

## **Fully Loaded Camels: Addressing Museum Worker Task Saturation**

### **Abstract:**

This paper is a more complete argument than the excerpts presented at the University of Toronto Master of Museum Studies programme 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference (Thistle 2010c). The task saturation and time poverty problem at issue for museum workers is based on continually rising expectations from all stakeholders in a situation characterised by a chronic lack of necessary time, tools, and resources to meet increasing demands. This causes museum workers to be overworked if not 'hopelessly overburdened' (Janes 2009: 64). This article analyzes the responses of professional museum organizations to the problem. Many stakeholders are surprisingly pessimistic that anything can be done to deal with the problem and current museology also ignores this issue (Thistle 2010a). Some potential solutions are suggested.

Keywords: museum worker, quality of working life, task saturation, professional museum organizations, critical museology

### **Introduction:**

'The straw that broke the camel's back' is a familiar aphorism that nearly everyone can understand. For this writer reflecting on his twenty-six years in the museum field, the point of this saying describes what I believe to be 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 to meet the increasing demands. Museum workers—whether they are paid or volunteer—currently feel desperately overextended if not 'hopelessly overburdened' (Janes 2009: 64; cf. Mercadex International 2002a: 5; Newlands 1983: 20) and under 'constant stress' (Human Resources Planning Committee 1995: 7) that continues to grow apace (Kahn and Garden 1994: 104, 193-4). Working conditions in the cultural field have been found to be 'very difficult,' characterised by excessively heavy workloads, high performance expectations, and multitasking requirements (Mercadex International 2002a: 8). Exerting themselves as already fully loaded camels, museum workers stand in a continual rain of straws (read rising and altogether new expectations). Burnout is the inevitable result (cf. Greyeyes and Walls 2002: 9)—in the extreme 'death by overwork' (Kanani 2006). As a result, I argue that museum worker physical, mental, and spiritual well-being are under serious threats—to say nothing about the deleterious impact on our capacity to achieve museum missions (after Murphy 2000, 130-3; cf. Thistle 2010a).

I will touch briefly on some of the causes of the debilitating difficulties inherent in unrelieved overwork among museum workers, present some preliminary strategies to begin addressing the problem, invite collegial sharing of ways and means to this end, and call for research on this most difficult predicament for museum workers. The problem has been

analysed by the author in a variety of contexts in the *Solving Task Saturation for Museum Workers* blog.<sup>1</sup> The main focus of this paper is a critical analysis of the role and responses of professional museum organizations in helping to create and a pronounced reluctance to deal with the problem of museum worker task saturation.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, it should be understood that I use the term 'museum worker' (a synonym for 'museum practitioner' if you will) in a comprehensive sense to include managers and mission workers, both paid and volunteer. Due to the demands of long hours and resulting high levels of burnout, the position of museum director is regularly characterised as being 'unreasonably overextended' (Deachman 2001: 25; cf. Taylor 2007: 33; Leiby 2003: 13) if not 'hopelessly overburdened' as we read in Dr. Robert Janes' *Museums in a Troubled World* (2009: 64). Anecdotally from colleagues and from my own experience, I believe many mission workers in museums also face the identical task saturation problem.

I first began to recognize the negative impact of work intensification and resulting burnout among museum workers as a noticeable problem while providing advisory services to museums in northern Manitoba, Canada in 1990 (Thistle 1990; cf. Thistle 2001, Thistle 2007). There had been some limited previous discussion of this issue including the identification of museum worker 'role overload' in a *Muse* article by David Newlands (1983), a study by museum consultants Gail and Barry Lord (1986: 116) that found 'dysfunctional' burnout among museum workers in the Yukon, the wonderfully whimsical *Muse* article by Gary Hartlen and Gary Zelig (1989) titled 'Dear Mr. Museum' that is a bang on description of the day-to-day challenges of circumstances and rising expectations in a small museum. More recently Philippe Dubé (2001: 8-9) in a *Muse* article identified a 'general state of fatigue' and 'burnout' among museum workers.

A simple conceptual representation of the problem in question is shown in Figure 1.

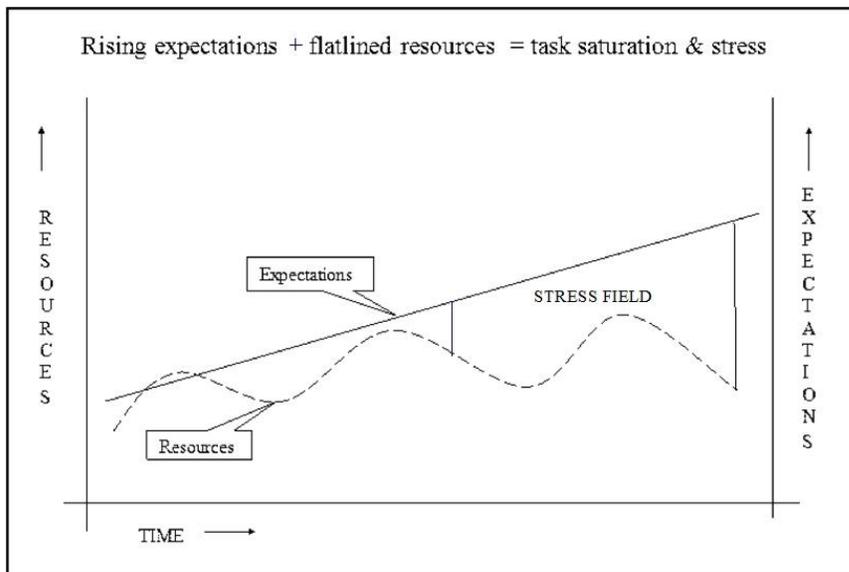


Figure 1

The X axis represents Time. The Y axis is the Resources scale. The level of resources available is shown as a discontinuous sinusoidal line. This indicates the rise and fall of available operating resources characterizing a largely grant-directed existence for many museum workers (cf. Bliss 2003: 23). The Expectations scale is shown on the Y' axis. For the sake of argument here, an arithmetic increase is shown. Situationally however, the increase in expectations experienced by museum workers all too often becomes painfully exponential.

When expectations exceed available resources, museum workers typically redouble their efforts in an attempt to close the widening gap. As highly committed practitioners, they work harder and, as expectations continue to escalate, harder still. The area of the diagram between the expectations line and the available resources becomes a field of over-commitment, overwork, and stress for museum workers. Here is where the concepts of 'time poverty' (Schor 1991: 5) and 'task saturation'<sup>2</sup> become relevant. The term task saturation, defined as overwork due to the lack of necessary time, tools, and resources to accomplish the mission, was introduced by James D. Murphy (2000: 130-3; 2008) in the book *Business is Combat: A Fighter Pilot's Guide to Winning in Modern Business Warfare* as one of the most serious problems in the military aviation field, with application for many medical and corporate management practitioners. Murphy explains that, under conditions of task saturation, perfectly good pilots (read business—and we could say museum—workers) can fly perfectly good fighter planes and turn them into 'smoking holes in the ground.' The problem is serious. In the museum field, Janes (2009: 64) points to select dysfunctional impacts of overwork (cf. Gurian 2004: 19). Some of these can be similarly catastrophic as alluded to below by John McAvity.

Evidence of the proclivity to deal with rising expectations by working harder comes from 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 (twelve-hour days are reported as common). It should be noted here, however, that the issue of unpaid overtime currently is being adjudicated in a lawsuit involving staff members of a federally regulated Canadian bank who, 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]' even if they wish to do so (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2007; cf. Cohen 2007).<sup>3</sup> Significant too is the belief among museum workers reported by Best (2007: 11) that this is 'the right thing' to do—not only organisationally but *personally* as well. Volunteers, of course, also continue to work more and more sacrificially—as a matter of course. According to the last relevant Canadian longitudinal study carried out, in concert with the decline in both the number of volunteers and the total number of volunteer hours contributed, 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; Greyeyes and Walls 2002: 8-9).

In light of the arguments about the widespread and serious nature of the problem excerpted above and explored in depth on the *Museum Worker Task Saturation Wiki* (Thistle 2010a), I want to focus the remainder of this paper on what I believe to be one significant reason that the problem persists and seems to be so intractable. It is the common response I have obtained from those concerned—museum workers, staff of professional museum organizations, and others—when the issue of task saturation is raised. In far too many cases I believe, these stakeholders tend to exhibit a rather pronounced reluctance to consider taking any action to address the problem. There is a surprisingly lack of attention being paid to this issue by museum workers themselves and by their professional museum organisations.

### **Responses to the Task Saturation Dilemma:**

In general, when asked about the problem even the most experienced museum workers, after sighing will say, 'Yes you're right' and many will continue 'but everyone [in all sectors] is in the same boat,' fatalistically implying 'so we can't do anything about it.' For example, a colleague contacted me following a promotion of the Museum Worker Task Saturation Wiki set up to help share solutions to the problem (Thistle 2010b). He responded with a one-line e-mail: 'This all sounds like a great idea, if I could find the time.' Here, my colleague seems to be admitting that, essentially, he is so time poor that he cannot look after his own best interests. One might argue that, by default, he has become a 'willing slave' to his work.

In her book *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives*, Madeleine Bunting, *Guardian* columnist and Director of the London-based think tank Demos, reports findings of a major study of workers in the UK. In a part of the world formerly criticised for the 'British disease' of 'tea breakism,' survey respondents describe difficulties with ever increasing workloads. Bunting refers to this development as 'work intensification' that engenders 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; Patmore 2006: 21). Howard Kahn and Sally Garden (1994) reported the identical problem of rapid increase in demands, overwork, and related stress in the case of museum workers in the UK.

In a parallel vein to my colleague above, some professional museum organisation representatives tend to respond in the same fatalistic manner. In replying to questions related to my critiques of the role of professional museum standards and issues regarding Canadian Museums Association (CMA) advocacy concerning this problem, Executive Director John McAvity (2010) introduced his responses by writing:

What you describe as job related stresses are not limited to the museum field, but prevalent in almost all other publically funded, and private organizations, as well. Read about the death of Remy Beaugard, the executive director of the NGO, Rights and Democracy, the day after a hostile Board meeting . . . [January 2010].

Most call this change, which I find to be undesirable shift, just as I suspect you do, **but like it or not** [emphasis in original], it is part of the new reality . . . The truth is that museum workers are not alone. Ask anyone working in almost any other public profession, including health care workers.

A 'new reality' indeed. However, one might ask must museum workers passively accept the problem with such unassailable fatalism? I believe we certainly do need to think about and understand the problem of work intensification in global terms, but surely we can *act* locally in the museum sector. In fact this issue may be one of the critically important world problems that museums and museum workers can address in their own settings, develop effective coping strategies if not solutions, and then engage the world to meet Janes' (2009) challenge to recover true relevance to society for museums. Indeed, if museums can become 'happiness machines' for our visitors and use wiki processes to solve world problems as envisioned by Jane McGonigal (2009: 51-52), perhaps we first need to experiment internally, using museum worker quality of working life issues as the primary focus of such a laudable project.

Obviously, everyone can agree with John McAvity that museum workers are not the only ones in the world who are stressed out, time poor, and task saturated. Even though this is so, should museum workers not bother to do anything about the problem 'like it or not?' At my mother's knee I was often asked, 'just because Johnny jumped off a cliff, should you do the same thing?' Of course, the proper rhetorical answer to this question is 'No mother, just because Johnny does something stupid (like working himself to death), I don't have to do the same thing.'

I believe it is critical for museum workers reject the hopeless fatalism expressed above by the representatives in the museum field who imply museum workers have neither agency nor choice in the matter—that we are inescapably doomed to a fate of increasing work intensification and stress. I disagree with the opinion voiced by Lord Cultural Resources President Barry Lord during the discussion period after presentations to the Museum Management session at the 2010 University of Toronto Museum Studies 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary 'Taking Stock' conference. He indicated that, as 'information workers,' we in the museum field must expect fifteen hour work days. Surely, however, workers' rights and human rights, if not common decency, must be considered here. Given the history of the struggles concerning the length of the working day (Gordon 2009), would we accept the substitution of 'truck drivers' (limited by law to 13 hours/per day), or 'single parent' workers, or indeed 'children' in the assertion about hours of work expected from information workers? Clearly, in my view, this expectation is a betrayal of the hard-won advances of the eight-hour day labour movement and directly opposed to every museum worker's fundamental best interests in terms of family, social, physical, mental, and spiritual health—not to mention our ability to achieve museum missions effectively. In *Fairness at Work: Federal Labour Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, former Dean of Osgood Hall Law School and labor law specialist Harry W. Arthurs (2006: 114) recommended retention of the eight hour work day. Unrelenting and untreated stresses caused by long work days and other such

rising expectations are in fact important causes of a rather long list of negative symptoms that significantly impair work performance (Gurian 1995: 19, 21).

Museum workers need to be able to identify the problem and to exert whatever remaining shreds of agency we possess to start doing something about our task saturation problem. The mythical 'lemming mentality' exhibited by those who cannot seem to imagine anything beyond the fact that 'we are all in the same boat,' must be rejected. All lemmings in every sector in the modern economy may indeed be rushing ahead to jump off the overwork cliff into the sea. What I am urging in this situation is that museum workers take our eyes off the lemming butt ahead of us, stand up, and say 'Hey, wait a minute! Is there no alternative to jumping off this cliff?' (cf. Ury 2007: 32).

I firmly believe that modern labourers—information workers and all—in the post-IT revolution can and must take action to improve our lot, just as workers in the post-industrial revolution did. How can this be done? Participants in an Ideas Café session at a British Columbia Museums Association conference (Thistle 2006) asserted the first strategy is to start saying No to fifteen hour days and other such work world demands. 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). As Janes (2009: 156) reminds us, deciding what *not* to do is a crucial part of rational planning.

In order to assist workers to say No, William Ury, Director of the Global Negotiation Project at Harvard, presents a workable plan of action for basing a '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*). Ury asserts that natural personal considerations for self-preservation at work are too often overwhelmed by corporate, collegial (cf. Green 2006: 57), and broader social and economic pressures that prey on workers' fear and guilt. This situation forces unrealistic over-commitments that result in problematic task saturation and stress. The Ury process then presents strategies for how to say No to unrealistic demands and how to propose potential compromise alternatives leading to an eventual Yes through negotiation (cf. Edmondson and Detert 2005: 422). This process allows effective coping with a new expectation in a way that respects the real world and the worker's material conditions.

The foregoing discussion has centred on the individual sphere. In corporate organizational terms, I maintain that professional museum organisations, museum institutions, regulators, and other stakeholders also must begin to acknowledge and take more responsibility for their roles in creating and solving the problem. The issue of increasing demands, overwork, and stress that characterize the museum human resources crisis is strangely absent from recent strategic plans, annual reports, and museum policy discussion documents published by the Canadian Museum Association for example. CMA President John McAavity (2010) does indicate that the matter is often raised with government in private meetings; however, it is not an apparent priority for the CMA according to its published information. I argue that there is a pronounced tendency for this organisation to

focus on infrastructure and museums as institutions rather than attending directly to the poor quality of working lives and museum workers as individuals in crisis (Thistle 2010a).

Elaine Heuman Gurian (1995: 20-21) in the book *Institutional Trauma: Major Change in Museums and its Effect on Staff*<sup>4</sup> gives a clear statement of corporate responsibility for addressing the overwork problem.

Even if impaired work performance were not the outcome of unabated staff stress, I would proffer another, and perhaps better reason to pay attention to staff needs. If our work in museums is evidence of our collective commitment to enhancing the quality of life for society, then we must be attentive to maintaining a high quality of life for our work community (cf. Brumgardt 1995: 70).

Quite apart from this exhortation, in corporate terms, paying attention to worker satisfaction and improving the quality of working lives in museum workplaces not only benefits museum workers, it also is more efficient for the institution in question (cf. Lambert and Kossek 2005: 521). Overworked and stressed employees and volunteers are significantly less productive and catastrophe can be the ultimate result. (Murphy 2000: 128-130).

Above and beyond the philosophical and practical surrounding task saturation, I believe we have an ethical issue to address. Is it ethical to continue exploiting museum workers' love for the cause to keep museums operating at a high level despite debilitatingly low levels of resources available? I maintain that there is an ethical imperative for beginning a collective movement to 'humanise the workplace' in our museums in order to seek reductions in the burdens of overwork and to create the possibility of more work/personal life 'balance' for museum workers (Burke 2006: 29; Messenger 2006: 237; Bunting 2004: 325).

If collective action is indicated, do we need a museum worker union? In the current situation, I would argue not. In an article on the unionisation of the Exploratorium, Joseph Ansel (1995: 92-3, 98-9) recommended the advantages of staff associations as a better alternative. In this light, I urge museum workers to make use of our existing professional associations. At this stage, professional museum organisations are failing to address the issue and I believe there is a case to be made that they are overly fixated on museums as institutions and underplay the real human resources crisis of human beings experiencing crises in their working lives (McAvity 2010; Thistle 2010a). I believe museum workers have not made effective use of their professional organizations to begin dealing with task saturation and need to raise the profile of this issue by taking actions such as passing resolutions at annual meetings that direct the regional and national associations to take specific actions to acknowledge and address the poor quality of working lives in museums (Thistle 2010a).

Some museum organisations representatives evidence a pointed reluctance to accept the very need to address this issue or change the priorities of current strategic plans and

lobbying efforts. In his commentary on issues related to the CMA's approach to dealing with the issues that were raised in a draft article submitted for his commentary, John McAvity (2010) asserts:

I therefore think you should be very cautious in what you submit to [a museum journal] in your article. In fact I should ask you why you are even adding this additional stress to your life by writing an article like this in the first place? If your stress is so overwhelming, reduce it, do not add to it. We are all responsible for what we do to ourselves in the long run.

Can museum workers not be allowed more agency than alluded to here? Indeed, why bother to address *any* problem—Janes' (2009) critical world issues or otherwise? I believe strongly that we need to name and begin to deal with the white elephant of overwork that occupies every museum work space. Even though we cannot prove for certain that Margaret Mead ever stated 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has[,] the quality of this wisdom remains beyond dispute. Surely, the problem can never be solved by saying or doing nothing about it. Speaking up is a *sine qua non* for achieving work-life balance (Edmondson and Detert 2005: 422).

Beyond the above point, the *CMA Ethics Guidelines 1999* (Canadian Museums Association 1999: 13) urges senior museum personnel to take particular responsibility for educating less experienced colleagues. In this light, I firmly believe it is crucial to identify the task saturation problem, lobby for action by professional museum organisations at all levels, and begin to wiki coping strategies to help overburdened colleagues. In the context of the long list of philosophical, organisational, and individual functional competencies recommended to museum workers by the CMA, skills expected for museum workers that analyse, create alternatives, act to minimise problems, and value original approaches to problem-solving (Canadian Museums Human Resource Planning Committee 1997: 15) surely need to be applied here.

As for taking individual responsibility for doing something about the problem, everyone does—whether joining Workaholics Anonymous or other less dramatic personal strategies. What I am urging here, however, is the need to start collective thinking, research, and action in order to address the problem. For example, I believe it is important to examine whether the task saturation problem can in fact be solved by individuals in isolation. This may be possible in some situations, but, in the absence of collective action, it is not very likely in my view.

Broadly considered, modern organizational management has come to expect continual levels of overwork by staff previously deemed necessary only in short-term crises. Society's high values on 'work mastery,' work commitment, and the use of personnel appraisal systems all play a role in the genesis of over-commitment as found for example in 'workaholism' (Burke 2006: 11, 13, 15). The ubiquitous trend of modern work in all

sectors is toward expecting fewer workers do more and wiring employees to the office via information technology to enable carrying out what are actually 'mind-boggling workloads' around the clock (Laab 1999: 30-2; cf. Bunting 2004). A sign of this new social norm comes indirectly, but tellingly, from a 2007-2008 radio commercial for the career search engine web site Workopolis. It jokingly promoted the company by claiming the service could help recruit 'Mr. works all weekend' to meet the needs of employers. Indeed, Fry *et al.* (2006: 330, 338) report that workaholism is now a behaviour actually highly valued by society and twelve-step Workaholics Anonymous groups have arisen to meet the new need.

Can Workaholics Anonymous or other forms of behavioural (Chen 2006) or spiritual therapies (Fry *et al.* 2006) for individuals solve the problem? Interestingly, in the case of museum workers, it is more complex than this. In the book *Between Work and Leisure: The Common Ground of Two Separate Worlds*, Robert A. Stebbens (2004) examines the workers who can be categorised as 'occupational devotees,' a classification that has been ignored by the sociology of work. According to Stebbens (2004: ix),

Occupational devotion is a strong and positive attachment to a form of self-enhancing work, where the sense of achievement is high and the core activity (set of tasks) is endowed with such intense appeal that the line between the work and leisure is virtually erased.

Museum workers are classed among a distinctive group including library and archive workers who devote themselves to socially important work. It is found to be highly challenging, intensely absorbing, and immensely appealing, engendering high value commitment and rewards of self-actualisation (Stebbens 2004: 10, 17, 76). Such workers demonstrate a 'profound love for the job' (cf. Best 2007: 10) that is quite distinct from the characteristic motives of 'work junkies' (cf. Gordon 2009: 223). Occupational devotees have deeply felt motives intrinsic to their work. It is significant that none of these have the properties of addiction (Stebbens 2004: xii). Workaholics anonymous twelve step programmes are, therefore, not likely to be the easy fix for museum workers.

Some representatives in professional museum organisations seem to miss the point of the straws and fully loaded camels aphorism. 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 British Columbia Museums Association responded:

[T]he 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** [emphasis added] of the camels themselves and the intended length of their journey.

Of course, this perspective ignores the debilitating impact of continually increasing expectations on museum worker performance and the quality of their working lives. It also sidesteps the need for professional museum organisations to help their members cope with the current problem of work intensification (Bunting 2004: xxxvii, 28) and the fact that the journey actually is never ending. 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 point of the aphorism is that one seemingly small new expectation can—and we can state categorically eventually will—result in catastrophic failure of a worker's ability to continue carrying an ever increasing workload. This is regardless of how *strong* museum organisations can help museum workers become through professional development and other measures.

Professional museum organisations certainly can make museum workers stronger through activities such as professional development. However, quite apart from their inflationary effect on expectations, museum training sessions rarely—if ever—acknowledge the problem or address exactly how learners can find the time, tools, and resources required to implement new learning about professional museum approaches. Indeed, 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 a training event, fully loaded museum workers often cannot find the time, energy, financial, or other resources required to implement the new knowledge and skills.

The never-ending and single-minded push to make museum workers 'stronger' in my view therefore places museum professional organisations 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 and given the tenor of Harding's response, professional organisations 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.

It may be argued, therefore, that continually ramping up professional museum standards is not an unalloyed good. Here, I believe that all concerned have ignored an important perspective on one potential means of addressing this issue. 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 a *Muse* 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, professor Dubé (2007) reports that his proposal has received scant attention in the museum world.

In relation to this question about professional standards, 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 professional standards. Included among these standards, for example, are many electronic links to various documents that outline numerous standards and best practices. One unexamined—yet I believe 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. Given responses I have obtained from anonymous reviewers of a draft journal article on this matter, I must make it clear here that my point is *not* an argument against the ultimate value of adherence to professional museum standards. It is simply to bring the issue of the impact of the ongoing inflation of professional standards (cf. Weil 1988: 32) into a discussion where it can be analysed critically.

Surely professional museum organisations and their activities should not be exempt from 'critical museology' as defined by Teather and Carter (2009: 24). This 'new museology' calls for a critical stance toward old assumptions and ways of working (Ross 2004: 84). The museum field is one in which this issue may be particularly acute since the general literature on the quality of working life ignores the significant impact of continually rising professional standards of practice (Thistle 2010a). Should museum workers be expected to put the extensive standards identified by AAM into practice irrespective of the resources available to do so? To my mind, this question is *never* addressed adequately.

Responding to a question about AAM's recognition of the problem of task saturation and resulting burnout, Julie Hart *et al.* (2009), AAM's Sr. Director, Museum Standards and Excellence with contributions from other AAM staff, writes for attribution:

Certainly, we hear this concern repeatedly from our own members. **However, there are still more people clamoring to work in museums than there are positions to accommodate them** [emphasis added]. Absent rationing entry into the field, which we see no mechanism to enact even if it were desirable in principle, we are left with the challenge of increasing resources available to institutions. AAM devotes a huge amount of its waking hours to just this challenge, through advocacy, training, and publications, and in almost every area in which we are active.

This statement outlining the AAM approach to the question is highly problematic. First, I believe that it is unconscionable to gloss over the problem simply based on the fact that there remains a surfeit of people who want jobs as museum workers. From the personal perspective of someone who is closer to the end of my museum career than the beginning, this says to me 'you may be "hopelessly overburdened," but many people still want your job.' Essentially, I interpret this as an admission that experienced museum workers are—if not deliberately exploited—expendable.

On the other hand, I would argue that what this statement says to entry level museum workers is, 'yes, let's continue to build the museum railroad by relying on a continuous stream of enthusiastic coolies and let you become "hopelessly overburdened" too. Surely other people will still be anxious to work in our field to replace any who burn- and drop-out.' How can this approach not be considered as anything other than a form of exploitation of young workers? Professional museum organizations, museums as employers, and other corporate stakeholders must begin reflecting seriously on their attempts to advance the cause of museums primarily by relying on—therefore by default *exploiting*—museum workers and their love for the work (cf. Friedman 1994: 120; Burke 2006: 120; Mercadex International 2002a: 6).

Beyond this, Hart *et al.* address the need to increase resources in order to deal with expectation inflation. This is one side of the problem, of course. However—and this is a crucial point—Hart *et al.* (2009) admit at the end of their response:

(As you can guess, there is no one right answer. Part of it is institutional and managerial; part of it is personal responsibility and ambition. The truth is the way we work is changing and will never be the same as it was. **There will never be enough resources (time, staff, money) to do everything we want/need to do** [emphasis added].)

If it is in fact the case that the AAM is expending 'a huge amount of effort' on a plan of action that admittedly will fail, is this not an irrational—if not irresponsible—strategy? Is there no other avenue open for action? In light of the admission that sufficient resources will *never* be available, I believe that it becomes absolutely crucial to address the other variable in the rising expectations + flatlined resources = task saturation, stress, & burnout equation. Given AAM's admission, and in light of William Ury's negotiation approach for example, are the variables rising expectations that are in dire need of management (Thistle 2010b) and museum worker task saturation not the factors which are most amenable to managed change in the current situation? At a bare minimum, is effort directed at reducing overwork any less likely to be an effective strategy than the current reliance on a doomed lobby for additional resources (cf. Janes 2009: 176)? Why do professional museum organisations appear to resist addressing the museum worker task saturation directly? This and the related issues cry out for critical museology, research, analysis, and concerted remedial action.

## Conclusions:

The widespread problem for museum workers resulting from rising expectations, insufficient resources to cope with increasing demands, resulting time poverty, task saturation, and debilitating levels of stress and burnout is I believe one of—if not *the*—most serious problems faced by museum workers today. Apparently, anecdotal evidence that many museum workers experience task saturation is not sufficient for some stakeholders to accept the need to address the problem. We must, therefore, break through the resistance of those in a position to engage in the necessary investigative research.

CMA President John McAvery (2010) reports for example that he was unable to persuade the Cultural Human Resources Council (2010) to include the work overload issue as part of its recent research program. In light of the lack of current data and the above argument, therefore, I believe that formal research into the breadth, depth, and significance of this quality of work life problem that would support the development of effective ameliorative action is required. Research results could lead to critical analysis of aspects of the problem such as the impact of rising professional standards on museum workers, consideration of policy revision for the real world characterized by finite resources, and changes in professional development practice so that ways and means of implementation are always addressed. To start, simple awareness of task saturation should become a more important collective priority for the museum community. Currently the issue appears to be entirely absent from the public agendas of professional museum organizations and is fatalistically and counter-productively brushed aside by many in the field.

Despite the stated belief by some stakeholders that museum workers can or should do nothing about the debilitating quality of working life status quo, I maintain that we certainly are able and clearly must begin to address the task saturation problem. This conviction is based on a vision espoused by the Foundation for Rural Living. It imagines everyone living, learning, and contributing to society at their highest level of potential (Hayes 2010; cf. Gurian 1995: 20-21; Brumgardt 1995: 70). Museum workers presently are frustratingly impeded from achieving this potential in their professional lives by the debilitating effects of task saturation and time poverty. Some unfortunate museum workers will certainly recognize the symptoms of task saturation described by Murphy (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 or museum operation into the ground.

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. I am arguing that unless museum volunteers and paid staff recognise, 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' (Thistle 2010a). 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. An individual saying No following the advice of Ury (2007) is one approach, but I maintain that collective action also is needed.

If museum workers as a collectivity do nothing, or fail to persuade other stakeholders to engage the problem directly, we condemn ourselves to a future of isolation as well as abiding and insupportable exponential increases in unresourced expectations. In this case we will be abandoning not only the achievement of our museum missions but our own physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being to the voracious demands and related personal stresses of the Post-Modern world. I believe 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 welfare if nothing else. Professional museum organisations and other stakeholders need to apply critical museology to their own actions and policies that exacerbate the problem. A preliminary step in this direction can be taken by consulting the analysis and range of solutions proffered on the [Solving Task Saturation for Museum Workers](#) blog and by participating in the collegial cooperation envisioned above.

'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  
Revised version, 21 August 2017

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> See the author's Solving Task Saturation for Museum Workers blog at <https://solvetasksaturation.wordpress.com/2016/11/16/decent-work-movement-lost-opportunity-potential-advances/> .

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to my colleague Nathaniel Howe for introducing me to this perspective.

<sup>3</sup> Also see the relevant sections of the law identified by a Justice Department staff member on the Solving Task Saturation for Museum Workers <https://solvetasksaturation.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/canada-labour-code-overtime.pdf> (The full text of the Canada Labour Code is available at <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/L-2/> ).

<sup>4</sup> In the contrast to the focus of this book on major change events and the crises they engender, I would argue that 'crisis mode' has now become 'business as usual' for museums as is the case in other sectors (cf. Bunting 2004: xxv).