

Copier Careers White Paper

Economic heat can burn out copier techs

Copier service is usually a money-maker, but highly-sophisticated machines, less time to do the work and too much pressure during economically-troubled times can turn up the burner enough so copier service technicians can burn out.

The recession that began in 2001 – coupled with copier-printer machines that are more durable – has caused copier dealerships to shrink the workforce. Territories may expand to that formerly covered by two or more technicians. And pagers may force technicians to be available longer hours in remote locales. Techs that used to have some bench time to interact with other techs and blow off steam may be dispatched from their home.

“The stress issue, as it applies to technicians, has been overlooked for too long,” said Joe Thomas, a Service Technician from Vero Beach, Fla., who has worked in the high-speed printing and copier areas. Thomas says he’s seen a lot of burnout in the industry and has experienced it himself.

Joe Maldonado is a technician who has worked as a copier service tech everywhere from The White House to walking the streets of New York City with a toolbox to island service in Puerto Rico. He says he witnessed a tech having an anxiety attack and has encountered other technicians who are stressed or burn out because of the workload or the commute. “Working in Washington, D.C. can stress you out, period,” said Maldonado, who is currently at Sylvan Springs, Md.

Karen Schapley, Vice President of Service for Northern Business Systems in Mahwah, N.J., a former copier service technician, says she has seen burnout because of downsizing or maybe a large workload makes the person feel like a drone.

“You think that your feet are tied in concrete shoes and you’re not going to get anywhere,” she said.

Economy sometimes causes burnout

The recent troubled economic times have had everything to do with some of the burnout, according to Schapley – from thinning manpower to wage freezes.

One company, she said, had nine technicians leave in a 10-year period from 1992-2002.

“The least little stone puts more ripples in the pond, and it affects more people than you realize,” she said.

How do managers spot burnout? You watch for attitude changes, said Les Samuel, Vice President of Service for BMI Systems Corporation, Oklahoma City, and hope you can pull that person aside to correct it before it becomes “a virus.” Said Samuel: “As a manager, it’s a tough one to overcome, because when you’ve been in this industry 10-15 years, you’re going to encounter it.”

Burnout is a problem in all fields, according to Ruth Luban, a Santa Monica, Calif. psychologist who has an audio workshop called Burnout: Keeping the Fire, (available at www.corporaterefugees.com) because companies cut back, become too “lean and mean” and ask workers to do more with less time.

“In addition, people who have jobs in this jobless recovery are fearful of losing their jobs if they don’t overwork,” Luban said. “Consequently, most workers are giving far too much time and energy without adequate down time, breaks, financial reward for their extra efforts, and so forth.”

Burnout occurs most often in people-oriented and deadline-driven work, she said, “that involves heavy responsibility for others or for the continuity of organizations – work that involves heavy or continuous rejection, competitiveness, or criticism.”

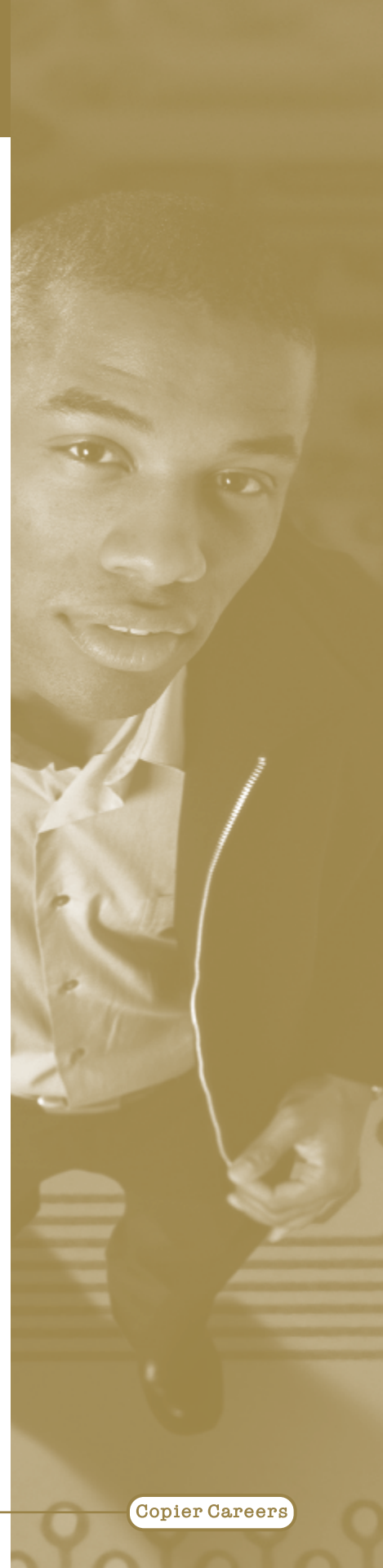
Working in companies that are downsizing, reorganizing, unstable or are crisis-driven can also induce burnout.

“A big cause of burnout is lack of adequate recognition or reward for job performance,” Luban said. “People are willing to give a lot – going beyond the call of duty – but when their efforts are not validated, they feel even more stress.”

Service techs are now expected to do more to help a company stay competitive. When there is often little differentiation among brands because of more durable machines, Samuel says dealers differentiate with service. In the industry, “the quality the equipment has reached has affected us,” said Samuel. He says this can create more expectations in service and can unleash a “battle of the service dollars” with other dealers.

In addition to those expectations on techs, troubleshooting network connectivity takes longer, Maldonado says, and one call can eat up four hours. Luban says copier techs are in a category where there is “techno-stress” – made to work at the speed of the machines ironically invented to ease the human workload.

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“Technicians are expected to be machine-like in their ability to get equipment up and running – fast – and likely receive a lot of the stress workers are feeling while those very machines are down,” she said. “Technicians are supposed to be magicians. They are often treated like machines, not given much opportunity for socialization as they run from job to job...they are merely the machine that fixes the machine, so to speak.”

Digital machines have caused copier service technicians to be more like mobile network technicians than the repairman they used to be, and Luban says changing job duties always contributes to burnout.

“Changing duties always generates stress, even if they are good changes,” Luban said. “Often, there is not enough training or support to help technicians do their new duties efficiently; there may not have been any choice in their taking on these duties, so they feel powerless in the face of changes they may not want. Again, troubleshooting, network-centric work of any kind has machines running us, so to speak. It’s a subtle thing, but it absolutely has impact on us humans.”

Know the symptoms of stress and burnout

Burnout is a process, Luban said, that begins gradually. People let go of “self-nourishing” behaviors such as exercise, adequate sleep and good nutrition. Over time, there are sleep difficulties or the inability to concentrate or relax. There may be uncharacteristic social withdrawal.

Thomas says one of the first symptoms of burnout is a tech showing for work in rumpled clothes, not taking care of his or her appearance and having bloodshot eyes.

When Thomas experienced burnout, he said he started going to a neighborhood bar that provided a support group that he needed at that point, but not the kind he really needed. He later began lifting weights for exercise, taking care of himself more and going to group therapy to overcome job burnout.

Maldonado says techs are often dispatched from home and have lost that support group they used to have in the office. For those in the stressful situation with a machine or a network, he says to do things to stay calm – take a deep breath and don’t stay around the machine too long. Make a cell phone call to another tech. “You’re not going to resolve the situation if you’re stressed out,” he said.

Luban’s suggestions on how to recover from the job burnout process, outlined in her audiotapes, involve consciousness-raising. Here are antidote suggestions she gives for job burnout:

- **Take real breaks.** Luban suggests 10 minutes every two hours – ideally away from the source of the stress.
- **Reduce multitasking.** Keep that cellular phone off when you’re driving if you can. She says it’s better for technicians to use drive time to take deep breaths, connect with their senses, see the environment around them or listen to music.
- **Make a healthy use of non-work time way from work.** Create friendships with people who are not work-related so there’s not constant shop talk. Create a decompression ritual between work and home. Stop at the gym for a workout or a yoga class. Take a walk in the park, or use the first half-hour at home to relax and meditate before taking on the needs of a family.
- **Eat well.** Be aware of what you eat and how you eat. Don’t grab fast food and gobble it down, but sit down and choose a healthy lunch, even if it’s only a half-hour long.
- **Create bedtime rituals.** These rituals allow you to unwind before going to bed to assure adequate sleep – bathing and reading, for instance, but not TV.

And don’t forget your primary support group. Quality time with family and friends “is very important for mitigating job stress and burnout,” Luban said. “Venting and sharing feelings, ideas, wants and needs – all occur in our intimate relationships and go a long way toward relaxation, pleasure and balance.”