

## **Problem Statement:**

### **Museum Workers as Fully Loaded Camels Standing in a Rain of Straws**

#### **Abstract**

Museum workers are faced with exponentially increasing levels of expectations from all stakeholders in a situation characterized by a chronic lack of time, tools, and resources necessary to meet these expectations. In their efforts to close the growing gap between expectations and available resources, museum volunteers and paid staff work at increasingly, and now unacceptably, high levels of personal sacrifice and stress. Based on the author's experience in Western Canada and Wisconsin that I believe is broadly applicable across North America and beyond, this article examines the situation of work overload in museums and calls attention to this widespread–yet largely unacknowledged and entirely unaddressed–problem. It identifies some of the causes of the debilitating difficulties inherent in task saturation among museum workers, presents preliminary strategies to begin addressing the dilemma, and calls for research and collective action on this most difficult of problems for museum workers.

#### **Introduction**

'The straw that broke the camel's back' is a familiar aphorism that most people can understand. For this writer reflecting on his twenty-six years in the museum field, the point of this saying describes one of the most significant and widespread–yet almost completely unacknowledged and entirely unaddressed–issues facing museum workers today. The problem is ever-increasing levels of expectations on the part of all stakeholders in a museum world that is characterized by a chronic lack of sufficient resources. Museum workers–whether they are paid or volunteer–currently are desperately overextended if not “hopelessly overburdened” (Janes 2009, 64; cf. Mercadex International 2002a, 5) and under “constant stress” (Human Resources Planning Committee 1995, 7) that continues to grow apace (Kahn and Garden 1994, 104, 193-4). Working as fully loaded camels, we stand in a continual rain of straws (read rising and new expectations). As a result, our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being are under serious threats–to say nothing about the deleterious impact on our capacity to achieve museum missions. This article surveys some of the causes of the debilitating difficulties inherent in unrelieved task saturation among museum workers, presents preliminary strategies to begin addressing the problem, invites collegial sharing of ways and means to this end, and calls for research on this most difficult predicament for museum workers.

#### **The Problem**

The causes of the problem are many and varied. For example, museum visitors are growing more sophisticated in a myriad of ways. Many have traveled widely, accumulating first-hand experience with excellent sister institutions and our well-heeled competition such as Disney theme parks. Museum audiences also are increasingly media savvy and the Internet has

broadened their horizons limitlessly. Not only traditional expectations among visitors, but the number and diversity of new constituencies are increasing dramatically (Kotler and Kotler 2004, 168-9; Janes 2009, 83). For example, museums and their workers are now expected to seek out and serve new and more diverse audiences (American Association of Museums Education Committee 2006, 59; Canadian Museums Association 2003, 3).

On another level, government and other funders continue to raise their benchmarks in all areas such as grant eligibility, application complexity, and accountability absent any operational funding increases or other supports to counterbalance the raised expectations (cf. Goldberg 2001). In the Canadian jurisdiction of the Yukon for example, even small volunteer-run museums that receive relatively small amounts of operating funding are required to comply with territorial government regulations that impose the same accounting standards as on well-staffed multimillion dollar government department operations. When the issue of the ongoing stress, despair, and burnout among museum volunteers and paid staff caused by such continually increasing expectations was raised by the Yukon Historical & Museums Association, the responsible Yukon Minister of Tourism responded that museum workers simply need to establish priorities (Edelman 2001, 2). Having ignored the main point that museum workers feel overwhelmed by the rising levels of expectations on all sides, essentially the minister blamed the victim. She ignored the fact that museum workers do not control priorities inescapably imposed by external government fiat. The issue of “dysfunctional” “burn out” among museum workers in question was by no means a new circumstance in the Yukon. The quoted problems were named fifteen years earlier as among the most important difficulties in the Territory's museum community at the time (Lord and Lord 1986, 116). How much had expectations placed on museum volunteers and paid staff increased in the meantime? Demonstrably, the rate of increase in the Yukon and elsewhere has been exponential (cf. Kahn and Garden 1994, 195). Comprehensive research on the quality of volunteer and paid staff working lives in museums is needed in order to measure and analyze the current situation. No such recent data was located for purposes of this article.

Government legislation and policy at all levels continually place new and all too often financially unsupported burdens on limited and already over-committed museum human and other resources. The Canadian federal firearms control legislation (Canada 2008) passed to establish a national registry aimed at deterring the misuse of firearms, controlling access to them, and controlling specific prohibited weapons placed new obligations and liabilities on museums and their workers without any offsetting financial or other accommodations (Canadian Museums Association n.d. [April 1993?], 1, 3). Indeed, the proclamation of Canada's original *Firearms Control Act* on 1 January 1993 was followed within two months by the announcement of cuts in federal funding for museums totalling \$40 million (Canadian Museums Association 25 February 1993). This writer was once employed by a museum where the municipal governing body implemented new policy requirements for managing volunteers that paralleled hiring procedures for paid staff. *Inter alia*, this included the necessity of obtaining criminal record checks for volunteers. Needless to say, no increase in operational funding or offloading of existing tasks accompanied the operationalization of new policy obligations for volunteer management. The

issue here, of course, is not whether government policies on gun control and vetting volunteers are necessary or not. The issue is the unremitting inflation of expectations and its impact on museum workers who are required to implement new labor-intensive policies imposed by governments in the absence of the means to do so.

Beyond funders and regulators, museum trustees and other like stakeholders also bring a constant stream of bright new ideas to the table. The danger of engaging in “management by the *next* bright idea” when the *last* bright idea has not yet been implemented fully is a related, but separate, issue that also requires serious attention (cf. Maniez 2002, 10). From my personal experience in more than sixteen years of working as CAO with museum boards, this is a common cause of the problem. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the issue of museum boards and the problem of management by the *next* bright idea, but this is another important contributing factor to the overloading of museum workers.

Foremost among such “bright ideas” are performance standards established in the museum field. Professional museum organizations around the world have been established for the primary purpose of supporting the development of excellence in museum operations and among museum workers through the implementation of regimes of high professional standards (Weil 1988, 32). These are among what Janes (2009, 19) refers to as “the multifarious and often contradictory requirements of museum work” that so challenge modern museum workers. None of what follows is to argue that the drive toward professionalizing museum workers and museum operations is inappropriate. The extremely positive outcomes of this movement and the implementation of improved standards, however, must not escape critical analysis regarding their impact on museum working lives in a context where new resources are scarcely ever provided to meet new expectations.

As a world leader in the museum field, the American Association of Museums (AAM) used the occasion of its centennial in 2006 to place new emphasis on its collection of standards. Included among these standards, for example, are *six* full pages of electronic links to various documents in the Collections Stewardship section alone. One unexamined—yet highly significant—aspect of this initiative is that the AAM defines standards as “generally accepted levels that *all museums are expected to achieve*” [emphasis added] (American Association of Museums 2006: 1, 12). From the perspective of many overloaded museum workers, however, this assertion arguably cannot be understood as anything less than an impossible—and indeed rather insidious—goal given the extensive content of the criteria in question and the inadequate levels of resources available to implement them. Should museum workers be expected to put the extensive standards identified by AAM into practice irrespective of the resources available to do so? This question has never been addressed.

In contrast to the AAM, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) began developing its own National History Standards Project for use by its constituents including museums and related institutions. In a manner that seemed much more realistic than AAM, however, the AASLH originally emphasized the need to assist small and medium-sized

institutions to access the resources needed to meet the standards (American Association for State and Local History 2007, 1; 2008). Sadly, the most recent information on this AASLH program seems to downplay the originally stated intent to assist smaller institutions to find the resources required to implement the recommended standards. In answer to the question “But staff and volunteers at my organization are already stretched to the limit! How can we fit one more thing into our busy day?” the web site simply asserts that the program “. . . helps everyone to work smarter, not harder. . .” (American Association for State and Local History 2009). Of course, this assurance is very easily given, but experience in museum trenches often puts the lie to such optimistic claims.

In Canada, the trend has been identical to the AAM approach for many years. For example, the British Columbia Museums Association (BCMA) developed and published a new additional set of Standards and Best Practices modules (British Columbia Museums Association 2008). BCMA members have been encouraged to implement these new standards (Mort-Putland 2007, 11). However, it must be noted that this initiative is presented by BCMA without any seeming consideration of the impact of raised standards on museums or their workers in the absence of any new operating resources devoted to implementation.<sup>1</sup>

More new elevated benchmarks appear continually in the museum field. For example, the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) announced an agreement with the Canadian Art Museum Directors Organization (CAMDO) and the Canadian Artists Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) that establishes a minimum scale for compensating artists for exhibiting their works of art (Canadian Museums Association 2007a). In no way to argue against the validity of the aim to properly compensate artists for exhibiting their works in museums, in this instance as in many others, there has been no apparent consideration given to the need for the increased resources required by museums to achieve the laudable goal. The intent of the three parties to the above agreement is eventually to urge the development of a federally funded program to compensate artists. At present, however, museum workers are left alone to wrestle with how to pay artists more in the absence of any new resources that would enable this to happen. The Canada Council for the Arts that provides funding for arts organizations reports “While our financial forms require that institutions report how much they pay in artists fees, we do not provide special funding or a specific grant to cover these costs. Rather, it is understood that these costs are part of the typical costs of managing an institutional budget” (Arpin pers. comm. 2008). Inflation of more than one kind is now seen in the announcement by CMA of the first increase in the minimum scale (Canadian Museums Association 2009b, 4). Sadly, no mention is made of any progress on the federal funding front despite the original intent and current objective in its *Strategic Plan 2009-2013* to champion the need for increased funding for museums (Canadian Museums Association 2009a, 10).

In addition to the external sources of such pressures, museums as employers also tend to have high and growing expectations of their workers. Museum positions, such as those at the executive director level, have a “bad reputation” because of the demands of long hours, lack of funding, low pay, and resulting high levels of burnout (Deachman 2001, 25; cf. Janes 2009, 64;

Taylor 2007, 33; Leiby 2003, 13; Mercadex International 2002a, 6). Beyond the executive level, museums make high demands on workers at other levels as well. For example, this writer has experience in a museum that expected its employees to forego collective agreement rights regarding length of lunch breaks in order to ensure that museum special events—planned without regard for contractual rights—could run efficiently as scheduled. In general, the failure to include human resources issues in Canadian museum planning efforts has received criticism in a report to the CMA (Human Resources Planning Committee, 1995, 13, 14).

Although there is disappointingly little recent research published on the museum labor force since the dearth was identified twenty years ago (Ekos Research Associates 1989, 2), Victoria Turner has studied the working lives of women in museums. She reports that “[m]useums often rely on the staff working late hours beyond the usual working day, with frequent evening and weekend work. The high work ethic causes a substantial problem for women and their families” (Turner 2002, 8). Although correctly identifying the problem, the author places most of her emphasis on women's family responsibilities as a source of the main difficulty that she had identified and she ignored the effect of rising expectations for their workers among employers in the museum industry.

The dilemma of high expectations in the absence of sufficient human resources is not just a modern problem however. A quarter century ago, David L. Newlands (1983, 20) raised the issue of “role overload”—too many roles expected of any one person—in the museum field. Although he identified the problem as endemic only among exhibition designers and some museum educators at the time, given the reports of work-related stress among contemporary museum workers in the Yukon noted above (Lord and Lord 1986:112), Newlands may well have underestimated the breadth and extent of the problem. More recently, Kahn and Garden (1994, 202) state that fully 75% of respondents to their study of museum workers in the UK reported “conflicting tasks and demands in my job”(cf. Janes 2009, 19) while 67% reported “Having far too much work to do.” A subsequent study of the Canadian cultural sector that included museum workers found “very difficult working conditions,” “excessively heavy workloads,” “overwork,” and “high performance expectations” (Mercadex International 2002a, 5). Undoubtedly, contemporary research on the reality of modern museum working lives is required (Kahn and Garden 1994, 211). One initial hypothesis for such a study would be that museum worker overwork, stress, and “workaholism” have spread and worsened in the interim as they have in the broader world of work (cf. Fry *et al.* 2006, 330). Increasing levels of job stress and “burnout” are common characteristics of working lives in modern museums as noted above (Janes 2009, 64, 75, 149; Kahn and Garden 1994, 104, 193-4).

For museum workers as individuals who occupy the positions where all of the increasing expectations eventually come to rest, every journal article read, every visit to another museum, every conversation with a colleague doing something laudable in his/her own shop, and every conference, workshop, or training session attended generates worthwhile new ideas that we naturally want to implement in our own settings. Museum workers are tremendously committed and enthusiastic individuals dedicated to pursuing excellence in our heritage preservation and

education endeavors (Igo 2006, 71; cf. Mercadex International 2002a, 5).<sup>2</sup> The embarrassingly limited resources available to actually carry out these activities drive us to work ourselves harder—to take more and more on our already full to overflowing workloads—hence the applicability of the fully loaded camel metaphor.

Evidence of museum workers' proclivity toward volunteering to work harder and do more than paid for comes in an article by Leah Best (2007) who has interviewed British Columbia museum CEOs. Paid museum workers—because, as Best reports, we “love what we do”—admit to being “workaholics,” volunteering many hours to their institution over and above paid hours (cf. Human Resources Planning Committee 1995, 18). Twelve-hour days are reported as common (cf. Janes 2009, 64). Significant too is the belief among museum workers reported by Best that this is “the right thing” to do—not only for the organization but personally as well. It should be noted here, however, that the issue of unpaid overtime currently is being adjudicated under appeal in a lawsuit involving staff members of a federally regulated Canadian bank that, it is alleged, are forced to put in unpaid time before and after regular hours of work without overtime compensation. One legal opinion holds that, under the *Canada Labour Code*, “The law is very clear—non-management *employees may not* be compelled or *volunteer to work for free* [emphasis added] (Sack Goldblack Mitchell LLP 2011; Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2007; cf. Cohen 2007).”<sup>3</sup> Paid museum staff, both managers and mission workers, certainly do contribute untold volunteer hours—much of it without overtime or lieu time compensation—to advance their institutions. Solutions to this problem recommended by Best (2007) include careful planning, delegating, managing expectations by being up front about time limitations, and setting boundaries. Unfortunately, no mention is made of simply saying “No” or offloading tasks altogether so that twelve-hour days might become less of a habit for museum workers. Here again, based on Best's anecdotal evidence, formal research on this and other working conditions in modern museums is necessary so that the extent of this issue can be determined.

Of course, officially unpaid museum volunteers also continue to work more and more sacrificially as well—as a matter of course. According to the last available study comparable longitudinally on the volunteer sector as a whole,<sup>4</sup> the number of volunteers in Canada is declining as is the total number of volunteer hours contributed. Just as disturbing, however, is the finding that the average number of hours contributed per volunteer actually rose by nearly *nine percent* during the three year period studied (Statistics Canada 2001, 31; cf. Mercadex International 2002b, 13). Clearly, an aging and numerically shrinking volunteer force also is working much harder than previously. Although the most recent survey shows a 5.7% growth in the overall numbers of volunteers in Canada, this is attributed to the general rise in population in the period 2004-2007. Still, the volunteer hours are highly concentrated. The top 25% of volunteers contribute 75% of the total hours while the top 10% contribute 52% of the hours. When extracted from the overall figures, volunteers in the arts and culture sector that includes museums, the average number of hours in this sub-sector declined by 11% (Statistics Canada 2009, 35-37). Unfortunately, there is a lack of comparable data to track changes longitudinally due to changes in the survey differing survey platform making it inappropriate to compare findings with surveys before 2004.

In short, therefore, expectations of museum worker performance by all concerned—and probably most widely seen in museum workers' own idealism—are high and increasing exponentially. Some feel that they are indeed “out of control” (Janes 2009, 20). Museum workers who find themselves already fully loaded camels are standing in a continual downpour of straws (read rising and altogether new expectations).

On the other side of the equation, the resources available to cope with these constantly increasing demands are flat-lined or declining due to simple inflation—not to mention deliberate cutbacks by governments and other funders (Silcox 2005; Canadian Museums Association 2003). Granted, new subsidy programmes are created from time to time, but the applications for these grants are just another *new* task museum workers must squeeze onto existing workloads. As it is now, many of us already consider ourselves to be nearly full-time “grant jockeys” and nothing more (cf. Bliss 2000, 23). When this author was CEO of a medium-sized museum for example, I received unwelcome pressure from a regional government official to apply for a new federal grant opportunity for which I had absolutely no time to develop and write, much less implement if successful. This is despite the fact that a project under the new grant program in question certainly would have been beneficial to my institution. In reality, however, new grant programs are rarely—if ever—geared to providing ongoing financial or other operational supports. They typically are “one-offs” that must be repeated continually *ad infinitum et ad nauseum*. Many museum volunteers and paid workers are both “sick and tired” of the never-ending grant work cycle. Indeed, all too often, museum workers are forced to follow available outside grant priorities rather than the established missions of their institution (Janes 2009, 69) simply to find resources to keep museum doors open and activity levels high. As a result, museum workers become increasingly grant-directed rather than goal-directed. Grant-directed existence not only overburdens us already fully loaded camels, it can severely distort or defeat museum missions, values, and planned directions.<sup>5</sup> Study of the extent and impact of current dependence on one-off grants for museums in Canada is needed in order to allow proper analysis of current museum operations and the impact of grant dependence on the quality of museum performance and the working lives in them.

In the end analysis, the only possible outcome of the museum human resource crisis sketched briefly above is camels' backs loaded one “straw” after another until they break. Museum workers simply burn out (Deachman 2001, 25; Taylor 2007, 33; Leiby 2003, 13; Dubé 2001, 8; cf. Laab 1999; Mercadex International 2002a, 21-22). In this situation, I believe we in the museum field must begin to address this largely unacknowledged crisis. Museum workers also need to do this much sooner than later if we are to be able to preserve our own physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to say nothing of succeeding in efforts to achieve our museums' missions and goals. Museum volunteers and paid staff are long past the point where we simply need to “work smarter.” Absent new resources, we need to dump large parts of our current workloads and to erect straw shedding umbrellas to keep rising and new expectations off our backs.

## Solving the Problem

To solve the problem outlined above, I am proposing that we begin to identify ways for museum workers to deal both individually and collectively with the current insufferable levels of rising expectations that are inseparably tied to the lack of adequate resources. Quite apart from becoming politically active (American Museums Association 2008; *but cf.* Janes 2009, 176) in order to address the causes of the problem that have their origins in rising expectations and the realms of government financing and regulation, museum workers need to borrow practicable solutions from colleagues and use them to ease our own individual burdens. We must create and share successful strategies to deal with the exponentially increasing and unreasonable levels of expectations placed on museum workers.

A preliminary step in this process was taken at the BCMA annual conference held at Prince George, British Columbia in October 2006. An Ideas Café session titled “Fully Loaded Camels: Strategies for Survival” attracted representatives from seven, mainly small, museums and other interested participants (Thistle 2006; Thistle 2007). The session focussed on identifying workable solutions to the problem of rising expectations and resulting work overload among museum volunteers and paid staff. The suggestions presented by the museum workers in attendance are recorded as a starting point on the “Solutions!” working document that is the key element of the Museum Worker Task Saturation Wiki discussion group. It is accessible in the Files on this web site for input by museum workers. I hope that museum workers will choose to be part of the solution by adding other practical strategies and philosophies to this preliminary working document in order to help colleagues deal with rapid expectation inflation. It is clear that museum workers must take the lead in finding practicable solutions to the problem since the trends in the field are—without exception—continuing to increase our burdens. Of course, this is another new task. If museum workers do not deal with the problem ourselves, however, then who will? A similar roundtable session “Museum Workers as Fully Loaded Camels: Improving the Quality of Working Lives” was held at the Ontario Museum Association annual conference in Hamilton, Ontario on 22 October 2009. The recommendations from that workshop session have been integrated in the above document.

The aim of such an effort is to go beyond complaining about the problem in order to begin the process of collegial sharing of workable solutions to the human resources crisis in the museum field. Indeed, if museums can become “happiness machines” for our visitors and use “wiki” processes to solve world problems as envisioned by McGonigal (2009, 51-52), perhaps they need to start such a laudable project internally with their own volunteer and paid workers.

As the BCMA Ideas Café session participants clearly stated, it is museum workers who are among the primary authors of this sad story of work intensification and overload in our field. I believe that museum workers are strongly committed to strive for excellence in the cause of heritage preservation and interpretation. Undeniably, as “occupational devotees” (Stebbens 2004), we also love what we do for a living. In the face of insufficient resources, the strong personal commitment to succeed drives us to work harder—to take more and more tasks onto our

personal workloads. Quite simply, we must stop doing this in the absence of new resources or reductions in what is expected we achieve given the available time, tools, and resources.

Ideas Café participants clearly identified the first strategy to deal with the worsening circumstances that many museum workers face—just learn to say No. Of course, this will only work in situations that are within our control. It will not work when demands are imposed from outside our sphere of influence as was the case noted in the Yukon above. In either circumstance, however, museum workers must start being brutally realistic about what is doable given the relatively minuscule human and other resources available compared to our own lofty expectations and those placed on us by others. Trying to do too much to meet the exponential expectations curve simply reduces the quality of *everything* we attempt—not to mention the quality of our own working lives (Maniez 2002, 10). Instead, let us determine to do a few top priorities well, rather than attempt everything expected of us in an under-resourced and therefore unavoidably and frustratingly mediocre—not to mention personally stressful—fashion.

In order to be successful in this strategy, William Ury, Director of the Global Negotiation Project at Harvard, presents a plan of action for basing “No” on first saying a positive “Yes” to the worker's own values and core interests (Ury 2007, 2, 17-18, 34, 43, 80-1, *passim*). The fundamental personal considerations for self-preservation are often overwhelmed by corporate, collegial, and broader pressures that prey on workers' fear and guilt. To combat this, Ury provides a practical problem-solving route to achieve compromise solutions. It takes all relevant factors into account in saying No and allows for the crafting of an eventual Yes to address a new expectation that respects the real world and the worker's place in it.

In his challenging new book *Museums in a Troubled World*, Robert R. Janes (2009, 64-6) makes an interesting case to replace the common “lone director” hierarchical model of museum leadership with an alternate *primus inter pares* model to save overwhelmed museum CEOs from their excessive workloads.

Beyond such strategies, I believe museum workers also must become somewhat subversive if we are to deal effectively with ever-increasing expectations. For example, one element of a solution could and should be to identify aspects of our continually growing load of obligations that can be eliminated from museum mission statements, the policies, and procedural rules that we write. I was fortunate to team teach a Museum Studies course at Beloit College with Dr. Bill Green where I had proposed the overall theme should focus on increased expectations in the museum field. Having thought and written about this question for the past eighteen years (Thistle 1990; 2001; 2007), even I was shocked and surprised at how pervasive and pernicious this problem actually is. As one example of the dilemma, a colleague, Judy Newland, led a class discussion on an inspiring newly-created mission statement for a museum that had been presented at an American Association of Museums conference. Given the theme of the course, it was all too easy to ask the students after the presentation whether or not this inspiring new mission statement that had generated much enthusiasm when it was discussed met the AAM's own standard criteria for these central policy documents outlined in an assigned reading for that class.

It did not. In this instance, the AMM standard for writing mission statements was insufficiently flexible to allow for creative crafting of such an inspiring foundational document.

It may be argued, therefore, that continually ramping up professional museum standards is not an unalloyed good. Indeed, in the absence of new resources to support implementation, the mountains of standards that continue to erupt in the museum field (such as those of the AAM and BCMA noted above) often as not serve to establish benchmarks impossible to meet, block creativity, cause untold frustration and stress among museum workers, and deflate enthusiasm—as occurred in the above classroom.

My point here is no argument against the ultimate value of adherence to professional museum standards. It is simply to bring the issue of standards into a discussion where they can be analyzed critically. Those who may believe that standards are beyond criticism from the standpoint of their impact on museum working lives in my view abandon the potential for maintaining the quality of life in museum work. I would argue that museum missions, policies, and procedures need to be written for the real world with a firm grasp on what is actually possible to accomplish given available human and other resources. To blindly focus only on the undeniable value of achieving the standards themselves ignores the real impact of standards inflation on museum workers who are expected to implement *every* new expectation of performance in the absence of sufficient resources. Attempting to reach achievable ideals is one thing; constantly striving to meet unreachable expectations is something entirely other. Museum organizations and other stakeholders would do well to attend to this distinction. Again, I am not suggesting here that museum workers abandon the pursuit of professional excellence or institutional advancement toward professional standards of improved performance in the field. I am merely suggesting that we identify and deal with the very large and continually growing white expectations elephant living in museums that all stakeholders have ignored for much too long.

How are our professional museum organisations helping museum workers cope with the existing mountains of standards and other work overload problems? Unfortunately, it seems as if many initiatives by our regional and national museum bodies tend to add more straws to our working lives. Witness a recommendation from a Canadian provincial museum organization, the Association of Manitoba Museums (AMM) that identified the need for museums to implement new policies to address issues raised by privacy legislation, or indeed any training programme (Association of Manitoba Museums 2006, 2). In addition to the raised expectation that apparently lacked any attached subsidy or other support to permit it to be implemented, the newsletter containing the recommendation arrived with a packet of inserts announcing seven professional development courses including basic Certificate in Museum Practice and specialised courses.

Even the smallest museum associations offer professional development opportunities that do more than build capacities among workers. Museum workers certainly understand that, if we don't update knowledge and skills through professional development, it becomes increasingly

difficult to maintain and improve the level of public services (Roadhouse 1994, 29). Museum training sessions, however, inevitably and unavoidably raise expectations among museum organisations, governments, other funders, trustees, museums as employers, and museum workers themselves. Quite apart from their inflationary effect on expectations, training sessions rarely—if ever—acknowledge or address the need for offloading existing tasks or additional resources to implement new learning about professional museum approaches. We look in vain for current museum professional development practice to broach the impossibility of continually improving performance in the absence of sufficient resources. One major source of frustration and stress for museum workers is that, when back at work after training, fully loaded camels often cannot find the time, energy, or financial resources required to implement new knowledge and skills gained through partaking in professional development.

Here, I believe that all concerned have ignored an important perspective on one potential means of addressing our difficulty. It was presented by Philippe Dubé, Professeur titulaire et Directeur du Laboratoire de muséologie et d'ingénierie de la culture at l'Université Laval. In an article titled “Towards a new generic model for small and medium-sized museums,” the author identified the widespread problems of insufficient financing, a “general state of fatigue,” and “burnout” among museum workers. Professor Dubé argues this state of affairs 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 definition of a professional standard museum creates “a trap that makes *museum work increasingly complex, and even absurd*” [emphasis added] (Dubé 2001, 8). Citing Stephen E. Weil, Dubé recommended that we look for an alternate model of what small and medium-sized museums can, could, and should be. Unfortunately, the author reports that his proposal has received scant attention in the museum world (Dubé pers. comm. 2007). It should be noted here that the original recommendation that the CMA become involved in instituting standards of professional practice stated that these should be defined from inside the field by members of the museum profession (Teather 1978, 16). True professions govern themselves and do not rely on standards imposed from outside the profession.

In light of all the issues created by the exponential expectations curve, it may not be too subversive simply to examine the potential for redefining how we expect small and medium-sized museums to operate in the absence of resources sufficient to meet rising expectations. The assertion by the American Association of Museums (2006, 12) that all museums are expected to achieve its published standards is patently unrealistic in the absence of significant new resources. In Dubé's words, it is absurd. Professional museum organizations and other stakeholders need to recognize that the understandable—yet scarcely if ever bounded, qualified, or differentiated—push toward professionalisation in the field is a major factor in the problem as experienced by museum workers at the grassroots. Stakeholders—among them the officials of professional museum organizations—tend to resist such strategies as reworking of the application of professional museum standards, however. To date, in the personal view of this author—and I have served on the executive boards in question—our professional organizations all have been important parts of the problem.

For example, in response to this author's article describing museum workers as “fully loaded camels standing in a rain of straws” (Thistle 2007), Jim Harding (2007, 5-6), Executive Director of the BCMA, makes the argument that “the responsibility of a truly relevant professional association is to help facilitate the development of its members . . . There will always be straw. The variables are the adaptability and *strength* of the camels themselves and the intended length of their journey [emphasis added].” Of course, this perspective ignores the realities of the problem itself, the fact that the journey is never ending, and it sidesteps the need for professional museum organizations to help their members cope with the current problem of work intensification and overload engendered by increasing expectations in the absence of sufficient resources. Undoubtedly, straws will continue to rain down, but it is crucial for all stakeholders to understand that museum workers are already fully loaded camels! The never-ending push by museum organizations to make museum workers “stronger” so we can carry more of the exponentially increasing demands (cf. Human Resources Planning Committee 1995, 4; Mercadex International 2002a, 8) without the resources necessary to ease our current burdens is a perfect example of why this problem exists and why it seems so intractable. In my view, museum organizations themselves are at the forefront of the forces that—it seems—heedlessly burden museum workers with expectations impossible to achieve in the absence of the resources actually needed to succeed at what is expected. In my experience, our professional organizations seem oblivious to museum workers' desperate need to be offloaded rather than continually burdened with new expectations—regardless of how “strong” additional professional development can make us.

In this light, I believe that museum workers must begin to take responsibility for and control over the quality of our own working lives (cf. Teather 1978, 20). Kahn and Garden (1994, 194) found that one important cause of stress and related negative outcomes in working lives is a feeling of powerlessness (cf. Golden 2006, 50) and this is among the causes of stress in working lives (Janes 2009, 75, 149). Perhaps it is time for museum workers to begin adopting strategies associated with “working to rule” (Public Service Alliance of Canada BC 2008; Direct Action in Industry 2008). As part of such an initiative, museum workers also need to take firmer control of the professional organizations that represent us. We can start to do this by strongly directing these organizations to adopt as a top priority over the next five to ten years to make it easier—not harder—for us to do our jobs. This means approaches such as strongly resisting the acceptance or proposition of unresourced demands for increasing standards of performance. For purposes of internal planning, negotiations with governments, and discussions with other funders, no additional expectation should be accepted without either offloading tasks or significant increases in financial and/or other resources. Crucially, however, the increased resources must be significantly over and above what actually is required to implement the new expectation on an ongoing basis. It must be acknowledged by all stakeholders that museum workers are overloaded camels already. Simply not putting new unsupported demands on us fails to address our existing problem. We need significant additional resources to unload the existing overburdens museum workers now carry to the detriment of our personal lives as well as their debilitating impact on

the achievement of museum missions and goals. The only available alternative is to drop large parts of our workloads before we collapse from exhaustion and stress.

Museum organizations, museums as employers, and other stakeholders must begin reflecting seriously on their attempts to advance the cause of museums one might argue primarily by relying on—and therefore by default *exploiting*—museum workers and their love for their work (cf. Friedman 1994, 120; Burke 2006, 120; Mercadex International 2002a, 6). Absent task deletion or additional resources, the vast majority of the increasing and altogether new burdens associated with improving museum performance fall on the backs of existing museum volunteers and/or employees. In this regard, another initiative by museum association members might well be to instruct executives to make a top priority in their next five year plan to work toward increasing basic operating funding for museums. The most recent survey of opinion in the museum field available to this author identified increased operating funding as the highest priority identified (Doherty 1992, 3; cf. Canadian Museums Association 2007a, 12; Semmel and Bittner 2007, 81; Canadian Museums Association 2009, 10). This would permit museums to hire more museum workers to begin dealing with the overwhelming backlog of tasks. Perhaps this initiative could begin with volunteer run museums to enable them to hire their first full-time permanent paid employee. Here, it should be acknowledged that the evolution of a completely volunteer-run organization to become one with a single paid staff member is fraught with its own danger: i.e., dumping all tasks formerly carried out by several volunteers on a lone paid person (Graffagnino 2003, 7). This guarantees that the first paid museum employee immediately becomes a fully loaded camel.

Our professional museum organizations also need to examine the current foci of their advocacy and to survey museum workers about their current top priorities. How do they act in the absence of such data and/or firm direction from museum workers in this regard? For example, where in the Canadian Museum Association's interventions in the ongoing struggle to create a new museums policy in Canada or in its current Strategic Plan (Canadian Museums Association 2009) has any significant attention been directed at reducing workloads and related stresses on museum workers? The Canadian Museums Association's (2003, 3) "Strategic Plan 2002-2008" had a section on human resources that identified the loss of museum workers, but it proceeded to focus on infrastructure and it made no mention of the resulting insupportable strains on those workers who remained. The current strategic plan iteration mentions human relations issues only in the context of the organization's own capacity (Canadian Museums Association 2009, 14), ignoring the current HR crisis that exists among its members. The problem of worker overload had been named by Newlands (1983, 20) more than twenty-five years earlier. The CMA's (2006) "Brief to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage" on the need for a new Canadian museums policy focused primarily on collections, facilities, and programs. It was silent about the ongoing crisis of overworked museum volunteers and paid staff. The existing federal museums policy in Canada ignored this issue when it was introduced almost two decades ago (Thistle 1990) and there is no indication that any serious consideration of this matter was attempted in the recent effort to create a new policy. The lobbying effort "talking points" promulgated by CMA (2007b:1) may mention the loss of museum workers and volunteers, but this "Key

Messages” document speaks solely about museums as institutions. Although the CMA’s 2003 Strategic Plan stated: “Human resources have become an urgent issue demanding immediate attention,” the recent documents entirely miss the fact that museum workers—as individual human beings—are in crisis. The next round of discussion on a new federal museums policy in Canada needs to address crucial human resources issues that face volunteers and paid staff as an urgent priority. Here, museum workers need to take the lead in ensuring this issue is included in CMA priorities in its future planning and negotiations with government concerning a new policy regime.

It must be said here that museum workers have been much too passive about our overburdened work lives and the growing debilitating impact of constantly increasing, yet unsupported, expectations. Indeed, it is recognised that denial of the problem is one of the main hindrances to corrective action in this realm (Chen 2006, 316). We have failed to make this an important priority for our professional organisations and other stakeholders. Arguably, therefore, it is museum workers who must now collectively take the initiative to identify our real needs to our professional organisations, governments, employers, and supporters in order to obtain some relief from ever rising expectations. We also must press to have these needs effectively addressed as top priorities in the near future. A collective movement to “humanise the workplace” in our museums is needed to seek reductions in the common situation of overwork and to create the possibility of more work/personal life “balance” for museum workers (cf. Burke 2006, 29, Messenger 2006, 237; Bunting 2004, 325).

### **Beyond Museum Work**

Some may argue that constantly rising expectations are merely a “fact of life” common to everyone living in the “Post-Modern” world. Indeed, as we all know, “there will always be straws.” Madeleine Bunting, *Guardian* columnist and Director of the London-based think tank Demos, in her book *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives* reports that general workers in the UK experience ever increasing workloads referred to as “work intensification” and epidemic high stress levels that are familiar too in North America (Bunting 2004, xix, xxii, xxv, xxvii, 7, 10, 25, 28, 37, 78, 187-8; cf. Burke 2006, 4; Robinson 2006; Schor 1991). Bunting identifies intensification of work through the impact of information technology (cf. Janes 2009, 148), the dissolving of the boundaries between personal and work lives, resulting exhaustion (cf. Janes 2009, 89), the high rate of workers who fail to take all vacation time due them, increasing levels of depression, and, significantly, the extra efforts now being demanded from workers. Golden (2006, 50) cites a 2005 study that confirmed a well-documented trend showing nearly half of survey participants report “feeling overworked” in the last three months. At the extreme end of the problem, Burke (2006, 8) and Kanani (2006, 171) raise the specter of the steep increase in the prevalence of “Karioshi” (death by overwork) in Japan.

Broadly considered, modern organizational management has come to expect continual levels of overwork by staff previously deemed necessary only in short-term crises. Today, crisis-mode has

indeed become simply “business as usual.” A sign of this comes indirectly, but tellingly, from a 2007-2008 radio commercial for the career search engine web site Workopolis that jokingly promotes itself by claiming the service could help recruit “Mr. works all weekend” to help meet the needs of employers. Indeed, Fry *et al.* (2006, 330, 338) report that “workaholism” is now actually valued by society and twelve-step “Workaholics Anonymous” groups are operating. Society's high values on “work mastery,” work commitment, and the use of personnel appraisal systems all play a role in the genesis of workaholism (Burke 2006, 11, 13, 15). The ubiquitous trend of modern work in all sectors is toward expecting fewer workers do more and wiring workers to the office via information technology to enable carrying out what are actually “mind-boggling workloads” (Laab 1999, 30-2). Modern workers have indeed become “willing slaves” to the excessive demands of the world of work (cf. Robinson 2006, 26). These authors seem to make no mention, however, of the significant compounding impact of constantly rising standards that exacerbates the problem they document.

The state of affairs referred to as “task saturation”<sup>6</sup> among workers has become one of the most persistent and dangerous problems identified in the modern military, corporate management, and medical fields. For example, James D. Murphy, author of the book *Business is Combat: A Fighter Pilot's Guide to Winning in Modern Business Warfare*, explains that task saturation essentially means you are overworked—not enough time, tools, or resources to accomplish the mission (Murphy 2000, 130-3). In this situation Murphy argues, perfectly good pilots (read business—and we could say other—workers) turn perfectly good fighter planes into “smoking holes in the ground.” Many museum workers will recognize the symptoms of task saturation described by Murphy (2008; 2000, 130-9):

- shutting down, being unable to proceed, becoming paralyzed, giving up, quitting
- compartmentalizing, avoiding the large overwhelming tasks, hiding overload through busywork, making lists of things to do rather than actually doing them
- channelizing, choosing to do only one task and ignoring everything else—with eyes fixed on only one cockpit dial, flying your high-tech fighter plane into the ground.

Murphy (2000, 143-55) recommends solutions based on close teamwork, centering on such strategies as check lists and mutual support from team members.

Recent scholars in the field of time poverty, overwork, and “workaholism” advocate behavioral and spiritual “therapy” (Chen 2006; Fry *et al.* 2006). Before this perhaps, shorter working hours, more public holidays, longer annual vacations, more part-time work (despite the inherent danger of task expanding “job drift” Kahn and Garden 2006, 209), and fewer total years of work (Robinson 2006, 106-11) have been proposed as remedies. It must be noted however that Stebbens (2004, xii) argues that museum workers and other “occupational devotees” do not exhibit addictive behaviour. In this light, twelve-step workaholics anonymous programmes are not likely to be an effective solution in the museum field.

## Conclusion

In the end analysis, museum workers in today's world of task saturated, time poor willing slaves certainly are not alone in our struggles with an insufferable overload of demands at work. For one moment, I challenge readers experienced in museum work to reflect on the deterioration in the quality of working life over the course of your own career. Considering the relevant Canadian studies Teather (1978), Newlands (1983), Lord and Lord (1986), Ekos (1989), Human Resources Planning Committee (1995), and the most recent report located Mercadex International (2002a; 2002b), all are long out of date.<sup>7</sup> In light of the lack of current data and the above argument, therefore, I believe that formal study of the breadth, depth, and extent of this problem that would support the development of effective solutions should be an immediate research priority for the museum community.

In the meantime, however, unless museum volunteers and paid staff begin to take direct, measured, and—if needs be—subversive action to solve our own problem in the museum industry, workers simply will continue to be overloaded and exploited until crushed by the “last straw.” Murphy (2000, 139) argues that self-diagnosis and remedial action are required. Bunting (2004, xxv) indicates that many workers are seeking personal, private solutions, but says nothing about the need for collective action.

It therefore seems clear that, if museum workers as a collectivity do nothing, we condemn ourselves to a future of isolation as well as abiding and insupportable exponential increases in expectations. In this case we will be abandoning not only the achievement of our museum missions but our own physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to the voracious demands and related personal stresses of the Post-Modern world. It is time for museum workers to admit, openly name, and resolve to start addressing this most difficult problem in our working lives for the sake of our own well-being if nothing else.

“nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight –  
got to kick at the darkness til it bleeds daylight”  
Bruce Cockburn “Lovers in a Dangerous Time” (1983)

Paul C. Thistle

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## Notes

1 See a discussion of the impact on small museums of the expectations engendered by new and essentially undifferentiated standards referenced in the “Standards Critique Letter” written by Paul Thistle to the Standards Committee of the Association of Manitoba Museums in 1994 during the process of drafting a set of standards for museums in that Canadian province. It is located here on the Museum Worker Task Saturation Wiki Files page (cf. Lynn Kurylo (1984, 9-13).

2 This assertion is at odds with one finding of the last major study of the Canadian museum labor force that reported museum workers did *not* in fact evidence a “catholic commitment to excellence” compared to members of another major cultural labor force—artists. See Ekos (1989, 28-9). The authors do admit, however, that “we may not have asked the right questions.” This potential limitation of the latter statement also is reinforced by the fact that the Ekos study made no mention of work overload as a problem in the museum field that one might have expected given the findings of Lord and Lord (1986) and Newlands (1983). I suggest that, following Igo's (2006, 71) claim, a working hypothesis for any new study of the museum labour force would predict finding an extremely high level of commitment to excellence among museum workers at all levels.

3 Also see the relevant sections of the law identified by a Justice Department staff member as well as a link to the full text of the *Code* on the Museum Worker Task Saturation Group's *Canada Labour Code* in the Files here on this site or at <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/showtdm/cs/L-2> .

4 Sadly, Statistics Canada no longer reports longitudinal comparative data in its National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating.

5 One encouraging sign is that some grant programmes now are phasing application processes so that only relatively short expressions of interest submissions are required for preliminary grant adjudication. Full applications are required only for those submissions selected for the second stage of the evaluation process. E.g., see guidelines for Part II - Expressions of Interest vs. Part III - Full Applications at [www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/pcce-ccop/progs/part\\_e.cfm](http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/pcce-ccop/progs/part_e.cfm) . This is an approach that could well be adopted by all grant programmes in order to save museum workers a tremendous amount of wasted application preparation work. In the current situation, most grant programmes typically receive requests that total many multiples more than the funds available. Cf. some of the practical recommendations for increased simplicity in grant processes proposed by the Independent Blue Ribbon Panel on Grant and Contribution Programmes [www.brp-gde.ca](http://www.brp-gde.ca) .

6 Thanks to my colleague Nathaniel Howe for introducing me to this perspective.

7 CMA President John McAvity (2010) reports that the Cultural Human Resources Council failed to be persuaded of the need to include the issue as part of its most recent research programme.