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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)

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BURNOUT: A SURVEY OF LIBRARY DIRECTORS' VIEWS

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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 continued stress on the job. Burnout, according to available research, is reported 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" including 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, nineteen 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 interaction 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 development 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 interesting 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		Do not know	
	No.	%	No.	%	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

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

QUESTIONNAIRE

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 \_\_\_\_\_

IV 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) _____ |                        |

V 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) \_\_\_\_\_