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Administration Policy Impacts on Counselor Productivity and Overall Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This literature review discusses the impact administration, agencies and their policies impact the counselor's productivity and job satisfaction. Often the board of administration is compiled of individuals who are disconnected from the counseling field, yet are the ones creating the policies for the counselors to abide by. Administration creates policies based upon criteria created by the agency, which may not always coincide with the counselor's job duties. Impacts of such policies are discussed in detail. Additionally, obstacles and barriers are examined. Some of these barriers include insurance requirements, agency requirements, and client obstacles. It is crucial administration, counselors and counselors-in-training are aware of these aspects of concern. All of these components are based upon counselors who are currently working in the field in the Midwest region of the United States.

Keywords: Administration, policies, counselors, counselors-in-training, job satisfaction, productivity, insurance, turnover

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Introduction

Job satisfaction is an aspect incorporated into every career around the country. Often, individuals who are in search of a career do so with the intention of enjoying their placement. In this paper, I will examine the components of job satisfaction, barriers to high job satisfaction and possible ways to improve one's overall job satisfaction in the counseling profession. Through this research analysis, administration and agency policies will be examined to determine their impact on delivery of services. The degree of agreement on agency policy is directly related to overall job satisfaction and individual productivity among clinical mental health counselors (Burke, Oberklaid, & Burgess, 2005). Agency policy could result in less provider availability causing more difficulties for the patients seeking mental health care. Additionally, the level of preparedness and expectations from counselors-in-training will be considered, in order to determine the overall impact for those entering into the counseling field from school.

The research examined throughout this paper is based upon licensed mental health providers, which includes individuals who have completed at least a Master's degree in the counseling profession, and are currently practicing psychologists, counselors and psychiatrists. The medical doctors (MD) included in the research analysis must have an emphasis and additional training within the counseling and psychological field. The community field includes those who are not owners of a private practice, but instead work for a private practice, hospital, or non-profit organization.

The motivation behind the examining the current research is based upon current employment concerns and how it can affect the patients. Additionally, this is important to patients because the results can assist to explain the reasoning behind a shortage of available counseling appointments. However, this is important to practicing providers in the mental health field in order to better understand the relationship between policies and productivity, which

affects job satisfaction. The outcome allows administration and providers to discover discrepancies within the agency and their individual work. In turn, the field will benefit, due to more effective communication, inspired by an increase in teamwork and ability to discuss concerns and the rationale behind the concerns in a professional manner to benefit all participating parties.

Inclusively, the conclusions based upon the inquiry of the research will assist agencies to better understand the rationale and the relationship behind employees and their job satisfaction. In addition, the research analysis will contribute to a higher expectation of communication between administration and other employees within the company, primarily within the counseling field. This paper examines the relationship found between stress, productivity and agreement with administration and policies related to job satisfaction in agency clinical mental health counselors.

Review of Literature

An employee's overall job satisfaction can be influenced by a multitude of factors including intrinsic and extrinsic factors, role clarity, relationships with co-workers, supervision and factors within the organization which one is employed (Wilkinson, & Wagner, 1993). This study revealed that leadership style is related to overall job satisfaction, as well as the relationship between the supervisor and counselor. Support and direction from administration is highly desired by counselor, and relates directly to job, supervisor and administration satisfaction from the employee. It was found that the higher the satisfaction of the employee, the higher the productivity. The interaction and interpersonal behavior between the counselor and their supervisor outweighed the working conditions, such as Supervisors have a greater influence on the administrative policies that are enforced compared to the employees, in this case clinical mental health counselors. Therefore, if the connection between the counselor and their supervisor is heavily weighed, the agreement to the policies will impact satisfaction. Aarons, Sommerfeld, and Willging (2011) found that turnover could be reduced by having a strong leadership, particularly during moments of change within the agency and system.

On the other hand, psychologists have rated their overall satisfaction to be higher throughout their careers (Rupert, Miller, Tuminello Hartmen, & Bryant, 2012). The satisfaction rating was related to the percentage of direct paying clients, the amount of administrative paperwork and the amount of control employees felt they had within their agency. Another factor proven to impact job satisfaction is the counselors' perception of how challenging the job is going to be (Kirk-Brown, & Wallace, 2004).

The ability to find meaning in one's work is essential to an increased success in the individual's career. Motivation, empowerment, development, increased job satisfaction,

performance, and decreased stress are all correlated to the meaning one finds in their work (Weir, 2013). Although meaning differs amongst individuals, it is critical that each individual find some type of meaning within their work, even if another individual could feel differently. There are multiple ways people can create meaning in their career paths. Three primary ways are: (1) spending more energy on tasks one finds exciting or gratifying, (2) surrounding themselves around positive, non-toxic individuals and (3) utilize reframing from a cognitive restructuring perspective. Through reframing, one is able to see the larger picture of their job duties, despite some of the tedious tasks, or tasks that one may view as unnecessary. For example, in the counseling field, one must complete documentation of the session, including some documentation that is necessary for insurance purposes or to abide by administration policy and not necessary for the individual patient. Therefore, by seeing the big picture, the counselor is able to decrease the stress caused by the “unnecessary,” but required tasks.

Prior to entering the field professionally, students are impacted by their educators and supervisors. A study conducted on doctoral students expressed counselor educators and supervisors impact the overall perception students have about the field (Parr, Bradley, Lan, & Gould, 1996). Students in counseling programs reported a higher motivation and satisfaction within the field when they received support from their administration, as well as their supervisors (Izzo, & Lamb, 2003). Additionally, Cherhade and Hajjar (2016) discovered that job preview information influences expectancies of the job, which directly influences the employees’ goals and performance. They also examined the realistic job previews information, which an agency utilizes to assist job candidates to obtain an accurate image of the position, including positive and negative aspects. The increased accuracy of the realistic job preview information leads to

positive outcomes within the organization, including increased job satisfaction, decreased turnover and reduces the probability of a decreased job performance.

Productivity is a common way organizations measure performance amongst mental health professionals (Franco, 2016). This is measured by examining a therapist's billable client contact hours, which is face-to-face. A higher job satisfaction rating is related to counselors sharing similar values of the organization and minimal role ambiguity. Additionally, agencies that require their counselors to adhere to their productivity standards are exposed to increased work-related stress, which decreases one's self-efficacy. Furthermore, productivity standards put the therapist at risk for conflict of interest based upon the therapist needing the client, just as much, if not more, than the client needs the counselor.

The personal-life and work-life combination can impact employees and how they view their current jobs. Burke, Oberklaid and Burgress (2005) looked at a sample group of psychologists to get a better understanding of the influence the organization or agency support related to satisfaction. Generally, those organizations that valued and supported work-life integration had their employees report higher satisfaction, less stress, greater optimism and a higher level of emotional and physical well-being. Additionally, women tended to benefit more from a supportive organization compared to men within the same field. Similarly, clients can affect the counselor. Just as support is important to the employees, it is equally important the counselor offer support to their clients throughout the relationship (Izzo, & Lamb, 2003).

Job Satisfaction

Collins English Dictionary (2012) describes job satisfaction as the degree to which an individual's hopes and expectations towards their employment are fulfilled. Job satisfaction allows an individual to feel achievement in their careers, including feeling as if their work is

worthwhile. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2016) individuals have a greater interest on achieving high job satisfaction compared to earning a larger income. This puts an increased pressure on job satisfaction due to employees actively striving for positions in which they feel they are making a difference. Similarly, the amount in which an employee's organization and administration policies correspond to the employee's personal values and beliefs directly impacts the overall job satisfaction.

Olmsted Medical Center (2016) completed a survey to examine job satisfaction throughout their agency, and inquired about areas of improvement. From this study, it was determined that job satisfaction has the ability to be improved in all areas. Three main areas that impacted one's overall satisfaction include role clarity, visibility and responsiveness. Role clarity expressed that individuals in the organization were unaware of who is in charge of certain areas, as well as the purpose of certain roles. Additionally, the overall structure of these roles, including examining and defining the responsibilities of individual roles was determined to assist in improving the employees' satisfaction. Once employees were able to determine and understand who was in what role, employees believed that visibility of the leadership and administrative members would improve employees' voices being heard and having an impact on new policies. Third, responsiveness to employees was seen as lacking amongst Olmsted Medical Center administration and employees. Employees expressed concerns as to not being made aware of policy changes, including the rationale as to why certain policies were created. Employees reported an increased desire to understand how decisions are made, and a desire to provide their feedback related to these decisions.

Productivity

Productivity is the rate an individual, in this case, a counselor completes useful work (Cambridge Dictionary, 2016). Olmsted Medical Center (2016) defines useful work in the counseling field as any face-to-face contact with patients, including telehealth visits, as well as, any time spent with patient's that has the ability to be billed. A common concern of licensed counseling professionals is the lack of control related towards productivity (Olmsted Medical Center, 2016). The productivity rate is based upon patients that are seen and does not take into account patients that do not show up for appointments, or cancel their appointments late, which does not allow the counselor to have enough time to fill their openings. Additionally, the productivity rate has been created to be within a certain averaged amount over the course of the year. This means that the counselors are concerned about under producing, but also about over producing, both of which impact their salary in a negative manner. If the counselor has a productivity rate higher than the suggested rate, the counselor is docked for the additional time spent with patients, rather than being reimbursed for their time with the extra patients.

Perceived Control

An important factor related to agreement of administration policies is the idea of control. Perceived control can be described as the belief that an individual can determine and predict the desired outcomes of the situation, including internal and external factors (Wallston, K.A., Wallston B.S., Smith, & Dobbins, 1987). Furthermore, perceived control assists in the diminishing of stress due to the individual, in this case counselors, feeling as if they have more control or say surrounding their job duties.

Agency Documentation Requirements

Each agency creates standards and requirements for what is necessary for appropriate documentation. The majority of those practicing in the mental health field will admit to a large

amount of paperwork for each patient or client, especially individuals who work within agencies compared to those in private practice (Miller, 2014). In fact, Scott Miller found that some clinicians are spending anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of their time completing paperwork. With the amount of time being spent on documentation, clinicians are experiencing increased burnout, lower job satisfaction, a smaller caseload of clientele, and an increase in no shows and cancellations. However, documentation also holds a professional and ethical responsibility for clinicians (American Psychological Association, 2007). The records created by the clinicians allow for an explanation of billing, updates and changes related to the client and client progress during each session. Typically agencies follow the documentation requirements set by insurance companies in order to collect payment, and follow the ethical guidelines. However, each organization is subject to create additional requirements.

Discussion

Limitations

Some limitations to this research includes the variety of policies that are created amongst different agencies varies, making it nearly impossible to create a “one-size-fits-all” solution. Additionally, productivity, if based upon face-to-face direct client contact, can also be impacted by external factors, such as insurance and the deductible of the client’s insurance policy. For instance, each year insurance restarts, leaving individuals and families with paying more out of pocket, and the majority of individuals are not as willing to spend money on unnecessary expenses until they’ve reached their deductible. Additionally, another limitation is the parameters in which the agency creates for counselors, such as a certain amount of cases.

Implications

The current research can be used to assist administration to understand their employees’ job satisfaction and how to combat increased turnover rates. Employees may be encouraged to participate in feedback related to agency policies in order to increase their satisfaction if they feel their opinion matters and their voice will be heard. Additionally, employees will be able to be aware of the correlation between their job satisfaction and their stress level, which can impact their job performance. Given the results, those agencies that have a low job satisfaction rating will be given the opportunity to make adjustments within their policies, which will increase job satisfaction and job productivity.

Recommendations

Here I want you to talk about what you think needs to happen in terms of research as well as what you recommend agencies should do to increase job satisfaction and improve client services.

Author's Note

As a future mental health counselor and an individual who currently works along side multiple professional counselors, I was inspired to gain a deeper understanding of the behind the scenes information that agencies may not be forthcoming about until after employment has been accepted. I had heard counselors discuss their concerns related to administration, including new policies such as productivity and salary. Unfortunately, there is not a clear-cut answer, however, I was captivated by the impact such policies had on the professional counselors, especially when they had no input. I also wanted to find some answers as to what an organization could do on a simpler scale to improve overall job satisfaction, such as improving communication and rationale for decisions.

After exploring the available research, I am able to better understand the viewpoint from both the administration and the practicing clinician. This will benefit my future career due to my knowledge of what questions should be asked and emphasizing the importance of having a professional relationship with administration.

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