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Emerald Article: Management versus repetitive tasks - avoiding "working for the weekend": A crash course in motivating library staff faced with seemingly endless tasks

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Management versus repetitive tasks – avoiding "working for the weekend"

A crash course in motivating library staff faced with seemingly endless tasks

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Abstract

Purpose – In this paper the authors aim to examine ways to motivate staff whose job assignments include repetitive library tasks such as shelving, copy cataloguing, circulation, and other similar functions.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors review the appropriate management literature and build upon the extensive management experience of the second author.

Findings – Ways to increase employee motivation including enriching the work experience, effective communication, appropriate incentives, and treating each employee as an individual. Sharing tasks among staff and maintaining an ergonomic workspace are also important. Library automation and eliminating unneeded tasks can reduce repetitive tasks but can also lead to a reduction in staff.

Practical implications – The paper provides practical steps for managers to take to keep staff motivated when faced with repetitive tasks.

Originality/value – This paper summarizes the management literature on this topic to provide practical guidance for library managers.

Keywords Repetitive tasks, Motivation (psychology), Enrichment, Communication, Library automation, Employees, Library management

Paper type Literature review

Introduction: "Sixteen tons – another day over and deeper in debt"

Since the invention of the assembly line, managers have faced the quandary of how to sustain productivity in the performance of repetitive tasks. How does the manager keep productivity up when employee engagement is spiraling downward? We have all seen the process. The new hire arrives on the first day full of enthusiasm and interest and charges full-speed-ahead to accomplish the daily tasks that support the mission of the organization. She/he works diligently to provide productive results; yet, over time, this enthusiasm dwindles. She/he finds herself/himself in a rut after working day after day performing the same repetitive tasks. Eventually, motivation drops; and she becomes burned out. The organization's productivity suffers and, instead of the jubilant new hire the library once had, the manager now sees herself/himself with an ambivalent employee satisfied with low productivity. The manager is faced with an

unhappy worker – one who feels she "owes her soul to the company store." "She works hard for the money" every day but seemingly gets nowhere. She lives her life where "everybody's working for the weekend".

This scenario is not specific only to Henry Ford assembly line employers. Indeed, many library managers need only look around to see just how closely library operations can fall into this rut. From shelving, to data entry, to record correction, library staff can easily succumb to burnout. They perform the same repetitive tasks day after day; and, without appropriate assistance from management, they may become less than enthusiastic employees:

> All librarians, even those working one job, can become victims of burnout. It is simply the nature of our profession. As we strive to help the patrons around us, many times we neglect our own needs. It is an occupational hazard, especially as librarians are now working harder than ever to prove their worth in a fog of budget cuts and economic uncertainty (DelGuidice, 2011, p. 22).

From a psychological standpoint, the risks of repetitive work are well documented. Since the mid-twentieth century, psychologists have been conducting research to create a general model of repetitive work and its implications (Phillips *et al.*, 1991). The consensus is that repetitive work causes boredom, which in turn leads to job dissatisfaction. However, the undesired effects do not end there. In addition to dissatisfaction comes a correlation with absenteeism, higher turnover, and output restriction. In essence, poorer employee performance results (Phillips *et al.*, 1991).

So how do library managers keep their staff from the perils of boredom and sustain high productivity? The options are numerous. For a quick crash course, we can start by looking at the experts in repetitive tasks: the assembly line employers.

According to articles in *Industrial Engineering*, many manufacturing plants are shifting their focus from quicker, faster, more repetitive shop floor practices to those that benefit both the organization and the worker alike. Rather than dwelling on one-task performance, managers are looking at the whole picture, including worker enrichment. History has now given us evidence that repetitive tasks cause not only physical problems over time but also produce employee burnout and poor job satisfaction as well. To offset this outcome, Wendy Ross Key of Pathway Industries writes:

> Concerns that should be focused on for assembly-line workers are the design of the workplace and worker enrichment programs. By focusing on worker needs, a company may succeed in having satisfied happy productive workers (Key, 1994, p. 44).

If those at the forefront of repetitive task management are placing an importance on employee engagement, then perhaps library managers can learn from their example – they must put a higher value on worker enrichment if they want to achieve long-term results. This is not a new discovery in the management field, although the principle may sometimes get shoved to the back burner in the press of dealing with crises. In 1997, Maslach and Leiter (1997) penned the management title *The Truth About Burnout: How Organizations Cause Personal Stress and What To Do About It*. This work cites six reasons for burnout:

(1) work overload;

(2) powerlessness;

(3) employing insufficient reward systems;

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(4) unfairness;

(5) workplace community breakdown; and

(6) conflicting value systems.

Although not every reason will apply to every position and every organization, most can be boiled down to worker dissatisfaction. Furthermore, how does a manager combat dissatisfaction in the workplace? Managers can all start with one major principle: motivation.

Motivation: "We didn't start the fire"

There are a million ways to motivate the staff as a whole and perhaps an infinite number of ways to motivate individuals. Dan Bobinski (2011) states it as simply as this on his blog when quoting from his book and radio show *Creating Passion-Driven Teams*: "Motivation is fire lit from within. You can't light that fire, but you can create the conditions for that fire to burn brightly". If that is true, then the theme song for many successful managers would be by Billy Joel's lyrics. Although in this case, "we didn't light it" ... but we're gonna' stoke it.

Motivation has been defined as "the psychological process that gives behavior purpose and direction" and the "degree to which an individual wants and chooses to engage in certain specified manner" (Ugah, 2008, p. 2). The reason for motivation is simple: an unsatisfied need in an individual that cries for satisfaction. In order to foster motivation, managers can employ several tactics, including worker enrichment, communication, feedback, and incentives.

While there is no right or wrong answer, a grasp of the basics of motivational management can help ease the burden of engaging employees.

Worker enrichment

According to research, adults spend on average 40 percent of their waking day on the job (Key, 1994). So why not make it more enjoyable? While socialization is certainly not the primary reason people go to work, it certainly does not hurt the motivational atmosphere. Encourage a safe, friendly environment. This may not be a simple task, but it can be an effective managerial tool (Key, 1994). When people get into the drone of complete separation of work from their lives, they can exhibit "psychic absence" as they leave their minds, hearts, and souls in the driveway. In fact, only about half the working population is happy with their jobs (Topper, 2008). In order to combat such drudgery, jumpstart a more enjoyable environment where home life is not necessarily dropped at the door. While it is not a good idea to become your staff's personal psychologist, the library manager would find it beneficial to appreciate employees' personal lives as an important aspect in their existence and not just as a factor that affects their library performance.

Find out what makes your staff tick. Observe their behavior. Pay attention to what they discuss in the break room. If it seems that most of your staff enjoy socializing together, ponder whether a company appreciation picnic might be appropriate. The important thing is to keep them interested in what they are doing. Research in the field of psychology supports this fact: "[...] (T)hey concluded that employees who view their work and workplace as a central life interest are more concerned with their company and its products, their craft or profession, workplace autonomy, and their career" (Phillips *et al.*, 1991 p.77).

Some library managers offer the following bit of advice for motivating library staff – giving them their own day. Staff days can be used for just about anything that is applicable to the work environment but without the traditional daily grind. Sally Decker Smith, an Independent 22 Library Consultant in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, suggests implementing such days; one common element is usually food. Smith states that staff days, or whatever terminology the library chooses to employ, "give staff a chance to interact without the pressure of work to be done" (Smith, 2011, p. 21). Several key elements, stomachs aside, can contribute to a successful staff day. They include advanced planning, such as warning the public in advance that the library will be closed for normal operations on the specified date. Others are more personal such as reinforcing the fact that management cares. Smith suggests making the event a group planned activity rather than one designed and implemented by an individual. This prevents burnout for the individual and helps create a team atmosphere. In addition, offer a "State of the Library" report from the director. Smith states that everyone benefits from knowing about the "big picture." A question and answer period at the end can clear up any misconceptions. Other options could include some form of evaluation at the end of the day. Overall, the day should be focused on showing gratitude for what the staff does without forgetting to have a little fun. Working together in this capacity can generate an opportunity to understand what everyone contributes to the library (Smith, 2011).

Efforts, however, must go beyond creating fun in the workplace. People need intellectual stimulation, too, at least on some level. Many people become bored when they are not challenged. Frederick Herzberg, management theorist, stated that people "would perform better and do more if they were challenged intellectually" (Lazenby, 2008, p. 6). According to a study conducted by the Greensboro, North Carolina-based Center for Creative Leadership, there are five ways to create new challenges (Nelson, 1997). Although the study was designed to foster the education of upcoming managers, the principles are applicable to staff as well. First, assign small tasks and projects that will encourage staff to learn something new. This pushes staff to view their jobs in a different light. Anything will work to get started such as organizing teams to address the current circulation policy. Provide opportunities to participate in workshops from local library organizations or authorize work-related classes and seminars that will broaden their professional education.

Secondly, assign small-scope projects that emphasize team building, individual responsibility, dealing with the boss, encouraging subordinates, and managing time pressure. This step may sound more complicated than it really is. For example, ask staff to work together to problem solve a previously unsolvable task. Has theft been an issue? Create a task force to investigate. Are library divisions having difficulty adhering to budgets? Ask staff to work in teams to brainstorm why this is a problem and what can possibly fix it. Remember, however, that managers must seriously consider implementing any solutions or risk being accused of creating busy work.

Thirdly, create small strategic assignments that underscore analysis and presentation skills. For instance, have staff try their hand at writing policies or proposals or have them assist in writing grants. You may find that their work not only benefits their job satisfaction but also aids library operations.

The fourth area the study found important to creating challenges is to have employees offer training or coaching on something new or of interest to them. For

example, having staff head training courses at the library on the latest technological development – anything that generates excitement and encourages demonstration of their skills – will be beneficial. Perhaps staff members are eager to help patrons learn more about social networking – embrace that excitement and offer training at the library. Benefits will abound for staff, patrons, and the library.

Lastly, take advantage of leadership skills that staff may already be using outside of the library. The more people networking within the profession the better (Nelson, 1997). Everyone brings more to the table when they are involved in their work, even when outside the office. While not in the list from this researcher, the authors will add the suggestion that employees can be encouraged to give talks at work about their personal interests. A bird watcher might explain to colleagues the appeal of this activity.

Communication

These tough economic times have made it even more difficult to find ways to motivate staff. Increased layoffs, no monies for pay raises or bonuses, heightened workloads, all are combining to create tough work environments. It is making managers face employees who are asking the question "why should we care anymore." That is why the authors recommend that managers keep staff informed to help morale and to reduce the spread of rumors. They should show by their words and actions that they will continue to work as their staff's advocates. Another key component is honesty. While it may seem a nice idea to sugar coat budget woes, it will not boost morale. Staff need managers to be directors, not friends. They want their frustrations faced, not sugar-coated (Maynard, 2009).

And while it is important to practice brutal honesty, a manager must not forget that first and foremost staff are human beings. When staff express concerns, be open and listen. Allow yourself to learn. Encouraging open communication can solve many problems. Being open to staff voices is essential to quality management. Nothing is gained if problems cannot be addressed. Continually sweeping problems under the rug hinders their resolution. Fostering open communication with employees promotes a feeling that they can turn to management to solve problems (Wormald, 2009).

If communicating one-on-one sounds like a difficult task, encourage staff meetings or offer a round-the-clock suggestion box for the shy employee. When hosting meetings, be as open-minded as possible – if staff do not feel their suggestions will even be considered, there is not much motivation for them to speak out. Make sure to always follow through on suggestions. Take notes at meetings to remember issues that need addressing. If note taking seems inappropriate, record what was said immediately after the meeting for review at a later time. Continue to address these suggestions at future meetings to give staff reinforcement that their thoughts and opinions do matter. However these practices are put into place, staff will at the very least appreciate the effort and may be more motivated to do their jobs well. Daniel Emojorho (2010), Head of Systems and Technical Services Divisions for Delta State University Library in Abraka, sums up the importance of communication very eloquently: "Effective communication is central to library services [...] In libraries worldwide, communication is used to modify behavior and achieve productivity, and meet goals" – essentially, communication can be the key to an effective organization, any way you slice it.

Incentives
Another great motivational tool to keep employees from burning out on repetitive tasks is providing applicable incentives. Furthermore, while monetary rewards are certainly appreciated, research shows that they are only temporarily effective (Wormald, 2009). A silent premise behind financial incentives is that, once people become comfortable with their new level of earnings, their performance tends to backslide. The best way to offset this result is to find different ways to give rewards.

While easier said than done, the key to finding incentives that work is to understand each person's individuality – everyone has personal issues that affect their attitudes concerning incentives (Wormald, 2009). When in doubt, ask employees what they would like. They most likely will be flattered that you asked.

If monetary incentives are not an option (as they may not be in this economic climate), it is still important not to be stingy with rewards – there are many ways to offer non-financial incentives to avoid looking like a scrooge. Praise and thanks are just two ways to offer staff rewards for going above and beyond required performance. Other suggestions include flexible scheduling, time off, special events such as "Bring Your Child to Work Day," or casual Fridays if dressing down does not hamper the organization's professional atmosphere. Whatever option is chosen, the key to successful implementation is timeliness. Just as in classical reinforcement, rewards should be given as immediately as possible for maximum effectiveness (Wormald, 2009).

Individual aspects
Realize that not every formula or motivational tool will work for everyone. Different people respond differently to their environments. In fact, some people even crave the consistency that repetitive tasks offer. "They don't say 'Different strokes for different folks,' for nothing," (Wormald, 2009, p. 26). Not everyone will suffer burnout from doing the same daily routines – in fact, some people flourish in that environment. That is why it is important to pay attention to individuals to see if there is even a reason to worry. "(T)here are employees who do not want to make decisions and prefer routine" (Phillips *et al.*, 1991, p. 77). If in fact feedback and communication are already open and thriving and no one is showing signs of burnout or "psychic absence" (Topper, 2008, p. 390), perhaps everyone is reasonably content. So while it is important to pay attention to burnout, remember that some people are much less likely to be subject to its effects. Do not push for changes they may hurt rather than help. Managers should be careful not to project their opinions about repetitive work to avoid encouraging staff to discover a problem where they do not see one.

The manager should also take care to realize that employees' attitudes can change. Someone who was motivated by last year's Summer Reading Program may not be as interested the next time summer rolls around. Keep active checks on employees to stay aware of production and potential boredom. In this manner, managers can determine if they are still aligned with employee's preferences and performance (Phillips *et al.*, 1991).

Share the load: "He ain't heavy, he's my brother"
If one of the most common reasons for job burnout is repetitive tasks, then why not share the load? Spread out tasks and offer job sharing opportunities that can benefit the entire staff.

For many library employees sharing the workload is not an easy task. Although perhaps a subconscious attitude, some employees believe that only they can perform a particular task correctly. Reinforce the adage that we are all on the same team – we can win the game when we work together. Sharing not only helps remove the mental stress from one pair of shoulders; it also allows other staff members to learn a new task. "It is okay to put your trust in your co-workers when it comes to completing certain tasks," states school librarian Margaux DelGuidice (2011, p. 23). Additional benefits of cross training include making it easier to find a replacement if the prime staff member leaves or is absent and avoiding the situation where an employee can bargain from a position of being critical to the library's functioning.

In addition, create an atmosphere conducive to asking for help. Foster an environment where employees know they can talk about burnout or even physical problems from repetitious behavior. Frequently it is difficult to know when staff are becoming overworked from a specific task. While it may only seem to make sense to managers that a page is hired to do shelving, realize that, even if that is the key function in the job description, not many people will stay and perform that task forever – everyone needs a break from monotony.

Margaux DelGuidice, a School Librarian for Garden City High School in Garden City, writes that there are tell-tale signs that someone may be experiencing burnout. Managers and co-workers can watch for these symptoms, behaviors, and indicators not only to recognize the potential in themselves but also in others. Sometimes people are leery of vocalizing any human weakness. DelGuidice (2011) notes the following signs of burnout:

(1) Physical symptoms:
   - Body aches.
   - Severe exhaustion.
   - Decreased immunity.
(2) Professional behavior:
   - Annoyance.
   - Viewing patron questions as interruptions.
   - Unnecessarily snapping at others and losing patience.
(3) Social indicators:
   - Weekends become more about recovering.
   - Free time is spent complaining about workload.
   - Apathy and indifference to friends and colleagues.

Physical space: let's get physical

While motivational tools are wonderful ways to boost staff morale and alleviate burnout, do not neglect the physical elements of the work space. Key (1994) adds that the design of the work space is an important factor for job satisfaction and productivity. In both the long term and short term, a pleasant work area will almost always create a more pleasant work experience.

As an example of what can be done, in the early 1990s, the Library of Congress (LOC) became a leader in establishing safe and productive working environments.

Management observed the rising costs for workers' compensation and the debilitating effects that a poor work area had on both physical and psychological health. In 1992, the LOC developed a formal ergonomics program, citing that "[...] (library) work entails many materials – handling, office, and maintenance functions found in other government and nongovernment industries. As in those industries, there has been increasing awareness and reporting of upper-limb musculoskeletal disorders" (Mansfield and Armstrong, 1997, p. 138). Concern over such disorders led to the program, which included a commitment from upper management, establishment of a health and risk factor surveillance, interventions, and training. Among several goals cited for the program development were to "optimize the health, safety, and productivity of staff, and to minimize the physiological and psychological stress" (Mansfield and Armstrong, 1997, p. 140).

Within several years of program implementation, the Workers Ergonomics Program detailed "a high level of satisfaction with the work of the program and the ergonomics process. From the point-of-view of management, the program has paid high dividends for a modest dollar investment" (Mansfield and Armstrong, 1997, p. 144). LOC began by establishing four objectives:

(1) Identify existing and potential conditions in the workplace that could lead to injury or illness.

(2) Reduce and/or eliminate exposures to such conditions through effective workstation and tool design and through proper work methods.

(3) Ensure evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment of repetitive strain disorders and provide steps for their prevention.

(4) Ensure that staff, through training and education, are sufficiently informed about ergonomic hazards to which they are exposed that they may actively participate in their own protection (Mansfield and Armstrong, 1997).

LOC appointed a small team to conduct surveillance and analysis of materials-handling in one library division. The symptoms survey concluded that 10 out of 11 employees had physical complaints related to lifting or bending. As a result, the LOC identified several risk factors in this type of environment. They include repeated bending and twisting of the torso to move books, repeated lifting of boxes, movement of objects below knee level, and maintaining standing posture for long periods of time. In order to combat the damage from these required activities, a task team developed several interventions to alleviate the physical stresses, including some floor redesign and eliminating some hazardous activities that were judged not essential to the organization.

The LOC's efforts did not go unnoticed – labor organizations testified positively on the Program's behalf before Congress in order to encourage management in other agencies to move forward with similar programs. After reflecting on several years' experience in the program, the LOC concluded that the program was important not only for the physical benefits for its staff but also for improvements in work processes and the quality of life at work (Mansfield and Armstrong, 1997). While such a detailed program may not be feasible for many libraries, its basic premise is another possible step for management's struggling to motivate staff in similar circumstances.

Finding alternatives: "Ground control to Major Tom"
Technology provides hope for eliminating a multitude of repetitive library tasks. According to Alan Butters (2007), Principal Consultant at Sybis, a Melbourne-based technology consultancy that focuses on Australian library needs, specialized technological systems offer solutions that take all or some of the burden away from staff.

Butters states that, while there are still some possible kinks in employing automated services, they can handle the bulk of the workload for some library functions. Implementing process automation can aid library managers who seek assistance from specialized technology to mitigate the burden of manual activities. Much can be done to automate library's circulation services. "(T)he task of circulating library materials represents such a significant proportion of staff time and energy that it is worthy of a discussion in isolation" (Butters, 2007, p. 34).

Employing such services is hardly a new idea – libraries have been experimenting with self-service schemes for decades, but it has only been since the 1990s that commercial equipment has been designed for library services. Today, numerous vendors offer hardware and software designed to automate circulation tasks. Traditional tasks, such as manual check-outs for loaned items, are being replaced in many areas with self-serve check-out. Materials with high-theft potential that required watchful eyes are now tagged with radio frequency identification (RFID) that allow librarians to breathe more easily. The same RFID systems can also sort books for shelving after check in and send them to the right area. With so much technology now available, how should a library manager decide if it is a worthy expenditure? "The guiding principle must therefore be do not automate more deeply than you can realistically justify" (Butters, 2007, p. 39).

Several questions can help to determine if automation will help or hinder a library's performance. Many argue that automated technology replaces some of the monotonous tasks placed on staff by allowing them to perform more customer-centered services. If this is the ultimate goal, then perhaps less research is necessary. If not, however, then some key factors to consider include the following:

- What is the desired outcome?
- Are the library's work and traffic flows optimized for self service?
- Are the library's circulation policies optimized for self-service?
- Are the library's materials ready for self-service?
- Are the staff and the borrowers of the library prepared for self-service?
- Does the library have an implementation plan for the users? (Butters, 2007)

In the long run, the benefits of increased automation could aid staff burned out on repetitive tasks. In addition, it could free staff time for more patron-focused services such as reference and readers advisory.

Changing mindsets: "Total eclipse of the heart"
Eliminating repetitive tasks may, however, tempt administrators to eliminate positions or reduce positions from full-time to part-time. Indeed, it could lead to an organization that experiences "a total eclipse of the heart" when it comes to staff loyalty. Improved customer service may not carry as much weight with some upper level managers or

administrators, who can physically see the benefits of tasks such as cataloging and shelving, but discount services such as readers advisory whose benefits are more intangible. In these situations, administration could argue for cutting positions they deem unnecessary. In such cases, managers should give serious thought before reducing resources for those tasks that provide useful services to the user community.

Sometimes eliminating tasks adds efficiency to the organization without reducing key services. For example, checking in print serials may no longer make sense in the digital environment where an electronic replacement may be readily available for a missing issue. In the same way, some libraries do not accept gifts-in-kind because the staff time required to process them is not worth the value of the few items added to the collection. An atmosphere where libraries are asked to continually do more creates hardship on already stressed time restraints. Sometimes the only clear strategy is simply to say "no." Questioning the legitimacy of traditional tasks is a way for the library may reinvent itself for the future. Professionals "must think clearly about the value or the service provided, and be bold about removing steps and tasks in favor of newer, more important ones" (Fischer and Lugg, 2004, p. 84). Are there redundancies in item processing? Is it critical to keep manual tallies and catalog unsolicited serials? Perhaps most importantly, are we performing these tasks simply because that is the way it has always been done? Questioning the relevancy of some menial behaviors can allow an organization to move forward as well as give library staff more interesting work.

Conclusion: "If you try sometimes, you'll get what you need"

In essence, keeping workers motivated in seemingly endless tasks is not rocket science. The same successful tools that are employed in regular management are those that can be applied to the droned-out worker. Listen and observe. Watch for the start of declining production rather than waiting for total burnout. Provide incentives to inspire motivation. Investigate work areas for maximum workplace quality of life. Find what works for your staff. While we may not always get what we want, such as a perfect answer to a particular problem, we can certainly try sometimes and find that we get what we need. And at the end of the day, that may be all we really want.

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Appendix
Song titles

- "She works hard for the money", *She Works Hard for the Money*, Donna Summer, *She Works Hard for the Money*, 1983.
- "Sixteen Tons – Another Day Over and Deeper in Debt", *Sixteen Tons*, Merle Travis, *Folk Songs of the Hills*, 1946.
- "Everybody's working for the weekend", *Working for the Weekend*, Loverboy, *Get Lucky*, 1981.
- "We didn't light it", *We Didn't Start the Fire*, Billy Joel, *Storm Front*, 1989.
- "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother", *He Ain't Heavy … He's My Brother*, The Hollies, B-Side: *Cos You Like to Love Me*, 1969.
- "Let's get physical", *Physical*, Olivia Newton John, *Physical*, 1981.

- "Ground Control to Major Tom", Space Oddity, David Bowie, album: David Bowie (single), 1969.
- "Total Eclipse of the Heart", *Total Eclipse of the Heart*, Bonnie Tyler, *Faster Than the Speed of Light*, 1983.
- "If You Try Sometimes, You'll Get What You Need", *You Can't Always Get What You Want*, The Rolling Stones, *Let It Bleed*, 1969.

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