

Increasing Job Satisfaction among Social Workers

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Abstract

Since the 1970's, countless studies and questions have been asked on how job satisfaction can be fostered and maintained among social workers. As the current research remains minimal with regards to the promotion of job satisfaction of social workers, it is now time for the profession of social work to stand up and take notice in order to prepare social work leaders and practitioners, with the adequate tools to lead. This paper will suggest ways in which job satisfaction can be fostered and maintained amongst social workers, as well as key factors contributing to job satisfaction of social workers. Key leadership traits will also be discussed along with models and avenues which look to create job satisfaction. This paper will conclude by offering recommendations which offer proper action steps to be visited when looking to increase job satisfaction among social workers.

Keywords: Job satisfaction, job satisfaction among social workers, social work job satisfaction,

1.0 Introduction

How can job satisfaction foster and be maintained among social workers? Since the 1970's, this question and questions similar have been asked countless times, spawning great debate in the social work profession. This paper will look to investigate ways in which job satisfaction can be fostered and maintained amongst social workers. Important key factors cited by social workers, will also be discussed when investigating which factors contribute to job satisfaction with regards to social workers. Leadership traits social work leaders compose will also be explored in-depth to discover how these traits increase job satisfaction of social workers. Models and avenues will also be discussed when looking to incorporate ways to increase job satisfaction. Upon conclusion, this paper will offer recommendations which offer future action steps to be taken in order to increase job satisfaction of social workers.

2.0 Factors promoting job satisfaction among social workers

When promoting job satisfaction amongst social workers, one must question which key elements are important in helping to create and maintain job satisfaction? Findings and results from research concerning job satisfaction studies have proven that the more satisfied an employee is with his/her job, the less likely employees will leave their positions (Gleasonwynn and Mindel, 1999). The area of job satisfaction not only derives benefits to social workers, but it also allows for job satisfaction to be embedded in the values of an organization. When job satisfaction becomes entrenched among the values of the organization and social workers, this can translate to enhanced services offered to clients based on job satisfaction sustained among social workers. With the direct link of job satisfaction increasing services and resources offered to clients, organizations which possess environments of high job satisfaction will also seem more likely to attract skilled social workers to an organization in the long run (Butler, 1990). When organizations employing social workers don't place emphasis creating environments that foster and maintain job satisfaction, these organizations will yield dissatisfaction among many of its employees. Thus, by not placing priority in striving to develop job satisfaction for employees, employees may not only become dissatisfied, but negative consequences such as burnout may occur (Jayaratne and Chess, 1986).

As social work is notoriously known as a demanding profession, it seems vital that job satisfaction be taken seriously when looking to combat such things as burnout. Organizations that employ social workers and identify job satisfaction as a priority, can lead to not only enhancing a social workers role within the organization, but can also reduce absenteeism, increased retention, and increased quality of services offered to clients (Cole, Panchanadeswaran, and Daining, 2004). Cole, Panchanadeswaran, and Daining (2004), cite that such factors as salary, job autonomy, opportunities for promotion, quality of supervision, good working conditions, support from co-workers, perceived efficacy, and social supports are all contributing factors to increased job satisfaction of social workers.

Elpers and Westhuis (2008) added to these findings and found in a survey of 833 practicing MSW and BSW social workers, that the items listed below contributed to increases of job satisfaction among MSW and BSW social workers. These influences included:

- Pay and benefits
- Opportunity for promotion
- Supportive and empowering work environment
- Clarity of job role
- Recognition
- Participative decision making
- Adequate resources which allow employees to provide positive outcomes for clients

Cole, Panchanadeswaran, and Daining (2004) cited Siefert et al. (1991) study of health care social workers, family preservation workers, child welfare, community mental health, and family service workers found that high levels of perceived efficacy provided a direct correlation to higher levels of job satisfaction. Cole, Panchanadeswaran, and Daining (2004), also cited a study completed by Davis-Sacks et al. (1985), which drew from a sample of child welfare workers, finding that supportive supervision was associated with increased levels of job satisfaction. As social workers are able to receive supportive supervision of their practice, not only does this allow workers to improve in their practice, but workers are able to hear what strengths they possess in their practice. As supervisors key on these strengths, this can then allow for a sense of satisfaction in ones work, thus, enhancing job satisfaction .

When conducting the literature review for this paper, a theme which continued to crop up was that the literature currently today echoes that of the 1980's. Barber's (1986), *Correlates of Job Satisfaction Among Human Service Workers*, earlier identified many similar factors similar to those above stated by Elpers and Westhuis, (2008). Barber (1986), as identified in his findings, cites factors below which are predicaments of job satisfaction among human services workers. These predictors include:

- The work itself
- A sense of achievement
- Responsibility
- Recognition, praised for efforts and work contributed
- Achievement or promotion, workers accomplishments are recognized
- Salary level
- Job security
- Relationship with supervisor
- Relationships with fellow co-workers

Again, as compared to the findings above predicting job satisfaction of social workers, Barber (1986), indicates that if these factors put forth are not met for employees, then higher rates of absenteeism and turnover will amplify. As absenteeism and turnover amplify, this can lead to increased administrative costs, workplace disruption, and reduced productivity among social workers. Although job satisfaction involves a significant investment of time and resources by leaders, the benefits derived by social workers and organizations far outweigh the costs of increased administrative costs, workplace disruption, and reduced productivity.

Barber (1986), strongly feels that in order to increase job satisfaction among social workers, than interventions such as job enlargement and job enhancement must be considered. As Barber's (1986), job satisfaction factors are evidently similar to that of the literature today, why is it that these factors are still not followed through on by a majority of leader's in social work settings? One rationale that may explain these circumstances is Barber (1986), argues leadership in organizations may be mostly to blame. Until there is a shift in leadership philosophy in adopting ways of increasing job satisfaction of social workers, then studies will continue to cite a need intervention to increase job satisfaction among social workers. Simply, until leader's takes the "bull by the horn", then increased levels of job satisfaction will remain on the backburner of organizations. Later in the recommendations and future action section, recommendations will be put forth that identify paths to increasing job satisfaction for social workers in an organizational setting. As displayed above through the predictors which create job satisfaction, one theme that can be pulled from these predictors of job satisfaction is the crucial predictor of leadership.

Solid leadership among leaders is seen as paramount in the creation of job satisfaction among social workers. The following section will explore the impacts of how leadership in organizations, specifically agencies which employ social workers, is crucial when fostering and maintaining job satisfaction.

3.0 Leadership and its impact on job satisfaction among social workers

Leadership specifically in organizations that house social workers can be viewed as a crucial determinant in whether job satisfaction flourishes or falls into disarray. Elpers and Westhuis (2008), discovered a clear link to when employees needs are met, job satisfaction and productivity will improve as a result. Until recently, there has been minimal literature published to date, relating to the impacts of leadership impacting job satisfaction of social workers (Elpers and Westhuis, 2008). Disciplines in the areas of business, social and organizational psychology, have taken lead roles looking to uncover what accurately promotes job satisfaction among employees in organizations. Social work to date, as noted by Elpers and Westhuis (2008), has lagged behind the competition when studying organizational leadership and its impacts with regards to the job satisfaction of social workers. In order for social work to work to bridge these gaps, the recommendations and future action section will draw upon how social work should look to take an active approach in pursuing further research to increase job satisfaction among social workers.

According to Fisher (2009), in order for a leader to be effective in increasing job satisfaction, leaders must begin to understand what motivates employees. Fisher (2009), cites that a social work supervisor for example, must move beyond the notion that social workers simply “just want to help people”. Fisher (2009), argues that these supervisor’s must uncover what motivates employees, in turn enhancing a social workers job satisfaction. Perhaps, when questioning what motivates social workers in an organization, a 360 degree feedback approach or focus group setting, could allow for the transmission of ideas in the hopes of furthering which factors motivate social workers. For example, a social worker might disclose in a focus group setting, that they would like to be praised or recognized when they have provided quality work to an organization. The leader in this case could then take these suggestions and learn how to better motivate social workers based on these findings.

Fisher (2009) cited an exploratory study produced by Rank and Hutchison (2000), which looked to find empirical evidence, in regards to which traits best describe that of a social work leader. Rank and Hutchison’s (2000), study found that deans and director’s of social work schools in the United States, suggested five components in which social work leader’s should and look to possess. These components include:

- Pro-action
- Values and ethics
- Empowerment
- Visionary
- Effective communication skills

Holosko (2009) contrasts Fisher’s (2009), findings stating five factors that successful leader’s should exhibit:

- Vision
- Influencing others to act
- Team work/collaboration
- Problem solving capacity
- Creating positive change

Upon reflecting on the components and elements above which comprise an effective leader in a social work organization, one must argue the diversity of leadership skills a social work leader should compose. As the literature states above, leadership skills such as being a visionary, problem solver, and being pro-active when anticipating challenges ahead, all look to not only classify an effective leader but also translate in establishing job satisfaction among staff social workers. Fisher’s (2009), argument in which social work leader’s must find what motivates their staff members, is also crucial in creating and maintaining job satisfaction among social workers. In identifying what motivates each social work staff member, this can be viewed as a leader who meets and exceeds the benchmark elements as described above. As these leaders continue to exceed these benchmarks, this in all likelihood will cultivate environments where job satisfaction succeeds among social workers. An important debate which continues to draw attention to social work leadership and job satisfaction, currently is the emerging theme in which Holosko (2009), cites the findings of Brilliant (1986), that suggest social work leadership, training, and education is a “non-theme” throughout the profession.

Researchers such as Stoesz (1997) have also put forth that the majority of social workers who move into leadership roles often have less adequate training and mentoring. Clearly, these examples display a gap regarding the lack of training and education being offered to social workers through social work school curriculums, at both the BSW and MSW level. The recommendations and future action section will help to provide ideas of how social work curriculums can offer courses and training, which look to prepare future social work leaders. Rank and Hutchison (2000), add to the above arguments through their investigated findings, stating that 75 individuals who held leadership positions within the NASW (National Association of Social Workers), identified the education and training they received didn't meet their expectations. Thus, this then carries over to effect job satisfaction of employees within organizations. If social work leaders are not prepared with adequate leadership skills, then how is this supposed to translate to environments having high levels of job satisfaction?

It is ultimately now time for social work programs at the BSW and MSW levels, to become aware of this "non-theme" in regards to education and leadership training. Social work programs must begin to equip professionals with adequate tools in the form of leadership training, in order to lead and create work environments where job satisfaction thrives amongst social workers. Based on these findings above, one conclusion that can be drawn is that leadership is one of the most critical aspects that impacts job satisfaction with regards to social workers. Later in the recommendations and future action session, I will offer recommendations based on why proper leadership training and education should be a staple in all BSW and MSW program. If graduates from these academic programs are provided with the appropriate tools, then it should likely impact and establish environments that consist of high job satisfaction. If nothing is done to correct this glitch in regards to training and education, the literature will continue to publish findings in a negative light surrounding social workers and the lack of satisfaction derived in their current positions. Simply, if social workers don't possess adequate training in regards to leadership, then they will be setting up work environments to fail and consist of low job satisfaction.

4.0 Avenues increasing job satisfaction among social workers

Based on the current literature concerning how to create and maintain job satisfaction of social workers, there still consists a gap in the literature regarding interventions, models, and avenues which explore and enhance job satisfaction. Jaskyte (2004), reports that a majority of models fail to pay attention to the importance of employee's views and opinions. The majority of interventions, models, and avenues explored will touch on how leadership can be improved in order to directly impact the job satisfaction of social workers. When looking to impact the direct job satisfaction of social workers, one method touted with increasing job satisfaction is the 360 degree feedback model. The 360 degree feedback model can be seen as an ideal fit with leadership in the social work realm. According to Richardson (2010), the 360 degree feedback model, lends itself to blending its business know how with the values encompassed by the profession of social work. The 360 degree feedback model looks to incorporate the feedback of multiple sources such as front line social workers that allow leader's to become more self-aware of how their leadership impacts the direction of the organization and most importantly the job satisfaction of staff (Richardson, 2010). Richardson (2010) also notes that an advantage not only of 360 degree feedback is its efforts to improve leadership, but also how it allows staff to draw upon feedback from peers.

Richardson (2010), cites that methods such as 360 degree feedback, can be implemented to increase the interaction of employees such as social workers, which have a direct benefit in regards to job satisfaction. Richardson (2010) also states that models such as 360 degree feedback, can also help to bridge negative elements such as the future, organizational stress, and imminent job loss for example. Richardson (2010) suggests that the literature displays a direct correlation when utilizing 360 degree feedback, from a leader's perspective which thus, effects job satisfaction. Richardson (2010), then suggested when leaders utilize the tool of 360 degree feedback in organizations, findings suggest that employees become more engaged and improve service towards clients, are less absent from the workplace, productivity increases, and performance increases. In order to implement a model such as this, Richardson (2010), states that all staff including leaders must receive training that allows all to give honest and respectful feedback. 360 degree feedback, should be seen as a useful tool that could aid in improving job satisfaction of social workers. 360 degree feedback, could be seen as an avenue where staff on the front lines of a social work agency, have the opportunity to express feedback on a proposed agency policy change for example. A 360 degree feedback model, allows then for administrators to take into consideration the views of staff in making a decision impacting the organization. Although there exists minimal research citing the use of the 360 degree feedback model in a social work agency setting, this model can be viewed as a viable option when organizations looks to enhance job satisfaction among staff.

Elpers and Westhuis (2008) found through a stratified, systematic survey of 833 practicing MSW and BSW social workers, that a majority of the respondents noted, organizational leadership impacts job satisfaction. These findings suggest that research must be continued in the social work realm to link how leadership impacts job satisfaction of social workers. Elpers and Westhuis (2008), propose that there is a need for more qualitative studies relating to how leadership impacts job satisfaction in regards to social workers. Elpers and Westhuis (2008), cite qualitative studies assessing the perceptions of leader's practices which are linked to job satisfaction. Elpers and Westhuis (2008) believe that a similar qualitative study could be implemented when looking to study social workers expectations of leadership and how it promotes job satisfaction. Qualitative studies conducted that draw from focus groups and individual interviews could draw clearer links to what aids in job satisfaction among social workers. Increased research linking leadership to job satisfaction of social workers, I believe would be best suited from by a focus group approach. These focus groups could then empower employees generate elements in which they feel that could lead to improved job satisfaction. Focus groups could also highlight organizations that have high levels of job satisfaction among its workers. By studying social workers who are satisfied in their positions, this could be seen as a beginning platform to collect findings that directly influence job satisfaction.

Interestingly, Fisher (2009) argues that leader's in social work agency settings have through experience become accustomed to leading staff based on wisdom and personal experience. Fisher (2009) explains that these social work administrators have for too long depended on these methods. Fisher (2009) found that leader's, who practice by one or more leadership theories, are viewed as more successful and highly looked upon by staff. One theory in particular, which Fisher (2009), highlighted was Herzberg's two-factor or motivation-hygiene theory. This theory includes two types of management criteria which could be looked towards when promoting job satisfaction of social workers. These two types of management include job enrichment and job enlargement. Fisher (2009) explained that job enrichment for example, allows a social worker to take a case from start to finish instead of the case being divided amongst social workers in a department. Job enlargement provides employees with a means of variety in one's work. For example, job enlargement could expand a social worker's primary role of a case intake worker to include becoming a part of an investigation team one week throughout a month. Not only are these two important tools central in creating variety among a social workers job, but it also allows for increased job satisfaction. When social workers are offered variety in their daily work, this will allow for work to become less routine and expose social workers to more responsibility which has been proven to be a factor when increasing job satisfaction.

As leader's in social work settings search for ways to increase job satisfaction, the suggestions of job enrichment and job enlargement should be held in high consideration. When employees are satisfied, this also produces a chain effect where clients are on the receiving end of the best quality provided services possible. Thus, job enrichment and enlargement could be seen as fundamental tools to social work administrators, when seeking to derive job satisfaction in an organization. Barber (1986) strongly feels that when leader's and social workers look to improve job satisfaction in an organization, the avenue of policy formulation could be explored when seeking to influence job satisfaction. Barber (1986), argues that policy formulation is not only crucial in ensuing job satisfaction among workers, but involving direct service workers in the policy formulation process will empower workers with the hope of increasing job satisfaction. Barber (1986), stated that policy formulation should not be left just to leadership but policy formulation should be decentralized among direct service workers. By allowing employees to become a part of the policy process, workers could make their voices heard when looking to decrease case load assignments for example. Workers involved in the policy process could advocate for avenues in the hopes of reducing case load assignments, which then could ultimately produce increased job satisfaction among workers. If policy changes are not acted upon and taken seriously by leadership, job satisfaction among social workers will cease to exist. It is now time for leadership to take into consideration the above avenues when looking to promote job satisfaction among social workers. At the end of the day, the services offered to clients by social workers are the utmost priority. By looking at ways to increase job satisfaction, it is a win-win situation for both parties as satisfaction increases and results in quality of services provided for our clients.

5.0 Recommendations and future action

How do organizations and leader's create and maintain job satisfaction among a staff of social workers? This recommendations and future action section will look to offer suggestion of how job satisfaction can thrive amongst social workers. If the following recommendations and offerings presented are taken under consideration by leaders and organizations, it is felt that job satisfaction will blossom in workplace environments consisting of social workers.

When pondering the elements which effect job satisfaction of social workers, one key finding that is consistent throughout the literature is the aspect of leadership and its impact regarding job satisfaction. Brilliant (1986), cites that training and leadership are currently the essential “missing ingredient” from social work education and training curriculums. This is viewed as having a tremendous impact in relation to job satisfaction. If social workers are not prepared with the sufficient tools of training in regards to leadership and training, social workers will later be unprepared when moving into leadership positions. Lohmann and Lohmann (2002)-Ensuring SW Admin- point to the fact that social work programs are consistently lacking the proper investment at providing courses and training which direct attention to leadership through such course as organizational behavior. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) found that in a survey among NASW social work leaders, the respondents identified the area of leadership being continually overlooked in academic training programs (Rank and Hutchison, 2000). As the evidence clearly suggests, there is an essential need for social work programs to adopt curriculums that promote the development of training in relation to leadership, Thus, having the proper tools associated with leadership training, will aid leader’s when developing and maintaining environments where job satisfaction ranks high among social workers.

Currently, there is a gap and need for leadership development at the BSW and MSW social work school level. Recently, I performed a web search to identify social work programs in Canada, which place emphasis on leadership training. Most notably, I found social work schools such as the University of Calgary, offer a joint MSW/MBA (Masters of Business Administration), programs completed over a two year basis. The first year focuses on the completion of the MSW portion, followed in the second year with completion of the MBA module. Joint MSW/MBA programs such as these signify that the profession of social work is starting to take positive steps paying attention to increasing efforts to develop future leaders. By taking these significant steps, social work students will accrue leadership and management capabilities that will eventually help to increase job satisfaction within organizations. Furthermore, it is recommended that social work schools rethink the current curriculum structure and also cater to provide courses that allow students to gain leadership skills through appropriate course work. Additional courses focused towards leadership training and models to practice by, will allow future social work leader’s to be adequately prepared to lead into the future. If social work curriculums act accordingly, job satisfaction will mirror these efforts by producing environments where satisfaction ranks highly among social workers.

The next recommendation identifies that there is a need for further additional research in the social work realm relating to enhancing job satisfaction. Further research should look to connect models, interventions, and studies that manufacture key elements that ensure job satisfaction among social workers. According to Cole, Panchanadeswaran, and Daining (2004), future research concerning job satisfaction among social workers should look to employ a variety of longitudinal studies relating to assessing short and long term effects of interventions which increase job satisfaction among social workers. Upon reviewing the literature directed at interventions that influence job satisfaction of social workers, the literature still consists of a proportionally small body of knowledge. The use of added focus group research studies could be utilized when studying factors that increase job satisfaction among social workers. Focus groups could also be conducted to study environments in which social workers inhibit high levels of job satisfaction. Focus groups would also allow for the transmission of expectations and further inform how leadership impacts job satisfaction of social workers. From these findings, studies could hypothesize and develop models helping to increase and lead to job satisfaction.

Models such as the 360 degree feedback tool could be viewed as a great resource when looking to increase job satisfaction of social workers. The 360 degree feedback model could be useful to leaders as they would hear feedback from social workers on proposed policy changes within the organization for example. Through giving staff a chance to offer feedback to leadership, this can also spawn a sense of job satisfaction. As the 360 degree feedback model, is a great tool to implement in organizations consisting of social workers, research should still continue to develop and produce models that add to job satisfaction attainment of social workers. Social work governing bodies can also take more of an active approach in the promotion of leadership to its members. Promoting leadership in the social work profession through awareness and advocacy through newsletters and workshop training is also another framework to be viewed upon when increasing job satisfaction of social workers. As social work bodies take more of a vested interest in the area of leadership, this could translate to significant positive impacts of job satisfaction among social workers. Another recommendation consists of leader’s leading by a strengths based approach.

Leader's practicing based on a strength based approach, could offer feedback in supervision for example, by highlighting the strengths workers possess in their practice. In essence, this could allow for social workers to feel a sense of recognition and achievement from gaining valuable feedback and also help to increase job satisfaction of the worker. From the literature reviewed for this paper, no where did the literature mention of a strengths based perspective being practiced by leader's who look to influence job satisfaction of social workers. Thus, the strengths perspective could be seen as a great tool which could likely enhance job satisfaction amid social workers. Perhaps, further research could derive a model which utilizes a strength based perspective that strives to cultivate high levels of job satisfaction.

Finally, the recommendation of taking action on a policy front leading to enhance job satisfaction is seen as a critical implication when boosting job satisfaction amongst social workers. As was noted above by Barber (1986), policy formulation with the involvement of leadership and direct staff such as social workers, could both work towards promoting a work environment consisting of high job satisfaction. Having policies in place that allow social workers to become a part of constructing such policies around reducing workload as an example, could be viewed as taking the right footsteps in developing a framework for job satisfaction.

Without policies in place that identify job satisfaction as an integral part of an organization, environments with high job satisfaction will be less likely. Perhaps a way for social workers to bring to light the positive impacts of job satisfaction within an organization, might be to prepare a list of downfalls which can occur when job satisfaction is not seen as a priority of leadership. The more leadership becomes aware that dissatisfied social workers for example, are likely to be absent, leave their position, and have lower productivity, this then may shift organizations to implement strategies which increase job satisfaction. Again, and as stated throughout the paper, job satisfaction will remain extinct unless leadership change their philosophy and take job satisfaction seriously.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, and based on the suggestions from the sections above, the topic of job satisfaction among social workers still and will continue to draw great debate for discussion among social workers and those who lead. As attention increases around the promotion of job satisfaction in the social work profession, this will hopefully render policies to be adopted by organizations which work to enhance job satisfaction among social workers. Going forward, and as was suggested in the recommendations and future action section, in order for the topic of job satisfaction among social workers to gain prevalence, avenues such as further research and proper leadership training offered in social work programs will help to bridge gaps. As the development of models and focus group studies supply findings regarding influences relating to job satisfaction of social workers, this will in turn help leader's in organizations to become aware of how leadership impacts and works to promote high levels of job satisfaction among social workers. As the research still continues to remain minimal in regards to avenues promoting job satisfaction of social workers, it is now time that the profession of social work take notice and prepare future social work leader's with the best possible tools to lead. Social workers make great leaders by nature, but without the proper tools and training, leaders are set up for failure when trying to achieve a sense of job satisfaction for employees. Now is the time like no other, for social work curriculums to adopt these suggestions and implement proper steps such as those noted above, when seeking produce environments where job satisfaction exists and thrives among social workers.

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