



For Love or Money

Confronting the State of Museum Salaries

Edited by Dawn E Salerno, Mark S Gold
and Kristina L Durocher

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CONFRONTING THE STATE OF MUSEUM SALARIES**

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ADDRESSING

THE ISSUE

CHAPTER TWELVE

DECENT WORKING
CONDITIONS ARE
ESSENTIAL FOR
DECENT COMPENSATION

Paul C Thistle

ENDEMIC LOW PAY in the museum sector is one significant circumstance unquestionably worth the critical study presented in this book. However, the culture of overwork that exists in museum workplaces gravely exacerbates the enormity, unethical nature, and destructive outcomes of under-compensation. I firmly believe it is absolutely essential to take a step back from the important question of unfair – and in many cases unsustainable – museum pay rates (Milldrum, 2017; Tyson, 2013: 92, passim). My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to provide necessary perspective on the structure, management, and experience of work in the museum field that undeniably make low wages more reprehensible – and, in hourly-rated terms at least, illegal in many jurisdictions. Dictionary.com defines the noun overwork as “excessive work.” The verb means to “exhaust with too much work” or “make excessive use of.” Synonyms listed include: “exploit, drive (too hard), overtax, and overburden.”

In my view, intense pressures to overwork in the museum industry are generated by rising expectations in a context of limited or declining resources. Love for what we do and commitment to excellence drive museum workers to fill the growing gap between rising expectations and the available resources. In the wider world of work, such circumstances result in personnel being confronted with related “work intensification” (Bunting 2004: 28), resulting “task saturation” (Murphy, 2018), and “excessive workloads/insufficient staff resources” (McIsaac, 2013: 21, 22) leading to eventual push-out from the job (ibid: 3, 22-23, 47). We will see that such workplace problems are identical in the museum sector.

The origins of concern

My earliest forebodings about this issue arose during the mid- to

late-1980s as I worked in my first long-term museum job as the sole staff member of a small museum looking forward to what eventually became a \$1.7 million capital project. Having failed to persuade my municipal employer to hire more staff to help prepare for this major expansion into a physical plant approximately six times larger, I applied for and was granted provincial (i.e. state-level government in Canada) funding to hire one additional staff position. In return, I carried out training and advisory services for museums located in the northern half of the province of Manitoba. To begin my new responsibilities, I called on museums in the region to pinpoint needs for support.

Returning from six of these visits, I was struck by one worrying characteristic recognized among the paid staff and volunteers working at every one of these rather diverse heritage operations. That similarity can be summed up in one word: burnout. Burnout is defined as emotional exhaustion, depression, and a variety of other negative symptoms such as loss of job performance due to job stresses that result from work overload. Typically, burnout strikes workers who are committed to their work and, significantly, “physical and psychological problems” occur (Schultz and Schultz, 2006: 370-2).

If you could see directly into the eyes of the volunteers pictured at Figure 1, understand their hearts, and hear the despair about the failure to recruit new volunteers and the resulting uncertain future of the museum, you would be as acutely aware of their weariness and discouragement as I was. According to the last Canadian study that provides relevant data, in concert with the decline in both the number of volunteers and the total number of volunteer hours during the three-year period studied, the average number of hours contributed per volunteer

actually rose by nearly 9% (Statistics Canada, 2001: 31).

On returning, I wrote an editorial in the newsletter of The Sam Waller Museum. It focused on the burnout discovered among the museum workers I had met (Thistle, 1990: 1). So, at the time of writing this chapter, I have been thinking, researching, speaking, and writing about the poor Quality of Working Lives (QWL) problem in museums for nearly three decades. Sadly, to date, there has been little or no progress made on addressing these issues. Arguably, the museum QWL situation has worsened in the last 30 years, for example, with the incursion of “work enhancing technologies” (cf. Towers *et al.*, 2005: 14-18) in our field.

The museum folks in the picture were soon to be challenged by the introduction of a program of Standards for Manitoba Museums (Association of Manitoba Museums, 1995). In the following, I make no argument against the ultimate value of professional museum standards to advance museum practice. However, I do insist that the negative impact of standards regimes on museums and their workers – given the lack of necessary resources to implement them effectively – requires critical museology. At the time, my analysis of the new standards regime proposed during its development (1993-1994) was that it imposed many unrealistic – if not impossible – standards for this and other small and mid-sized museums (Thistle, 1994: 11, *passim*).

Research related to this question that focused on museums in Quebec identified widespread problems of insufficient financing, a “general state of fatigue,” and “burnout” among museum workers. Research project leader Professor Philippe Dubé, from Université Laval, concluded that this state of affairs



FIG. 1: Hospitable volunteers Gertie, Mary and Dorothy wait for their peer Bruce to finish one more task before starting lunch put on for the author at the Ole Johnson Museum, Big Woody, Manitoba, Canada in June 1990. Photograph: Paul C Thistle.

is due in large measure to an ideal operational framework defined from outside the institution that is based on “an official definition that small and medium-sized museums simply cannot meet.” This conception of a professional standard museum creates “a trap that makes museum work increasingly complex, and even *absurd*” (Dubé, 2001: 8-9) [emphasis added]. Similar conclusions about the damage to museum operations imposed by unresourced expectations introduced by standards regimes have been reached by other museum analysts (Janes, 2009: 19; Tivy, 2006: 32, 43; Kurylo, 1984: 10).

Indeed, museum standards regimes have resulted in some museums becoming unsustainable and forced to shut their doors. I am sad to report, when seeking to learn the fate of the volunteer-run Ole Johnson Museum many years later, I found it had closed and been lost to the memories of my contacts in Manitoba. I recently discovered that its collection was passed on to the Swan Valley Historical Museum – another volunteer operation in the area that currently is desperate for new volunteers. It should be noted here that the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) (1986: 3) identified the main concerns for small museums with respect to the impact of professional standards at the time as being:

- the failure to take into account the lack of resources available to small museums;
- the tendency for standards to be based on “ivory tower” ideals which do not address the real needs of small museums;
- and the potential for setting up invidious comparisons with richer museums.

Citing Stephen Weil (1988: 8, 24 *passim*), Professor Dubé (2001) recommended that museum practitioners should develop an alternate model of what professional standards small and medium-sized museums can, could, and should be expected to achieve.

To close this section, my overall summary of the human resource crisis in the museum field generated by overwork is captured by the aphorism “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” My experience, observation, and research leads me to describe museum workers as already fully-loaded camels working in a constant rain of straws – read unresourced expectations. As they often do, when resources fail to keep pace with continually rising expectations from all stakeholders – government and other funders, professional museum organizations, and visitors – museum workers choose to step up to close this ever-widening gap. In practice, we meet these unresourced expectations by self-sacrificially overworking longer and harder than we are paid to do. As a result, museum workers find themselves impacted by chronic circumstances identified by research in the wider world of work as: “task saturation” (Murphy, 2018), “time poverty” (Schor, 1991: xx, 5), and workplace stress (Posen, 2013: 2, *passim*). Thus, when museum practitioners habitually overwork, they are in danger of breaking their backs – if not physically, then, as outlined below, in mental, family, and social health terms.

Why museum practitioners tend to overwork

To start, we love what we do. Here, we must look to the sociology of work that identifies museum workers among a class referred to as “occupational devotees.” In short, such individuals have

“profound love for the job,” and “a set of deeply felt values” significantly regarded as “socially important, highly challenging, intensely absorbing, and immensely appealing” creating “deep involvement and attachment” and “rewarded by self-actualization or self-development” (Stebbins, 2004: ix, 10, 17, 76). Not only are we devoted to our vocation, museum workers are committed to excellence – and expected to be so by professional ideals (e.g. American Alliance of Museums, 2017; cf. Tyson, 2013: 64, 88). What is the upshot here? When expectations increase above available resources – person-power, time, money – museum practitioners voluntarily work longer, harder, and faster than we are paid to do (Tyson, 2013: 16; cf. Posen, 2013: 13). We sacrificially overwork regardless of the damage done to our own QWL.

Occupational devotion is not the sole – and perhaps not even the most significant – reason behind overwork. Clear evidence of what I call the “unfunded expectation inflation” rampant in the museum field is the fact that paid staff and volunteers often are given no choice but to overwork.

At one point in my career, due to a supervisor’s approval of vacation time for colleagues and refusal to permit an upcoming exhibition opening later than advertised, I found myself in an unplanned situation with no option but to dismantle my vacationing colleague’s temporary exhibition as well as to prepare and mount my own replacement displays on schedule. To accomplish this, I worked 32 days in a row for between eight and sixteen hours a day. Physician David Posen, who has been treating stressed-out workers for more than a quarter century, identifies the three biggest problems that cause workplace stress like mine: the work’s volume and velocity compounded

by “abuse” of workers by management (Posen, 2013: 38, 247, *passim*). Posen observes, “an increasing amount of stress in recent years has been company-driven and organizations are doing precious little to own up to the damage they’re causing on a daily basis” (2013: 32).

A remarkable corresponding declaration by a well-respected museum professional underlining the author’s experience above was voiced during discussion of a conference presentation I made (Thistle, 2010). Another panelist, the late Barry Lord – then President of Lord Cultural Resources – firmly asserted that, as “information workers,” we in the museum field should expect “fifteen-hour work days”.

I disagree in the strongest possible terms with Lord and others who maintain that eight hours of work a day are never enough (cf. 80-hour weeks in Matousek, 2018; [but this is “stupid” Posen, 2013: 116]). Museum professionals of this opinion should attend to a comprehensive review of labour standards in Canada that recommended the eight-hour work day be maintained and that no worker should “be subject to coercion, or... be required to work so many hours that he or she is effectively denied a personal or civic life” (Arthurs, 2006: x, 47). In parallel, I suggest that those of us in the heritage business must not forget the history of struggle to bring about the eight hour working day (Golden, 2006). This is to say nothing about internationally recognized human rights to health and safety at work under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Spieler, 2003: 86-87, 101, 104). While laboring fifteen hours a day, we must ask, what is the QWL under such circumstances?

The overwork all too often expected of museum occupational devotees can be understood as nothing less than default – or deliberate – abuse of our love for the work. This exploitation is short-sighted in the extreme, since overwork not only harms the mental, physical, family, and social health of workers, it also demonstrably undermines productivity (Kuroda and Yamamoto, 2018; Posen, 2013: 5, 45, 58-9, 136, *passim*; Higgins *et al.* 2008: 6-11, 160, 199-200; Duxbury and Higgins, 2012a: 6, 9, 13-14 *passim*).

Research data on overwork outside and inside museums

Large longitudinal studies on samples of 25,000 Canadian workers carried out in 1991, 2001, and 2011 have identified significant increases in stress levels at work and sharp declines in life satisfaction (Duxbury and Higgins, 2012b: 12; Duxbury and Higgins, 2012a: 6, 9, 13-14 *passim*). Half of the participants in these studies match the professional, well-educated characteristics of museum workers.

In the museum sector specifically, the rather rare research on working conditions from 1983 through 2019 has identified the following related problems:

- “role overload” (Newlands, 1983: 20);
- “dysfunctional burnout” (Lord and Lord, 1986: 116);
- “little or no attention... paid to the need to support museum workers, to attempt to reduce the mounting stresses in their lives, nor to treat the rampant burnout” (Thistle, 1990: 1);
- increased “occupational stress,” “job dissatisfaction, mental ill-health ... hypertension, heart disease... absenteeism, and high turnover” (Kahn and Garden, 1994: 193-4, 202);

- “general state of fatigue” and “burnout” (Dubé, 2001: 8-9);
- museum executive directors “hopelessly overburdened” (Janes, 2009, 64);
- “over half of respondents agreed... life has been too rushed” and – at the same time as showing markedly higher or equal happiness scores in all ten other measures – museum workers reported statistically significant discontent compared to the very large Happiness Alliance (happycounts.org) data sample in only one well-being factor: that being “time balance” (Michelbach, 2013: 3, 34-35, 42);
- due to funding cuts “greater demands have been placed on me” and “I take on more because I care for my organisation” by 65% & 56% respectively in a museum workplace stress survey (Sullivan, 2015);
- 47% of respondents to an informal survey of museum workers reported leaving the field is a consideration and 33% of those who actually have quit museum work cite “poor work/life balance” (Ocello, 2017, 8);
- the most recent Center for the Future of Museums’ *TrendsWatch* reports “workers often feel overworked and that their productivity drops when the workweek reaches 50 hours or more. Museums... pay a high if hidden price for stress. Turnover results in a loss of knowledge, experience, and institutional memory” (Merritt, 2019: 40, 43, 44).

The do more with less culture in museums

One particular management trend forms part of the strong pressures on museum workers to overwork. There exists a prevalent frame of mind in the museum sector that often seeks to “do more with less.” This idea was evidenced by officials of

the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) who said exactly that when announcing layoffs of 23 permanent staff and decisions not to renew 47 contract positions (Bradshaw, 2009). In the real world, such irrational deceits can be put into practice only by further exploiting museum workers' willingness to overwork self-sacrificially in order to meet expectations that lack sufficient resources. With 70 fewer workers, AGO officials seemingly continued to expect that its remaining demoralized staff could "do more with less." It is not difficult to see why management is acknowledged as the major cause of stress and related burnout, according to author of the book *Is Work Killing You?*, medical doctor David Posen (2013: 321, *passim*; cf. Higgins *et al.*, 2008: 160, 199-200).

In summary, I am convinced that museum practitioners must apply the available evidence detailing the indefensible Quality of Working Lives in our field to the question of under-compensating museum workers. If we fail to do so, we will never be able to effectively address unsustainably low wages in museums.

Increasing pay alone is no solution to wage slavery

Without any doubt, pervasive overwork in the museum industry makes the nominal low rates of pay much worse than the raw figures reveal. As occupational devotees, museum workers have a tendency to become "willing slaves" to our jobs. Madeleine Bunting, *Guardian* columnist and Director of the London-based think tank Demos, reporting on a major study of workers in the UK in her book *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives*, introduced the concept of "willing slaves" overburdened with work. The study found dystopian

increases of workloads, more hours worked, “work intensification,” “stress levels soared,” “rising incidence of depression,” and, rather than short sprints, work became “an endless marathon” (Bunting, 2004: xix, xxii, xxv, xxvii, 7, 187-8, *passim*).

Personally, I rate myself as a willing slave. Although I have been blessed to spend the majority of my 26 years of employment in the museum field working for municipal museums that are unionized and, along with higher levels of government heritage operations, typically boast wages that are above the problematic norm. On the other hand, important research by participant observer Amy Tyson identified problematic low wages even for state-funded living history site interpreters and this had been the case since the outset (Tyson 2013: 4, 6, 15, 91-92, 172, *passim*;) in this “poverty-ridden field” (Phillips and Hogan 1984: xi, 9 ff.). Despite the well-documented evidence of low pay – markedly poorer for women – I argue that, even if museum workers find ways to get paid more, no pay raise – no matter how large – can improve the QWL deficit if we do not escape from excessive work. Overworked willing slave employees need to be emancipated from the proven stress-related ill-effects.

I now return to my own case to demonstrate this problem. After surviving my 32 straight days of unpaid overtime, I calculated the effective rate of my hourly pay. My comparatively high \$32 (CAD) an hour curatorial department head wage rate at the time actually ended up being \$8.88 (CAD) per hour for the duration of my month-long marathon. This amounted to a pay cut of 72.25% relative to my nominal wage rate. I believe that I am not the only museum practitioner to be exploited for my devotion to the job. It is both a pervasive and a perverse

situation. Many employees in this field exhibit total investment in the emotional and intellectual labor that is entailed in the museum enterprise that we love and for which we sacrifice so much (Tyson, 2013:18-21, 104, 115, 176, *passim*).

Self-evidently, the under-resourced expectations under which many museum workers toil – without, or even with, continuous overtime pay – can never adequately compensate museum workers for the negative QWL, stress, and ill-health outcomes of constant overwork. Museum worker burnout from excessive work is driving committed and experienced people out of our field.

Let's be brutally realistic here. High or increased museum pay cannot prevent – or even ameliorate – burnout. There is empirical evidence that bigger paychecks do not buy life satisfaction, especially in the face of stress at work (Kasser and Sheldon, 2009: 243; Posen, 2013: 6). Witness the case of physicians whose labor is comparatively highly-paid compared to museum work. Medical personnel also are occupational devotees. Recent research on doctors finds that between half in Canada and two-thirds in the USA report overwork and burnout (Goldman, 2018; Larkin, 2018). Newly-trained doctors in residence – who in the museum field would be called “emerging professionals” (cf. Milldrum, 2017) – are deliberately forced to work punishingly long hours, mainly as a right of initiation. In one American study, suicide is the second most common cause of death for all resident doctors and the most common cause among males in the cohort (Yaghmour *et al.*, 2017: 1). Thus, high pay is no protection from the debilitating damage that overwork and burnout cause to even well-paid workers' mental and physical health.

In light of the above, even if my museum pay had been increased to equal a top lawyer's billing rate per hour, or to the salary of a large private sector corporate CEO – which Google searches report make between 200 to 400 times above his/her firm's line workers (cf. Posen 2013: 131) – my willingness to overwork, and the professional opinion that 15-hour work days are *de rigeur*, wouldn't ever allow improvement to the quality of my working life. I will simply continue to be task-saturated, debilitatingly overworked, stressed, and burned out regardless of my pay rate (cf. Posen, 2013: 26, 182).

Conclusion

There is a strong case to be made that constantly rising, yet unresourced expectations, and poor Quality of Working Lives, combined with museum human resources practices, must not be exempt from critical museology. Continually attempting to do “more with less” cannot be accomplished in any business supposedly following professional ethics standards that obligate museums to “protect” their staff members on the same level of importance as collections (International Council of Museums, 2017: 2; American Association of Museums, 2000: 2) and to treat workers fairly (Museums Association, 2019: 19). In the end analysis, the serious problems of worker overload and under-compensation must therefore be addressed at the same time if we are ever to attain pay in the museum field that actually can be considered decent and sustainable.

I maintain that it is critical to act now to change the culture of overwork and resulting burnout in our vocation. Amy Tyson (2013: 84), author of *The Wages of History*, asserts that museum practitioners do possess collective agency. Among

the many philosophical, organizational, and individual functional competencies that museum workers possess are skills that analyze, create alternatives, act to minimise problems, and value original approaches to problem-solving (Canadian Museums Human Resource Planning Committee, 1997: 15). I urge museum workers in the strongest possible terms to initiate change in the museum industry that – by default or deliberate intent – preys upon museum practitioners’ love for our work.

In considering the potential effectiveness of such a necessary lobbying effort, I point to the much-needed and extensive efforts among North American professional museum organizations currently aimed at improving diversity in our field (American Alliance of Museums, 2019; Canadian Museums Association, 2019). By all means, let’s diversify the museum workforce. We can succeed in such social activism and must do so (Janes and Sandell, 2019). However, I believe it is imperative that we work equally hard to ensure that increasing numbers of diverse museum employees are not forced to labor in an unreasonably low wage ghetto, nor to continue “business as usual,” expecting them to carry out museum work unethically and/or illegally as is distressingly commonplace in our industry today.

With regard to addressing exploitative employment, Tyson advises her living history interpreter colleagues – and, by extension, I believe the entire museum workforce – “Above all, fight it now so it doesn’t plague you the rest of your working life” (Tyson, 2013: 70-71).

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COVER IMAGE

Demonstrators outside New York's Museum of Modern Art on May 31, 2018, call for a fair contract for the museum's union workers.

Photograph: Ilana Novick.



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ISBN 978-1-912528-12-7