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Job Burnout: The End or a New Beginning?

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JOB BURNOUT: THE END OR A NEW BEGINNING?

by

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B.A., Drake University, 2002

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree

Department of Education and Human Services
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2011

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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for the Degree of

Master of Science
in the field of Rehabilitation Administration and Services

Approved by:

Dr. Carl R. Flowers

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
April 13, 2011

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

PATRICIA J. ALSUP, JR., for the Master of Science degree in Rehabilitation Administration and Services, presented on April 13, 2011, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: JOB BURNOUT: THE END OR A NEW BEGINNING?

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Carl Flowers

Human services work entails providing services to others. Services are personalized to meet the needs and desires of the recipient. Providers may encounter a range of emotions, not only their own but those of the service recipient and other interested parties. Combined with increased workloads, fewer resources, and outside pressures, employees can experience job stress or burnout. This work explores the nature of human services work and burnout and provides recommendations for further examination to aid in retaining service providers, thereby preserving continuity and quality of services.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my daughter, Anika Cheyenne.

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CHAPTER 1

Burnout is defined as long-term exposure to chronic job stress resulting in

emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). These effects have implications not

only for the individual but the organization and end user of the service. In the case of

human services organizations, the provider's experience of burnout has implications not

only in terms of their tenured and productive employment but also effects the

organization where they are employed, and the end user of the service, or the client.

Effects of burnout can be observed in employee behavior, decrease of quality of service,

and possibly the client separating from the organization due to decrease in quality

services.

Human services is an emotionally charged industry where the quality and quantity

of work depends upon the provider's interaction(s) with the client. "People-Work"

(Maslach & Florian, 1988) described settings where job duties and responsibilities

depended on interaction with service recipients. They defined people work as

professions in the following categories: medicine, social service, education, mental

health, criminal justice and ministry.

The world of work has changed and requires organizations to maximize their

output with minimal inputs or do more with less. Reductions in workforce or service

offerings can be implemented as cost-cutting measures. Organizations are more likely to

downsize their workforce to save money as it is most expedient and evidence of change is

clear in a relatively short amount of time (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2002). Downsizing of

workforce has implications for remaining employees. They may experience changes in

job titles, responsibilities, and/or workload. While the staff position is no longer

available, the workload of that position must still be completed. The changes

experienced at work can spill over into the employees' personal life straining

relationships and contributing to the employee experiencing health problems. Work

becomes a part of the individual's identity. When work or sustaining work comes into

question, so does the individual's sense of worth on both personal and professional levels

(Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001).

Retaining a viable workforce that can maintain service provision and quality in

spite of unstable times is a major undertaking. To this end, studying the causes of burnout

is important, but not enough for the social services industry to meet the challenges of an

increasing need for services with dwindling funding dollars. Understanding burnout as an

opportunity to rehabilitate and engage the employee to reaching their former productive

state may be a better option for preserving employment, organizational standing, and

continuity of service provision.

This paper explores the nature of human services work, job stress leading to

burnout, and job engagement/motivation as a means of employee retention. Turnover

intention and actual turnover are undesirable, but possible outcomes of the burnout

continuum and will be addressed. Finally, recommendations for further study of burnout

in human services will be explored.

CHAPTER 2

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

The Nature of Human Services Work

The Occupational Outlook Handbook (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010) defines human services workers as people who provide services to other people. These jobs include social work, nursing, case management, direct care, counseling, etc. Human services jobs may be carried out through fieldwork or regular assignment to a location within community settings, residential placements, or day programs. Work settings vary, as does the level of supervision. Employees may work independently, with other staff on shift at the same time, and/or with or without supervisory support present. The outlook for work in Human Services is expected to increase due to the aging population and people needing mental health and substance abuse treatment (Benson & Dundis, 2003; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Staff qualifications differ depending on the job and may require additional educational credentials, licensure, and /or certification as appropriate to the position. Certificate and degree programs in human services commonly include internships as a component to fulfill completion requirements. Extensive on-the-job training is provided for workers in this industry as they are learning useful techniques but also practical application of skills in order to provide services and meet the objectives/outcomes of the program to which they are assigned (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Ethical standards of conduct provide employees with organizational and professional best practices in performing job duties. For example, the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) identifies the guiding principles of

autonomy (respect rights and choices of the individual), beneficence (promote well being of the individual), fidelity (keeping promises), justice (fair provision of services to all), nonmaleficience (do no harm to others), and veracity (honesty) in providing services. These principles are highlighted throughout the code as a road map of acceptable and professional behavior. Practitioners are forewarned that the Code cannot possibly identify every scenario possible. The course of actions contained within the code serve as a reference for preserving a professional stance in the course of conducting job duties (CRCC, 2009).

"The work, while satisfying, can be emotionally draining" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010, para. 5). In their article on stress, trauma, and addiction behaviors in helping professionals, Cross and Ashley (2007) found that this group experienced job related stress and trauma of greater intensity and frequency than most would be able to handle. They maintain that such experiences can chronically affect the individual and impact their work capacity.

Job Stress

Storey and Billingham (2001) noted that stress is a normal experience in life and work-life. Although there is no single documented definition of job stress, it is recognized as stress resulting from the workplace. Although stress is a common experience, it is an individual concern. That which may be considered stressful by one person may not be viewed as stressful or to the same degree by another.

Causes of workplace stress are just as varied as stress levels of employees. Addressing specifically occupational stress and social workers, the authors note six general areas of stress in the working environment: physical environment, employee's

role, organizational structure and climate, public image and expectation (of social workers) and the inter-face between work and home (commonly referred to as work-life balance) (Storey & Billingham, 2001, p. 601).

Social work is recognized as a helping profession as in the earlier definitions of people providing services to other people. The nature, then, of the work of social work has the propensity to become emotionally exhausting. The social worker is responsible for carrying out their job duties working directly with the client in addition to meeting organizational standards and requirements (Kim & Stoner, 2008).

Schaufeli and Greenglass (2001) described the relationship between the employer and employee in terms of Equity Theory. If the employee does what they are asked to do, they will be able to keep their job. This becomes problematic when changes arise and job security is questioned. In this situation, employees feel that they have kept their part of the deal but are being betrayed or short changed by management. This scenario can contribute additional stress to an already emotionally overloaded employee.

Reactions to workplace stress can impact absenteeism and productivity. Some take time off from work in order to cope with stress in the workplace. This situation is referred to as "neurotic reaction to stress" by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Webster & Bergman, 1999). Other employees may continue to come to work but lack focus and show a decrease in productivity or lack of thoroughness that was previously present in their work. Both yield lower productivity rates and quality of services.

Job Burnout, then, is a reaction to stress (Storey & Billingham, 2001) experienced consistently over a long period of time. Symptoms of both conditions are similar,

however, the time element and frequency is the dividing factor (Templeton & Satcher, 2007).

Burnout

Burnout was initially disregarded as a pertinent topic for research and investigation. It was thought to be frivolous and more the product of outlandish theorizing in the popular psychology of the time. As time and research have progressed, understanding burnout and its relevancy across disciplines has garnered international attention (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005; Maslach, 2003). Central to burnout literature is the notion that burnout is a result of chronic stress experienced over a long period of time. Researchers include additional information that they feel is important to note as part of the core definition. Schaufeli and Greenglass (2001) include physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion on the part of those performing "emotionally demanding" work as part of their definition (pg 501). Kristensen et al. (2005) indicated that burnout spans all disciplines and should not be thought of as pertinent just in occupations where people work is performed.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory, (MBI), is the most commonly used tool to measure burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). It was originally developed to assess burnout of human services workers as burnout was found prevalent in people work occupations. The MBI was revised to target educational occupations and also a general inventory that was applicable to any occupation. Translation of the MBI into other languages increased its availability for use in other countries (Maslach, 2003).

The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, (CBI), (Kristensen et al., 2005) was created to address areas where the authors believed the MBI fell short. The developers stated that

the MBI was not a global tool where burnout could be assessed across occupations. Although it had its roots in assessing burnout of those performing people work, changes in the MBI inventory (number of inventory items) to address other occupational groups did not remain consistent with the original definition of the concept nor was the concept's definition adjusted. The authors also found that translating the MBI was problematic as some terms were not easily translated from one language to another and inventory items were relayed negatively (Kristensen et al., 2005).

The risk of burnout is highest for people working in professions that are emotionally intensive (Thomas & Lankau, 2009; Templeton & Satcher, 2007). Thomas and Lankau (2009) list antecedents to burnout in health care jobs as stressful or dangerous work, lack of supervisory support, and frustration caused by discrepancies between job expectations and realities. Maslach and Leiter (2005) stated that non-profit workers are more susceptible to burnout out because they typically have fewer resources to complete their work, which leaves employees with neither time nor tool to carry out their work. Templeton and Satcher (2007) found that organizational variables such as work setting, severity of disability of clients, and caseload size could impact burnout in rehabilitation counselors.

Schaufli and Enzman (as quoted in Templeton & Satcher, 2007) listed affective, cognitive, physical, behavioral and motivational classification of burnout symptoms that may be observed. Examples of observed symptoms include, inability to show empathy towards clients, self-esteem problems, lack of concentration, poor decision-making, fatigue, headaches, increased aggression, absenteeism, limited enthusiasm for work, and lack of motivation leading to low productivity. Maslach and Leiter (2005) stated that

categorizing the individual situation allows for development of an intervention to target problem areas. They suggested areas of workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values as categories of dissention for employees that can be remediated through a collaboration of the employer and employee in hopes of combating burnout.

Burnout has personal and organizational costs. Employees can suffer decline in personal health and strain in their personal lives in addition to concentration problems and low productivity at work. Employees performing below their usual capacity aren't (as) committed to their work and make more errors (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Burned out employees have higher rates of absenteeism, low productivity, deliver poor client services, are ineffective, and may ultimately look for other work (turnover) (Templeton & Satcher, 2007).

Burnout research is taking a new direction. Burnout has typically been viewed from the individual point of view in terms of results of burnout. Recent research efforts take a proactive look at the workplace for methods of preventing burnout (Maslach, 2003; Roma, Schaufeli, & Lloret, 2006).

Job Engagement

Healthy workplace initiatives were usually thought of as wellness programs that encouraged employees to adopt healthy lifestyles through programs and initiatives such as smoking cessation, weight management, meditation, etc. Grawitch, Trares, and Kohler (2007) redefined this concept to include a holistic view of the employee where their effectiveness at work, mental, and physical well-being were also taken into account. While organizations define the work to be done and how to do it, it is up to the employee to successfully carry out assigned job duties. To that end, it is essential that the human

side of the business be a component of maintaining a healthy workplace where employees are productive and engaged in their work (Maslach & Leiter, 2005).

Thomas and Lankau (2009) assert that managers and supervisors should be trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of burnout. This would allow intervention before job stress continues on and develops into burnout. Managers and supervisors must remember the potential costs of burnout on the organization. Remaining open for business during unstable economic times is no small feat and retaining current employees at productive levels is key to continued success (Shepherd, 2010). Managers and supervisors need to provide support through contact and observation of employee performance on a daily basis (Kim & Stoner, 2008). Following this style of management leaves managers and supervisors better able to assess the needs of the employee as an individual and part of a work group to ensure positive and productive workflow. Problems are also easier to diagnose and correct at the beginning instead of lingering to the point where workflow is interrupted. Frequent contact also gives the manager or supervisor better insight on how to best provide support to employees who are performing below standard and encouraging high performers (Parsons, Reid, and Crow, 2003). The manager or supervisor sets the stage, so to speak, for the employee to carry out job duties, but it is ultimately up to the employee to determine the outcome of their employment (Grawitch, et al., 2007).

Stress Management Intervention programs, (SMI), are "any activity or program initiated by an organization that focuses on reducing the presence of work related stressors or on assisting individuals to minimize the negative outcomes of exposure to these stressors" (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008, p. 69). Programs should be guided by

the needs of employees so that relevancy, time, and money are preserved. Implementing

programs without taking the employees need into consideration may leave the

organization in a position where there is little to no return on their investment in time and

money dedicated to the program or employee improvement from the intervention

(Grawitch et al., 2007).

SMI programs usually target the intensity of the workplace stressor, how the

employee perceives the stressor, and how the employee copes with the stressor. Further,

classifications of interventions are primary (making a change in the workplace to relieve

the stressful situation), secondary (teaching the employee how to cope with the stressor

so that it does not impact their health), and tertiary (providing employee sponsored

treatment through confidential access to mental health professionals such as an employee

assistance program) (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008).

Maslach (2003) defines job engagement as the opposite of burnout. The

employee is present, energetic, and productive in their work. As removing the negative

properties from a job may not be possible, it is important to build positive events for the

employee. Further, this lessens the desire to "cure" burnout and instead increase positive

measures that may prove more effective for a longer period of time. Negative properties

may still exist in the work environment, but the employee will be more likely to seek

positive solutions, as they believe that their contributions positively impact their

department and the organization as a whole.

Recurrent themes in motivation theory includes reinforcing behavior encourages

its repetition, increasing response time to behavior increases the likelihood that the

behavior will occur again in the future, positive incentives are better than negative

incentives, and motivation is subjective (McConnel, 2005). The author found it important to remind the reader that employees and motivational factors were individual in nature. Motivating factors would also differ from person to person as far as ranking of intensity. Fisher (2009) maintained that managers need to know what motivates the employee at work other than wanting to make a difference in someone's life or helping people.

Parsons et al. (2003) found productivity in human services to be judged on successful service provision. Successful service provision is evident through meeting and/or exceeding outcome based goals and objectives for the client and the organization. The quality of the service recipient's experience depends upon how well the practitioner performs the job. This relationship must be maintained at a level where the client wishes to continue receiving services from the organization.

Benson and Dundis (2003) encouraged supervisors and managers to view challenges they encounter with their employees as opportunities for learning instead of problems. Further, they suggested using Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a way to understand the human behavior, and thus the behavior of their staff.

Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is the most well known of the motivation theories. Needs are met beginning at the bottom of the pyramid and move towards the top. Each level must be met before advancing to the next. In a work context, managers and supervisors would need to identify the level of the pyramid where needs correspond to the employee's present state (Fisher, 2009). Once that is accomplished, managers and supervisor's are able to determine motivating activities to assist the employee in reaching the next level. Managers and supervisors must be aware that movement up and down the

pyramid is possible. Once a need is met, it is no longer a motivator. The manager/supervisor should also be aware that employees may operate on different levels of the pyramid and management techniques should be adjusted accordingly (Fisher, 2009).

Retention/Turnover

Employee engagement can be looked to as a vehicle for retention. Martinez, Jr., Griffith, Campbell, and Allen (2007) listed important reasons to retain current employees. Baby boomers reaching the retirement age will leave the workforce causing a gap in services until new employees are hired and trained. At one time, employees remained in a job or industry until they reached retirement. That is no longer the standard. Mid-Career changes are common and there are programs and services marketed towards those looking to work in fields often times very different than those where they began employment. Finally, retaining employees is important because it is difficult to replace the knowledge base of long time employees. Retaining employees can be an agent of attracting new employees who share similar qualities (Dewhurst, Gutheridge & Mohr, 2010).

Recognizing and rewarding employee performance may aid in retention and improve motivation. Lack of recognition for work is closely associated with feelings of inefficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Employers may develop reward systems that recognize personal and professional milestones of employees such as birthdays, length of service to the organization, etc. Understanding the needs of the employee will assist the organization in developing reward systems that are of interest and thus motivating to the employee (Shepherd, 2010).

Parsons et al. (2003), advise against the use of tangible rewards such as gift cards and days off on a continuous basis but encourage their use from time to time. Dewhurst et al. (2006) found that employees are more responsive to non-monetary based rewards. Rewards of this nature are cost-effective but require an investment of "time and commitment" (Dewhurst et al., 2006, para. 5) of the manager/supervisor for successful implementation.

The other piece to the burnout conversation is turnover. Turnover intention occurs when the employee seeks other employment. Turnover occurs when the employee separates from employment (Kim & Stoner, 2008). It is important to understand the work related situations that would cause an employee to leave their position (Kim & Stoner, 2008). Popular opinion of employees leaving their jobs is due to dissatisfaction and/or better opportunities with another organization (Allen, Weeks, & Moffitt, 2005). Mitchell, Lee, Sablynski, and Erez (2001) suggest that there is more to the employee's decision to leave employment than simply dissatisfaction and other opportunities. Their construct of job embeddedness suggests that employees have multiple considerations to make prior to separation from employment. These considerations are on both personal and professional planes but are intertwined. The authors found that links (employee's commonality with others in work groups and other social groups outside of work; common ground found between employees sharing similar interests outside of the working environment), fit (how well the employee meshes with the organizational culture; interconnectedness between the skill set and knowledge the employee brings to the position as well as how the corporate culture fits within the personal values of the employee), and sacrifice (the employee's perceived trade off for the work agreement) in

the employee's personal and professional life were strong determinants of continued employment.

Turnover is a costly event for the organization as time and money have to be devoted to recruiting and training new employees. Turnover can be burdensome to existing employees as they are left to assume job duties and responsibilities of open positions until the new employee is trained (Templeton & Satcher, 2007). Additionally, service provision may suffer during the interim (Kim & Stoner, 2008).

Aarons, Sommerfeld, Hect, Silovshy, and Chaffin (2009) studied the effects of turnover on organizations that provide human services in community settings. They found turnover intention to be a predictor of a turnover. Turnover intention is classified as a withdrawal behavior similar to that of absenteeism and tardiness. Employees experiencing turnover intention are actively seeking another job and are less involved in current duties and responsibilities.

Turnover negatively affects remaining employees. Staff morale is lower and service provision is negatively impacted. Staff was ineffective as their productivity was lower than prior to turnover. Work teams were deficient as their workload was higher. Services were inconsistent due to the weakened relationship between the provider and service recipient. Finally, the financial implication of turnover was realized in the monetary cost associated with training new staff (Aarons et al, 2009).

CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION

Human services work requires that the employee have both physical and emotional stamina to provide services to others. The employee must abide by organizational and licensing standards in performing job duties and may have to make decisions for which no formal training was provided. Immediate support may or may not be available depending upon the working environment. In this instance, the employee would be expected to rely upon organizational and professional best practices and codes of ethics as references for decision-making.

Providing services to others entails the recipient's willingness to participate and be receptive to assistance. Human services are a relational industry where successful services and organizations depend upon the relationship between the provider and service recipient. As services are typically personal in nature, providers may encounter recipients who respond to services and service recommendations through combative, resistant, or avoidance behaviors while carrying out their daily job duties. These situations in addition to personal and departmental goals and expectations can become stressful and impede upon the providers ability to service the client.

Additionally, the provider may encounter other events in and/or outside of the workplace that contribute to stress levels. Stress occurring over a period of time can impact the provider personally and professionally. Stress can be observed in the workplace through absenteeism and tardiness, lack of concentration, decreased productivity, and feelings of inefficacy. Medical conditions or exacerbation of existing

medical conditions may be results of stress. Personal relationships may be strained due to stress at work.

Consistent job stress experienced over a long period of time is recognized as job burnout. Employees experiencing burnout may still come to work, but are not as productive or motivated as they had been previously. Ensuring that supervisory staff are in tune with their employees and trained to observe employees for signs and symptoms of job stress and burnout is a proactive measure that can be implemented.

It is important to note that although stress is a part of life, it is an individual experience that differs in stressors, frequency, and intensity by the individual. Recent initiatives in burnout literature shift the focus from the individual experience to reducing workplace stress. Holistic views of the employee provide better opportunities to combat workplace stress and burnout. Organizations are charged with creating working environments where employees are productive and encouraged to seek positive alternatives to negative workplace situations. Daily support and monitoring by supervisory staff can contribute to increasing positive experiences during the course of the workday and allow supervisory staff to observe changes in work behavior and intervene before the behavior becomes problematic.

Employee recognition can be a motivating event not just to the individual being recognized but other employees as well. Monetary rewards may not meet the financial constraints of the organization. Financial rewards neither guarantee quality of services nor remove additional workload or responsibilities. Reward and recognition systems in human service organizations should be tailored to employee needs in order to be

meaningful. Instead, seeking employee input for guidance in understanding what they find rewarding and motivating is a better alternative.

Turnover intention and turnover are possible outcomes of burnout. Turnover intention can contribute to lower productivity as employees are less focused on their work and may actively seek other employment. While employees may discuss their desire to leave employment, there are multiple considerations that will influence their final decision. Continuity between personal and professional responsibilities and values, or lack there of, are greater influencers on continued employment than better pay or possible alternative employment. Employees must consider the effects that changing employment will have on their personal lives. Events such as schedule changes, benefits offerings, and flexibility within a position can influence an employee's decision to remain in their current position or seek other employment.

Organizations must also consider the impact burnout can have on sustaining business. Burned out employees are less productive and committed to their work. In human services, this is realized in the relationship between the provider and recipient. If the recipient is dissatisfied with services, they may be less likely to participate in service activities and may ultimately separate from the organization. Separation of services could negatively impact the organization, as anticipated revenue based on achieving outcomes is contingent upon successfully meeting outcome.

Employee turnover is a costly event for the organization as well. Employees have knowledge of organizational and funding source requirements and processes. They have built rapport with service recipients that is not easily replaced. Organizations must dedicate time and funds towards recruiting and training new employees. During this

time, remaining employees are expected to pick up the work of the open position until the

new employee is trained and ready to assume the responsibilities of the position.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The unstable economic climate of recent years has pushed human services organizations to produce greater outcomes with fewer resources. There is an increased focus on meeting and achieving outcome measures. The meaning of work has become less about the individual's occupation and more about survival and identity. Mass lay-offs and program closures in human service organizations are real events occurring at staggering rates. The prospect of being out of work and having to seek work in a down economy is unsettling to say the least. Organizations must understand the human side of human services. Those providing the services deserve support in meeting their job demands. Human services are earmarked as having the potential to be emotionally stressful and should include caring for the care giving professional within the organizational structure and standards. Consulting best practices of other customer driven and service-oriented industries can provide a way to draw parallels in employee relations and retention methods. Continued research and development of best practices for employee engagement specific to the highly emotional and relational nature of human services work may assist organizations in restructuring the workplace to decrease stressors in the workplace and lessen the possibility of workplace stress developing into burnout.

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Research Paper Title:
        Job Burnout: The End or a New Beginning?

Major Professor: Carl Flowers