included. (KM)

BURNOUT: A SURVEY OF LIBRARY DIRECTORS' VIEWS

The phenomenon known as job burnout or simply burnout has, in recent

years, been written about extensively in occupational and managerial

literature. These studies have emphasized the need for managers to recognize

burnout among staff and to devise programs to combat the problem.

Burnout is defined as emotional and physical exhaustion due to con-

tinued stress on the job. Burnout, according to available research, is re-

ported to be a widespread condition. "Burned out" workers experience work as

tedious, redundant and insignificant. Its effect reduces employees' job

performance and negatively affects their personal life.

Because burnout reduces employee productivity, organizations must learn

how to recognize its symptoms and be able to intervene with proper treatment.

Most of all managers must plan and initiate prevention strategies within the

organizational framework.

The examination of available literature finds three sets of writings:

1) self-help literature - describes the burnout phenomenon, suggests

    ways of preventing and coping with it; most of all, it is aimed

    at individuals who are experiencing burnout and who seek self help.

2) clinical literature - reports on studies of occupational groups

    tested for burnout.

3) managerial literature - concentrates primarily on financial

    liabilities of employee burnout.

The early studies focused on the so-called "helping professions" includ-

ing social workers, caseworkers, teachers, psychologists and librarians.

These jobs are all characterized by having interaction with the public. Recent

studies have demonstrated the existence of burnout in other professions,

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such as data processing personnel, credit managers, and air controllers (Grimm 1982; Nelson 1980).

There are mixed findings among researchers reporting on the prevalence of burnout among librarians. Todaro (1983) concluded that the library professionals are prime candidates for burnout. Todaro's work was supported by Ferriero et al. (1982) and Bold (1982). Contradictory evidence is reported by Smith et al. (1983) whose research concluded that "librarians do not seem to be especially prone to burnout".

Although most studies generalize about the necessity for managers to recognize burnout and for companies to deal with its effects, there has been a lack of reported research. This study was designed to test whether or not library directors were able to recognize the existence of the problem.

Additionally, it looked into how, if at all, top management of the institutions of which the library is part, view and deal with the issue.

METHODOLOGY

A one-page questionnaire was prepared and mailed to heads of 90 libraries in New York State. The libraries were selected on the basis of being part of a larger institution as opposed to libraries with complete autonomy with regard to decision making. The emphasis was placed on publicly funded academic, special, and medical libraries with small professional staff.

The questionnaire's design was based on the findings and definitions contained in the literature. The survey included a list of factors which were found to be characteristic of burnout and administrative techniques which could be used to control the problem. The survey's objective was to test the library manager's understanding of burnout. Additionally, it questioned what, if any, recognition the central administration paid to the problem.

To determine their understanding of burnout, respondents were asked to

rank as either very important, important, or unimportant those factors which they perceived as warning signs of burnout. Similarly, administrators were offered a variety of techniques designed to help reduce the potential of burnout and to rank those as above.

FINDINGS

In response to mailed questionnaires, forty replies, most of them anonymous, were returned. Of those received, nin .een represented special libraries, thirteen represented academic and eight replies came from medical libraries. Twenty-four of the respondents indicated that the library which they head employs five or fewer professionals; nine libraries had six to ten professionals, and seven were in the "eleven plus" category.

The survey's main finding was that 65% of the library directors perceived burnout among their professional staff (Table 1); 80% of the respondents replied affirmatively to the question asking if there was a need for a central program to deal with the problem (Table 2). Only 15% indicated that burnout was discussed by the Central Administration, and 12.5% indicated that their institutions had a program in place (Table 3).

As to the second part of the questionnaire, which contained a list of symptoms and causes of burnout and administrative methods of preventing and remedying the warning signs of burnout, most frequently selected as being very important were stress and frustration. The ones considered as important were rigidity, low morale, and low productivity. Those ranked as unimportant were high turnover and absenteeism (Table 4).

The recommended administrative techniques ranked as very important in dealing with burnout were (1) to provide realistic job expectations and (2) to establish clear lines of communication. Following these in importance were the techniques of encouragement of attendance at professional meetings

and the rotation of work assignments. The reduction of staff/user inter-
action hours was the technique selected most frequently as the least
important one (Table 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The administrative literature upon which this study was designed
emphasizes the importance of management's understanding of the burnout
phenomenon. Specifically stressed was management's responsibility to help
prevent burnout among employees (Ledbetter 1981; Glicken 1982; Cherlin 1981).
Glicken (1982) states that burnout takes heavy toll on employee productivity
and without an effort to remedy burnout, organizations stand to lose employees
who create its top level resources. Cherlin (1981) suggests that keeping
employees interested in their jobs requires flexibility and the opportunity
to meet new challenges. Glicken (1982) emphasizes three elements which are
crucial to an organization interested in reducing the negative impact of
burnout: recognition of early warning signs, diagnosis of causes and a develop-
ment of prevention strategies. Such strategies include (1) matching employees'
characteristics to the organizational setting and the complexity of the job
and (2) developing a program to help employees cope with stress as well as
teaching them self-diagnosis.

Although a majority of library directors who replied were able to detect
the existence of staff burnout, their reasons for reaching this conclusion
did not in all cases fully parallel those identified in the major research
literature. This indicates the depth of the burnout problem: even though
most library directors do not have a complete understanding of the components
of job burnout, they are able to recognize this condition. Even more interest-
ing is the paucity of central programs to deal with the problem, despite the
overwhelming existence of burnout in most libraries. This suggests a topic

for investigation.

Contrary to published studies on burnout among librarians showing either a lack of burnout or simply making suggestions for further research, the results obtained via this study and reported herein, clearly state that based on library administrator's understanding of this issue, burnout definitely exists among the library professional staff.

Furthermore, based on their replies, it is obvious that though they are familiar with recommended administrative techniques used in reducing the negative impact of burnout, the majority of these administrators are in need of, or would find useful, some central program sponsored by their organization, which would address the issues related to job burnout among their employees.

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TABLE 1

Library Director's Perception
of Staff Burnout

	Yes			No.	
No.		%		No.	%
26		65		14	35

TABLE 2

The Need for a Central Program
to Deal with Burnout

Yes		No	
No.	%	No.	%
32	80	8	20

TABLE 3

BURNOUT AND CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

Question	Yes No. %	No No. %	Do not know No. %
Does the central administration of the organization of which your library is a part recognize the problem of burnout among its employees?	9 22.5	19 47.5	12 30
Has the central management discussed the burnout problem at meetings?	6 15	27 67.5	7 - 17.5
Is there a central program in place to deal with the burnout problem?	5 12.5	30 75	5 12.5

TABLE 4

BURNOUT WARNING SIGNS

Variable	Very important No.	Important No.	Unimportant No.
Absenteeism	16	9	8
Low productivity	15	16	1
Frustration	17	16	4
Rigidity	7	21	3
Stress	20	13	0
Low morale	14	19	3
Alcohol/drug abuse	12	11	7
Irritability	23	8	0
High turnover	9	3	13
Psychosomatic complaints	13	13	6

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TABLE 5

ADMINISTRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Type of technique	Very important No.	Important No.	Unimportant No.
Provide realistic job expectations	26	13	0
Flextime	6	21	11
Establish clear lines of communication	25	10	2
Staff participation in decision making	23	14	2
Promote creativity and innovation among staff	21	16	2
Rotation of work assignments	6	22	11
Promotion from within organization	18	16	6
Encourage attendance at professional meetings	7	23	7
Reduce the number of hours of staff/user interaction	7	16	16
Allowing for self-management skills	11	16	10

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I   The Library you head is (i.e. academic, special, etc.) _____ __ _____

II   The number of librarians in your organization is: 1 to 5____ 6 to 10____ 11 or more_____

III Does the central administration of the organization of which your library is part of recognize the problem of "burnout" among its employees? yes___no___don't know _____

   1. Has the central management discussed the problem at meetings: yes__ no___don't know____

   2. Is there a central program in place to deal with this problem: yes___no___don't know____

   3. Is there a need for such discussions and development of a central program: yes___no____

V   Do you perceive a problem of burnout among your professional staff: yes ____ no_____

     Of the following which factors do you perceive as warning signs of burnout
     (Please rank as follows: 1=very important 2=important 3=unimportant)

     a) absenteeism _____   b) low productivity_____   c) frustration _____
     d) rigidity _____   e) stress _____   f) low morale _____
     g) alcohol/drug abuse ____   h) irritability _____   i) high turnover_____
     j) psychosomatic complaints _____   k) other (please identify) _____

I   Which of the following administrative techniques would you recommend to help reduce the potential of burnout:
     (Please rank as follows: 1=very important 2=important 3=unimportant)

     a) provide realistic job expectations _____
     b) flextime _____
     c) establish clear lines of communication _____
     d) staff participation in decision making _____
     e) promote creativity and innovation among staff _____
     f) rotation of work assignments _____
     g) promotion from within organization _____
     h) encourage attendance at professional meetings _____
     i) reduce the number of hours of staff/user interaction _____
     j) allowing for self-management skills _____
     k) other (please identify) _____ _____

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