What Do I Do Now: Suggestions for the Frustrated Mid-Career Professional

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Abstract

Librarians, like most professionals, may arrive at a stage in their careers when they start questioning themselves about their job satisfaction and importance. The reasons are many, from not being challenged by their work to abrupt changes in the workplace dictated by management and the economy. At this stage professionals may begin to feel unappreciated by management and not in control of their work environment. In this piece I offer some suggestions that could help mid-career librarians to re-energize themselves and survive in a workplace that is in constant flux. How you react to anxiety of job disconnect will affect the rest of your career life. Should you become more proactive at your job, increasing your responsibility and value to your institution? What does your personality have to do with how you adjust to management changes? Does tenure fit into this equation? Should you even think about changing your job at this stage of your career? What other factors could "spice" up your career? Specific strategies and options for each of these questions will be discussed.

1. Introduction

Some days at work can lead to boredom, stress, and difficulty concentrating, and even thoughts of leaving the profession. After years on the job, librarians may be questioning job satisfaction, and indeed, your importance to the organization. However, maybe there is more to this questioning and frustration then meets the eye. Institutions and organizations today are challenged daily with economic and technological adjustments that can cause stress and anxiety for all employees. Larry Bossidy author of *Execution: The Discipline Of Getting Things Done,* and a former senior executive at General Electric states, "Whether the economy is strong or weak, competition is fierce, and change comes faster than ever."[1] In today's competitive atmosphere budgets are being strained and staffs are being required to do more with less and at a quicker pace.[2] Having the feeling of being overwhelmed, stressed-out, and not in control of your workplace is becoming common in today's stressful world.

Constant stress on the job can lead to various forms of burnout. Dr. Michael Cronin, Professor, Speech Communication at Radford University in Virginia states that "Burnout is a loss of will, motivation, idealism, moral purpose or commitment at work."[3] People may have a measured degree of disconnection from their job brought on by constant work overload. When a person perceives that there is high degree of failure related to their job, increased stress levels can lead to various types of burnout. Dr. Cronin's workshops recognize the common symptoms of job burnout that include the loss of feeling and concern for co-workers, deficient energy levels, questioning one's career goals and decisions, as well as poor job attitudes and increased health problems which include a high incidence of headaches, ulcers and high blood pressure.[3] The cost of burnout and time lost by the employee are both distructive and expensive to the organization. Dr Cronin's burn-out scale test could be a useful tool for librarians who have been encountering increased stress loads at work.

Jonathan Halbesleben and M. Ronald Buckley have produced an extensive review of the burnout literature from 1993 to present. The information in this article is wide-ranging and thorough.. Contained in this document are: models of burnout, the measurement of burnout, reduction of burnout, and future directions that include alternate means of reducing burnout.[4] This review covers in depth the full scope of burnout syndrome. It offers the librarian the precise and detailed information that you must have in order to identify the various aspects of this syndrome, and how it may be affecting your life.

2. Self Assessment: a useful tool to identify and challenge job disconnect

What kind of strategy can I use to cope with the signs of burnout and job disconnect that could also help re-energize my attitude toward my work? The first step to take on the journey to re-energize yourself might be to begin self-assessment. Self-assessment is a process by which you learn more about yourself -- what you like, what you don't like, and how you tend to react to certain situations. Knowing these things can help you determine which work situations could be a better fit for you.

Start this process by analyzing your abilities, interest and values at this stage of your career. You're constantly changing, and so are your personal values and desires, says Dottie Perlman, president of DynamicPursuits LLC, a career and life-coaching firm located in Potomac, Md. Asking yourself if this is still where you want to be in terms of your job, your employer and even your life can help you to re-center yourself, return yourself to where you really want to be that has more meaning, and do what you really enjoy.

Management consultant Peter Drucker feels that in order to manage yourself you must first determine what your values are. You can be very effective at a certain way of doing things, but if it doesn't match your value system, you won't succeed. To be successful in an organization, a person's values must be comparable in relation to the organization's. Their value system doesn't have to be an ideal fit, but they should correspond most of the time. Otherwise, the person will not only be aggravated but will become nonproductive.[5] If this process is done in an honest and analytical way, it can be a life and career saver. As you grow you will pick up new interests and discard old ones. Often your goals are different later in life than they were earlier. "You can keep changing your career according to where you find yourself at a particular point or you can

base your choice from the beginning on a deeper understanding of who you are and who you'll always be.".[6]

Attempting to find out why you now have negative feelings about your job that you didn't have before can be perplexing. As a young professional athlete I had to continually reassess and adjust my game and practice to stay at a high level of competition. I Later in life, as a librarian, I used an assessment process that helped structure my goals and kept me alert to changes in my discipline.

The approach I use when critiquing my work consists of listing my targeted job assignments for the year. I then try to evaluate them through management's eyes. I proceed to make positive and negative comments concerning each assignment. I place myself in their position and start grading myself by using my work plan for the year and my institutions strategic goals and objectives as guidelines for this process. After this comparison I become more aware and in-tune with the organization's planned outcomes. For example, the list may include library staff training, and whether the training has been accomplished. A positive comment would indicate that the library staff has attended the appropriate workshops and the training has been successful in meeting the objective set by management.   A negative comment would be that the training was not accomplished and therefore the goal was not met. By completing this assessment on a periodic basis, I am able to identify problems that may have otherwise escaped me. My personal job assessment approach helps me identify not only training issues but can range from examining library policy issues to evaluating my own personal self-assessment. This is how I am able to re-energize myself and avoid possible disconnects and job burnout. I review this process on a quarterly basis and have found it to be a useful tool.

Self assessment takes practice, and being honest with yourself is the most important part of the process. Taking stock of yourself can be a difficult challenge, but this operation should be viewed as a positive step that will help you become more successful and aware of your environment. The process helps you to master yourself better, by allowing you to take responsibility for your behavior, adjust to change, and accept new concepts while maintaining your value system. As you become more familiar with the assessment process you can modify it to fit your needs. The more sophisticated you become with the procedure, the quicker you will be able to spot a complication, deal successfully with management, and solve the problem appropriately.

Management may be waiting for you to grow into a more responsible position, and understanding how they analyze and solve problems will make you a more valuable asset within the library and your organization. Remember that each organization has their own special way they treat information and solve problems. Learning this process and it will save you many headaches and possibly gain you a higher position at a later date.

3.   Personality: Your job and the organization

Have you ever considered how your personality may match your current job? For almost fifty years experts have claimed that there is a connection between the sort of person you are and the sort of job you would be good at. Begun by Isabel Myers and her mother, Katharine Cook

Briggs, and based on the theories of psychologist Carl Jung, a questionnaire successfully identified personality types in World War II such as GI Joes and Rosie the Riveters, then '50s conformists, '60s rebels and on to Gen X types. Attitudes, styles and cultures may change, but the basic personality types that Myers-Briggs identifies don't. In the late twentieth century the two women developed the idea that there are sixteen personality types. Each one predisposed to various vocations.[7] Recruiters the world over now rely on the Myers-Briggs theory. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of the best-known psychometric tests. A psychometric test is used to measure personal qualities of an individual, which include personality, intelligence, ability or motivation. "Most tests are designed and developed by occupational psychologist, and allow employers to compare a candidate against a similar population or group of individuals. A good test will be backed up by evidence and statistical information, which most importantly will demonstrate its reliability or consistency and its validity."[8]

Today, most Fortune 500 companies use the test in some form or another, including 89 of the Fortune 100, says CPP Inc., publishers of Myers-Briggs. General Motors Corp. has put its workforce through thousands of the tests. Myers-Briggs was a key part of an executive training program between 1997 and 2000, when every GM executive was given the test. It is still widely used by the company. The MBTI (The Myers Briggs Type Indicator) is self administering test with no time limit and is available from Education Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. The Type System of personality assessment is based on four basic aspects of human personality:
1. How we interact with the world and where we direct our energy, *Extraversion-Introversion,* (EI).
2. Indicating dominate perception style or what kind of information we naturally notice, *Sensation-Intuition,* (SN).
3. How we make decisions or which of these two modes of judgment is relied upon, *Thinking-Feeling,* (TF).
4. Whether we prefer to live in a more structured way or indicating which of these uses of the mind is relied upon in dealing with the environment, *Judgment-Perception,* (JP).[9]

Another personality test (NEO) is derived from empirical studies about how types of people behave in certain situations. NEO (Neuroticism, Extroversion and Openness) Personality Inventory is a subtler model than Myers-Briggs that measures five main traits: extroversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness. Unlike the MMPI and notorious Rorschach test, it was designed to measure normal personalities. The Strong-Campbell Interest Theory or Self Directed Search (SDS) is able to indicate your interests and their similarity to those in several occupations. This is an example of a test developed through both theoretical and empirical means. The Kiersey Bates Temperament Sorter (KBTS) is akin to a short MBTI exam. It will give you a 4-letter personality indicator type and has proved reliable in terms of test/retest as a personality type indicator.[10]

Personality and assessment tests are now available on-line including DISC, a new and fresh psychometric test being used by recruiters in the business community. It is an industry-standard recruitment and assessment tool. DISC is personality testing technique that uses a questionnaire as a basis for insights into person behavior. DISC measures four factors of an individual's behavior: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance. They can be characterized as assertiveness, communication, patience and structure.[11] A DISC profile can be used to describe

a person's general approach, including their motivations and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, and some of the basic assumptions they make about other people. This can be helpful tool in your self-assessment strategy concerning how you approach and interact with people. The possibility of changing your library job may not be an option, but altering your personal behavior with the aid of these types of personality and assessment tests will help you target and solves specific areas of job disconnect that involve socialization.

Another test involves J.L. Holland's theory on research in the vocational field. His theory shows indicate "that persons will move toward work environments more congruent with their personality types and that people working in environments highly congruent with their personalities will be more satisfied than those whose personality environment congruence is low."[12] Utilizing the psychometric tests that are mentioned above can aid in your assessment. The question that you might ask yourself at this point is twofold. First, is your personality congruent with being a librarian, and second, are you comfortable with the personality and culture of the library that you are now working at? The answer to the first part of the question is usually affirmative; librarians are usually happy with their career choice. However, the second part of the question may have a less affirmative response. When major changes occur because of economic conditions that cause staffing and budget cutbacks, or there are leadership changes, an organizational culture and personality shift can take place and you may not feel comfortable in this new environment. Libraries are facing huge financial questions as we speak, and it does not appear that higher levels of funding for libraries will be more forthcoming in the immediate future. It is important that you recognize that these changes will occur and how you adjust to your new environment will be important to you as well as to your library staff. This is a moment when you should display a tactful and a confident personality. Examine the organizational landscape and see where your talents might be used. This can be a time of opportunity for you. The dynamics of the marketplace demand change in every aspect of our society, and libraries and librarians are certainly included in this formula. If you recognize that change can be a positive force for you, then the future will become much brighter.

4. Should I make a job change?

Many people become frustrated with their job at some point, and the previous steps, suggest ways that can identify and turn a negative situation into a positive one by using self-assessment as an early detection devise that can spot problems that may cause frustration and anxiety in your workplace. Everyone's situation however, is unique, along with their tolerance level for job dissatisfaction.

If you are dissatisfied with your job, ask yourself these questions before starting a search for new employment. Otherwise, you could end up in a situation with similar problems but without the familiarity of a long-standing position.

- ✓ Am I happy with my work?
- ✓ Am I challenged by my work?
- ✓ Is there opportunity for me to advance?
- ✓ How do I feel about my office location, hours of work and co-workers?
- ✓ Is my job too stressful?

In addition to the questions listed above, you should take an in-depth inventory of what you have invested in your work. How close are you to retirement? What are the economic consequences of leaving, both in the short and long term? If you have a family, how would this affect them? Are you tenured? Would you be required to go through another tenure process at your new job? These are just some of the questions that you would have to answer before going on to another job. If you have many years invested in the organization, and retirement is right around the corner, you might want to re-evaluate your thinking about your job and try to re-energize yourself to get back on track. W. Kiechel, author of The *Managerial Midlife Crisis*, recognized that "The crisis usually ends with integration, acceptance, and the exploration of new opportunities."[13]

On the other hand, if you haven't invested many years in the organization, a change may be in your best interest. Sometimes no matter what you do or how you assess, tweak, or compromise, the frustration of your job never seems to end. In fact, the frustration which may be burnout seems to have a life of its own and even carries over into your social and family life. Changing jobs used to be frowned on, but not today. Evan Harris, author of the *Art of Quitting*[14] suggested that all things must come to an end; and by choosing when to quit a job; the person had more control of their own destiny. A fresh start in a new job or re-energizing your present job by approaching it from a different perspective can be positive and empowering.

5. Activities that can help re-energize your career

There are a number of opportunities that you can explore in expanding your horizons and at the same time re-energizing your career. Some organizations "detail" selected personnel to serve in different departments of their organization. This affords one the opportunity to work with new people, solve different problems, show how capable you are to management, and boost your self esteem in the process. For example, because of the skills you have demonstrated as a librarian, you could be chosen to head a task force that involves university policies. In the government or private industry you could be transferred to another division to take advantage of your management and problem solving skills. When you return to your original job, you'll have a totally different perspective of yourself and the organization, and be re-energized to do something new and exciting.

Take advantage of a sabbatical and travel to a foreign country for your research project. Learn to speak a foreign language and live with a local family in the country of your research. M. Hubbard, the author of *Exploring the Sabbatical or Other Leave as a Means of Energizing a Career,* states that a successful leave of absence for a librarian not only inspires professional growth but also renewal. It also offers at mid-career, an opportunity to discover a fresh perspective from which to view one's profession.[15]

Some institutions are affiliated with schools or corporate organizations in foreign countries. Spending a semester at a foreign affiliated university or corporation affords you the opportunity to refresh your life style and to engage in new cultural activities. Funding is usually available through corporate and institutional grants. Unique programs like the University of Pittsburgh's "Semester at Sea" are attractive opportunities available to selected librarians. It's a wonderful and rewarding way to inspire professional growth and re-energize your career.

Pursue another degree and open up new options for yourself. For instance acquiring an M.B.A. degree would bolster your management and leadership skills. Taking selected computer courses would certainly enhance your career possibilities. The course selection and growth potentials are endless.

Get involved with charitable work. Giving your time and efforts for a worth while cause can make you appreciate your life and job that much more.

Start an exercise program. Nothing can help you get rid of frustration and the "Blues" better than exercising. The benefits are astounding. You feel and look better, increase your energy and metabolism level, and it also triggers better mental health. This may be the most important thing that you can do to re-energize your entire life.

There are so many things that you can do outside of work to give your life a more substantial meaning. Try and start something new that will add energy and optimism to your life and your job. Become bold and attack that project that you thought you could never do, or travel to that special place that you never thought you would ever get to. Always try to be positive in everything you do and you'll find that your life and job really can be constantly energized.

6. Conclusion

Self assessment can be used as an effective tool in combating work fatigue and burnout. Most librarians have to be re-energized at some point during their careers. How they go about identifying and later correcting this problem has been the topic of this article. Mid-Career burnout is characterized by an elevated frustration level, not uncommon in most professions. I introduced a self-assessment strategy that can not only identify problem areas, but empower the librarian to assume responsibility for correction and solve the problem. The introduction of assessment and personality tests was used as tools to identify and solve problems in the workplace. I illustrated how through self-assessment, you could control and better manage your job, and become a valuable asset to your organization's management team.

Studies have shown the importance of matching the personality of the professional to the organization and job where they work. Many companies and organizations are using personality and assessment tests extensively in hope that it would help secure employees that are competent , satisfied with their jobs, and who have their value system in line with their employer,. "Companies across America are investing large sums of money to figure out what types of employees they've got-and who they want more of. Today's personality tests attempt to meld the 1950's desire for the perfect employee with the 1990's belief in the individual."[16]

When unforeseen dynamics such as budget cuts and management/staffing changes occur, undue stress is placed on this relationship. I indicated how librarians could adjust their responses to cope with chaos during this period. When everything has been tried and re-energizing doesn't appear to work, the possibility of job change is addressed. The pros and cons of this decision are discussed in length. The re-evaluation of this decision is called for when an in-depth inventory

and analysis is performed for a librarian who has many years of service. It is emphasized that this decision is made only after all the facts and alternatives are examined. After exhausting all means to stay at the job, some will leave. For them the re-energizing begins with this new appointment. It offers them a fresh start and a new beginning. Every librarian is unique, and how they deal with re-energizing themselves eventually is individualistic and depends on their motivation and attitude towards this process.

I presented a list of opportunities that you can take advantage of in re-energizing both your job and your life. Peter Drucker (2005) states:

> Successful careers are not planned. They develop when people are prepared for opportunities because they know their strengths, their method of work, and their values. Knowing where one belongs can transform an ordinary person – hardworking and competent but otherwise mediocre – into an outstanding performer.[5]

and librarian.

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