Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Assisting With Systematic Reviews Can Be Associated With Job-Related Burnout in Information Professionals

A Review of:
Demetres, M. R., Wright, D. N., & DeRosa, A. P. (2020). Burnout among medical and health sciences information professionals who support systematic reviews: An exploratory study. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, *108*(1), 89–97. https://doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2020.665

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Abstract

Objective – This study explored reports of burnout among librarians who assist with systematic review preparation.

Design – Electronic survey (Copenhagen Burnout Inventory).

Setting – The survey was advertised via three email discussion lists based in the United States of America.

Subjects – The study surveyed 198 librarians and information specialists who support the systematic review process. Of these, 166 completed the personal burnout scale, 159 completed the work burnout scale, and 151 completed the client burnout scale.

Methods – The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) is a validated survey that includes three separate scales: personal burnout, work-related burnout, and client-related burnout. The end of the survey addressed demographics, including questions on the respondents' involvement with systematic reviews. Survey questions use a 0 to 100 rating scale, with 0 indicating Never/To a Low Degree and 100 indicating Always/To a

High Degree. The researchers shared the survey to the email discussion lists MEDLIB-L and DOCLINE and advertised it on the Medical Library Association (MLA) News. Survey answers were collected using Qualtrics Survey Software. Once emailed, the survey remained open for one month. Data was coded in Excel and analysis included scoring following the CBI metrics, as well as TukeyHSD and Kruskal-Wallis tests to determine differences in demographic groups.

Main Results – Reported burnout levels were significantly lower for those who spend more than 80% of their time helping with systematic reviews compared to those who spend less than 10%. The consistent use of a systematic review support tool was also associated with significantly lower burnout levels. Other comparisons were not significant. The average overall response score for personal burnout was 48.6. The average score for work-related burnout was 46.4 and the average score for client-related burnout was 32.5. Reference librarians reported the highest average total burnout scores (47.1), while research librarians had the lowest (37.7).

Conclusion – Consistency, either in time spent dedicated to systematic reviews or in the use of a support tool, was associated with lower levels of burnout among librarians and information specialists. The authors suggest that these results could inform ways of improving burnout among those assisting with systematic reviews.

Commentary

Research has examined job-related burnout in multiple areas of librarianship, including public and academic liaison librarians (Nardine, 2019; Smith, Bazalar, & Wheeler, 2020). Burnout related to a specific job role, such as supporting systematic reviews, has not been a focus. However, it is clear that supporting the systematic review process can be a time consuming and potentially stressful endeavor for a librarian (Bullers et al., 2018).

This review consulted Boynton and Greenhalgh's (2004) critical survey appraisal checklist, which makes a clear suggestion to use an already written and validated questionnaire when one is available. The CBI is a validated questionnaire used to measure burnout in a variety of professions. The survey was advertised via appropriate mailing lists and was available for a sufficient time for participants to respond. However, the method of recruiting respondents, by sending the requests via professional email lists, may have introduced a source of bias. As the authors themselves point out in their discussion, those experiencing feelings of burnout may have been more likely to respond to a survey questioning that topic than those not experiencing burnout. Another source of potential bias comes from the cross-contamination of personal burnout affecting feelings of work-related burnout and vice versa. Survey instructions directed respondents to answer based on work-related feelings, but as the authors explain, it is "difficult to compartmentalize" (p. 96).

The researchers asked respondents a number of demographic questions within the survey, which helped them compare burnout scores across different groups. It is unclear, however, if they planned these comparisons. The majority did not yield significant differences, but there were a number of demographics that were not included in the reported results. These demographic questions focused on the stages of systematic review a respondent was involved with, the type of users, and the number of information professionals that worked together on a review. It would be interesting to know whether these had an association with burnout, as would further analysis into whether interactions between demographics (such as percentage of job duties versus use of support tool) were correlated with burnout. Also, a meaningful analysis of burnout between different job titles was not possible, due to the low response rates and the wide variety in job title and duties. Future studies could first analyze job titles and duties for those who report working with systematic reviews, followed by a closer look at burnout in those different roles.

The results of this study do give libraries some potential ideas for mitigating burnout in those supporting systematic reviews. It appeared that a lack of consistency, whether in time spent on systematic reviews within the job role or with use of a systematic review assistance tool, led to higher rates of burnout. While not all libraries can afford or need to dedicate staff to systematic reviews as a primary job role, a clear library policy defining systematic review assistance, including the use of a review tool, could help to offset potential burnout.

References

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