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### **Challenges Facing Field Instructors Employed in Wilderness-Based Expeditionary Programs: A Review of Literature**

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# **Challenges Facing Field Instructors Employed in Wilderness-Based Expeditionary Programs: A Review of Literature**

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## **Abstract**

Additional research is needed to gain a better understanding of the unique demands faced by field instructors working full time in wilderness-based expeditionary programs. Connections between perceived challenges and consistently high rates of turnover in these employees remain mostly unexplored within outdoor program research. The purpose of this study is to present the findings from a review of literature as well as to indicate areas for future research about challenges facing field instructors employed in wilderness-based expeditionary programs. Findings presented in this paper include, first, what is currently known about this population, second, challenges encountered outside the work context, as they are perceived by these individuals, and finally, potential solutions to address these issues. This research informs future discussions directed towards encouraging front line employee retention in this unique field.

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**Keywords:** wilderness, instructor, expedition, challenge, turnover

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### Introduction

Unique constraints and responsibilities that arise from a wilderness-based work context are regularly encountered by expeditionary field instructors and create a variety of challenges that must be faced. If not managed appropriately, these challenges can lead to employee burnout and premature turnover. Burnout is a multi-dimensional process and is often characterized by emotional exhaustion, feeling anxious or overwhelmed by work responsibilities, and a diminished sense of accomplishment (Marchand, Russell, & Cross, 2009; Thomas, 2001). Reaching a state of burnout is a highly individualized process that may be attributed to a diverse set of factors, but precursors that commonly affect field instructors include long work hours, extended time away from home and continual responsibility for others' safety (Marchand et al., 2009; Thomas, 2001; Thomas, 2003). More research is necessary to explore the "potentially serious social, moral and financial implications for organizations and individuals" related to the presence of burnout in the outdoor industry and its impact on premature employee turnover (Thomas, 2003, p. 55). Solutions that will effectively address this important issue require attention from program managers.

Program directors experience significant difficulties in retaining employees. The amount of time one is typically employed full-time as a wilderness therapy field instructor is 11.85 months and almost half (45%) of those surveyed by Marchand et al. (2009) had held this position for less than five months. One program director reported that a front line staff replacement rate of 100% every two years is "common and even expected" (Kirby, 2006, p. 3). Considering the seasonal variability of this work and the common tendency of front line staff to quit within the first year of employment, field instructor retention is an ongoing concern within this industry.

Impacts on the organization from elevated rates of front line employee turnover are often damaging. Negative consequences from this trend have

been observed as decreased staff morale, staff culture, program quality and client satisfaction (Kirby, 2006). Additional concerns for the organization include directing significant resources toward ongoing instructor recruitment, selection, hiring, and training of new employees instead of investing those resources into other program areas (Gass, 1993; Kirby, 2006; McCole, 2005). Furthermore, indirect costs may arise that include lost knowledge, disruption of workflow and feelings of uncertainty (Kirby, 2006). A high turnover rate of front line employees "most likely has several embedded costs for program administrators and consumers" (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 371) and critical examination of these costs is imperative to improve organizational functioning.

Acknowledging the difficulty involved in hiring and maintaining a group of committed individuals as front line staff, Erickson and Erickson (2006) also recognize it as "fundamentally important to the viability of the organization" (p. 6). Organizational benefits from retention of high quality instructors include a positive staff culture and a workforce with extensive experience in group facilitation, judgment and decision making; skills where years of hands-on practice should be highly valued. Especially when working in a remote wilderness context containing many unpredictable variables, retaining high quality employees with adequate experience to make the most appropriate choices for the group will lead to superior client care, program facilitation and medical crisis management (Galloway, 2007; Marchand et al., 2009)

In order to avoid the negative consequences associated with high rates of employee turnover and gain the benefits of employee retention, issues influencing one's intention to quit or leave one's job must be brought to the forefront. Gaining an accurate and up-to-date understanding of this prevalent issue could help organizations and individual employees implement effective and appropriate interventions to reduce turnover. Additional research involving field instructors that explores similar chal-

allenges arising outside of the workplace is necessary in order to offer realistic solutions to reduce the intention of these employees to leave their jobs.

The purpose of this study is to present the findings from a literature review and to indicate areas for future research about challenges facing field instructors employed in wilderness-based expeditionary programs. To achieve this, a systematic review of relevant literature was conducted by searching for various terms through an online database of academic journals in the field. The terms used to define the population under study included 'field instructor,' 'expeditionary leader,' and 'wilderness trip leader.' These were then paired with additional terms more specifically defining the context of employment such as 'wilderness expedition' or conditions of interest in these individuals such as 'burn-out' or 'turnover.' Full text versions of journal articles were either accessed electronically and downloaded or accessed manually at the university library. To present the findings, this manuscript will first introduce the expeditionary leaders collectively known as 'field instructors' by summarizing the existing demographic information about this population. Next, limitations of the literature will be discussed. Finally, the manuscript will introduce several challenges faced by field instructors and offer several solutions to address these issues and encourage employee retention.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Who are Field Instructors?**

For the purposes of this paper, the term field instructor refers to an individual who is primarily employed full time, either seasonally or year round, to lead expeditionary outdoor programming for paying clients. Other terms used synonymously in the literature include 'guide,' 'field staff,' or 'outdoor instructor.' Allin and Humberstone (2006) highlight early life experiences as fostering "predispositions toward the outdoors" and the role of serendipity in one's entrance into this field and in one's enjoyment of particular outdoor work experiences (p. 149). For

example, involvement with fishing, camping or hiking in the outdoors at a young age develops one's love for being outside and may lead to a desire to work as a professional in the outdoor industry later in life (Udall, 1986). Responsibilities of a field instructor include leading multi-day expeditions in remote wilderness areas, providing direct care to participants and teaching wilderness living skills, all while continuously experiencing the "daily pressure of making split second decisions" (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 360). Feelings that field instructors associate with this uniquely demanding lifestyle are largely unknown and deserve further exploration.

Most field instructors today fit a specific demographic that includes people that are "young, educated, single, and Caucasian" (Kirby, 2006, p. 79). Kirby (2006) suggested that "only a limited range of individuals would consider work as a field staff fulfilling and enjoyable," and attempting to find individuals from outside this demographic with similar sentiments would be difficult (p. 68). Perhaps due to a strong desire to share their love of the outdoors with others, many field instructors choose the jobs they do for altruistic reasons (Marchand, 2009) and hold a strong belief in the power of facilitated experiences in the outdoor environment to "help others change for the better" (Kirby, 2006, p. 75).

Shifting demographics over recent decades within the areas of age, gender, and education are worth mentioning. For example, field instructors employed in the 1980s were commonly in their late 20s and early 30s, older than today's average age of 22 to 26 (Birmingham, 1989; Kirby, 2006; Riggins, 1984; Wilson, 2009). In addition, work in the outdoors began from a "historically male-dominated culture and philosophy," apparent through values commonly associated with the military and with physical competence (Allin & Humberstone, 2006, p. 136). Today, men and women are now equally represented in trip leader and field instructor roles (Kirby, 2006; Marchand et al., 2009; Wilson, 2009)

and in some cases, women even outnumber men (Marchand, 2010). However, Marchand et al. (2009) discovered that male survey respondents had worked an average of six months longer than females. What attracts females and younger individuals to this role, even if it is short-lived? Perhaps trends of age and gender have shifted in conjunction with one another, so women are drawn to this type of work in their younger years. During this time period they may feel free to embrace the extreme physical, emotional and time demands required by the job, aware of the near impossibility of balancing these demands later in life with the responsibilities required when starting a family.

A marked increase in post-secondary education levels of field instructors over time is evidenced by recent survey results. Approximately 70% of field instructors have a baccalaureate degree (Marchand et al., 2009; Wilson, 2009) compared to less than 40% in the early 1980s (Birmingham, 1989; Riggins, 1984). Despite their education, the literature still paints an unclear picture of whether currently employed field instructors are adequately qualified and trained to handle some of the potentially dangerous or traumatic psychiatric and medical emergency situations encountered when working in isolated wilderness environments (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Galloway, 2007; Russell, Gillis, & Lewis, 2008).

Young adults today may approach employment in this field with idealistic expectations and experience feelings of pressure and disappointment after recognizing the realities of the job. These feelings may develop more commonly for employees who place a high value on the perceived worth of their work and have a desire to ensure it is in line with their personal ethics and leads to the betterment of others, personal growth and skill development (Kirby, 2006). Sustained high rates of instructor turnover could indicate that job expectations are commonly not aligned with actual experiences. Disappointment surrounding the reality of the job and

the demands related to the lifestyle required for this work may unexpectedly motivate people to quit who, only months before, entered the role with great enthusiasm, passion and hope.

### **Limitations of Available Literature**

The dearth of academic research related directly to field instructors ensures this is an area where considerable future scholarship is possible. In outdoor and adventure program research, the vast majority of studies have historically examined the impacts of wilderness-based programs on participants, not instructors. Several meta-analyses, reflecting the trends of hundreds of empirical pre-post studies, focus solely on broadening the understanding of impacts from participation in wilderness programs on the participants (e.g., Bunting & Donley, 2002; Cason & Gillis, 1994; Hans, 2000; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Marsh, 1999; Neill, 2002; Neill & Richards, 1998). Very few studies have focused on understanding the perspectives or characteristics of the field instructors who are employed to facilitate wilderness-based expeditionary programs (e.g., Birmingham, 1989; Kirby, 2006; Marchand, 2010; Marchand, et al., 2009; Wilson, 2009). Studies conducted qualitatively in search of perspectives on the lived experience of field instructors are particularly limited (e.g., Allin, 2004; Hutson & Bailey, 2008) and represent an approach that could be beneficial to broadening the understanding of this understudied population in future research.

Although some interest does exist in causal factors of turnover for field instructors in wilderness programs (e.g., Birmingham, 1989; Kirby, 2006; Marchand et al., 2009; Ross, 1989; Thomas, 2001; Thomas, 2003), the “specific instructional staff turnover rates for different programs are not widely known or reported” in the literature (Birmingham, 1989, p. 4). Russell et al. (2008) acknowledged, “very little is currently known” (p. 71) about the motivations or experience that field instructors bring to their jobs or “the characteristics of field staff, other

than initial training and certification requirements” (p. 70). Additional examination of field instructors’ experiences, training, job tenure and academic qualifications is warranted (Marchand, 2009; Russell et al., 2008). Survey data alone does not always provide enough detail to be useful in informing current practice and more research must be done to thoroughly evaluate how various instructor styles, behaviors and attitudes are influencing program effectiveness (McKenzie, 2000).

Several studies employed quantitative methods by conducting surveys among field instructors to gather empirical data regarding who they are and what issues they encountered in this unique career (Birmingham, 1989; Kirby, 2006; Marchand et al., 2009). According to Marchand et al. (2009), quantitative survey responses are a good starting point, but one-on-one, in-depth interviews with field instructors would be an ideal approach from which to fulfill recommendations for future research in topic areas such as intimate relationships, social support or client care. A qualitative approach to examining some of these issues could answer several of the questions raised by quantitative studies and contribute substantially to an emerging body of knowledge seeking to better understand the perspectives of individuals working on a daily basis in an isolated, nontraditional wilderness setting (Birmingham, 1989; Berman & Davis-Berman, 1994; Marchand, 2010; Marchand et al., 2009; Russell et al., 2008). Although Kirby (2006) recognizes the difficult nature of locating field instructors after they have left their jobs, gathering information from field instructors retrospectively could offer a new perspective on challenges experienced both within and outside the workplace. The lack of literature exploring the perspectives of field instructors shows that there is a limited availability of methods and resources available for understanding the challenges experienced by these individuals in this unique work context.

### **Challenges that may Influence Turnover**

Although the specific challenges faced by field instructors are dependent on one’s work environment, it is evident that these issues are generally perceived as significant (Marchand et al., 2009). As research into the areas of job satisfaction, work-related stress and burnout increases, there is recognition of complex interplay between various factors, meaning that this work affects each employee differently (Kirby, 2006; Thomas 2001). A multitude of implications exist from working under schedules requiring long hours and intense physical and emotional investment. Normally overlooked, the difficulty field instructors, especially females, perceive in maintaining relationships with friends, family, and intimate partners outside of work will be a focus of the following discussion. Other factors that affect perceptions of employee challenges will be highlighted in the following section. It should be noted, however, that these factors are often unrecognized by management since they generally occur outside of the workplace context.

The seasonal nature of this type of work combined with an atypical work schedule consisting of several consecutive days away from one’s family, friends, spouse and the comforts of home, results in unusually challenging circumstances each employee must negotiate (Marchand et al., 2009). The most common complaint from wilderness field instructors is the work schedule, making long-term, committed personal relationships difficult, if not impossible (Kirby, 2006). Marchand et al. (2009) suggests “when field instructors do return from long extended stays in backcountry environments, they are then challenged in managing their days off with other obligations, including finding time to tend to personal matters and maintaining intimate relationships” (p. 371). During time off, “a large portion of time is often spent physically and mentally recuperating from previous field experiences, which leaves little time for meaningful interactions with other people” (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 371). Thirty per-

cent of participants saw “limited time to explore other interests” as often or always challenging while 26% identified similarly with the statement “having to re-adapt to life outside of work” (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 368). In a related study, common contributors to work related stress were identified most frequently as, *long work hours* and *time away from home*, at 61% and 60% respectively, and these factors were attributed to the difficulties in maintaining relationships experienced by large proportions of survey respondents (Thomas, 2001; Thomas, 2003).

For women specifically, motherhood provides additional challenges to maintaining the exhausting schedule created by work in an already demanding career. Combining a career in the outdoors with the family responsibilities of motherhood was termed “particularly problematic” by female instructors (Allin, 2004, p. 64). Issues highlighted by this study include dilemmas between one’s career identity and one’s identity as a mother, a lack of recognition from one’s employer regarding the physical consequences of motherhood, changing relationships with work colleagues, and difficulty maintaining or updating one’s professional outdoor qualifications (Allin, 2004). Recognition of the particularly large demands on women attempting to combine both career and family responsibilities is not a new concept (Goldin, 2004), but can be amplified for those women working as field instructors due to the centrality of the body to one’s success in this job (Allin, 2004).

In the study by Marchand et al. (2009), survey results focusing on demographic characteristics and job related difficulties were collected and analyzed from a sample of 129 field instructors employed at three state-licensed behavioral healthcare programs in the United States. Several of the statements that were seen as highly challenging by study participants were often related to their relationships with people from outside their work environment. Over one third of respondents perceive themselves to “struggle to create relationships with others not associated with work when outside the work setting”

(Marchand et al., 2009, p. 368). Over half the participants indicated feeling “disconnected from home” and “missing out on time with friends and family” as always or often challenging (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 368). Experiences of a “lack of friendship stability” and a “lack of relationship with extended family” are also seen as highly challenging (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 368).

Field instructors who identified themselves as married (9%) or in a committed, long-term relationship (38%) feel more challenged with time and schedule constraints associated with their job than single individuals (Marchand et al., 2009). Researchers also propose that some employees may choose to remain single in order to devote the necessary time and energy to avoid feelings of being overwhelmed by pressures in both one’s career and family life (Allin, 2004; Gehring, 2002; Marchand et al., 2009). Approximately one third of respondents report they see their “spouse or partner affected” by their work and/or their work has a “negative effect” on their most intimate relationship (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 368).

Marchand et al. (2009) observed, “results from challenges experienced outside of the work setting were more pronounced than challenges experienced inside of the work setting” (p. 368). This finding indicates a compelling need for managers and administrators of organizations that run expeditionary wilderness programs to find solutions to implications of the atypical work schedule on their employees that may often be ignored because they are frequently occurring beyond the boundaries of the workplace. If relationship difficulties and time away from home are as problematic for practitioners as research to date suggests, then “a significant challenge for employers is to find ways of addressing the problem to prevent practitioners leaving the profession earlier than desired” (Thomas, 2003, p. 58). The variety of employee challenges potentially influencing turnover, as described throughout this section, indicate an undeniable need for attention to be

turned toward more clearly identifying how these challenges will be successfully overcome.

### **Potential Solutions**

If research can provide increased knowledge of current field instructor challenges, who is then responsible for developing and implementing effective solutions to these issues? "There appears to be little consensus on exactly what makes working in the outdoor education profession stressful or on how these problems can be best managed by employers and employees", yet several ideas exist that could be effective solutions to each (Thomas, 2001, p. 13). Without experienced and dedicated field instructors available to mentor new employees entering this field of work, organizations and the individuals pursuing this meaningful position are destined to operate below their full potential.

### **Organizations**

From an organizational perspective, employee retention in this uniquely demanding field deserves immediate attention. Given the elevated potential for field instructors to experience burnout and change jobs, "preventative strategies should become enshrined and incorporated into outdoor education organizations' philosophy and administration procedures" (Thomas, 2003, p. 61). If organizations offering wilderness-based expeditionary programs insist on providing high quality instruction from a dedicated, experienced and professional field staff team, they must adopt specific hiring and incentive practices to encourage this (Ross, 1986). Despite the common inability to pay staff what they believed they were worth, managers can seek out other creative initiatives to reduce the frequency of burnout and premature turnover (Thomas, 2003).

To encourage field instructor retention, organizations offering expeditionary wilderness programs must ensure new employees are fully informed of the realities of the job. Most field instructors "understand the challenging nature of continued employment in the profession," yet it is commonly unknown how long each intends to remain in this

type of work (Thomas, 2003, p. 54). According to the person-environment fit perspective, if there is an inappropriate fit, the person's abilities will fall below the job demands and lead to increased stress levels and intentions to turnover (Cranny, Smith, & Stone, 1992). Maslach and Leiter (1997) agree burnout is caused by a "mismatch between the nature of the job and the nature of the person who does the job" (p. 9). Alternatively, Kirby (2006) asserts that field instructors are "inherently transient and prone to turning over no matter what kind of job or work environment they are afforded" (p. 4). Assuming that a change in this trend is possible, turnover could potentially be reduced through realistic job previews, specific orientation manuals and programs, mentoring, and extensive training programs in order to offer new staff a composite picture of what to expect (Cranny et al., 1992). Providing new employees with a complete understanding of exactly what is expected of them, what lies beyond the scope of their job responsibilities, as well as establishing an early familiarity with members of the community with whom they would work could ensure appropriate person-environment fit, consequently reducing rates of burnout and turnover in recently hired employees (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Stehno, 1988).

Even within the same organization, the strategy for satisfying the needs of one employee may be very different to that required for another. While attempting to implement solutions that address a wide variety of challenges, managers must examine basic procedures that are currently in place to ensure these practices are meeting the needs of their present employees. The importance of offering employees positive feedback, individual recognition, as well as opportunities for professional development and training outside the immediate work context should not be overlooked (Thomas, 2003).

Individualized revision of employee work schedules would ensure one's time spent in the field is seen as balanced by what one perceives as ade-



quate time to maintain a healthy living situation outside of work (Marchand et al., 2009). Scheduling issues perceived to be threatening one's relationships outside of the workplace could be solved by adopting creative approaches that include varying one's work schedule, spending periodic paid time spent out of the field and diversifying one's work-related tasks (Marchand et al., 2009; Ross, 1989). For example, recent research involving public park and recreation employees suggests organizations implementing "flexible work arrangements" have employees who are more committed and display higher levels of motivation than employees working in organizations without such programs (Mulvaney, 2011, p. 75).

Continued research will allow for a more complete understanding of the variety of factors that contribute to a satisfied, productive and committed workforce in this unique field, yet research alone is not enough. Managers must make use of this knowledge to implement specialized initiatives aimed directly at recruiting, supporting and retaining high performing employees. There is no single, quick-fix solution that can be applied unilaterally, but implementing a diverse set of strategies to build supportive and sustainable work communities is imperative in addressing the organization-specific demands found in expeditionary wilderness programs and related careers (Thomas, 2003). In addition to organizational practices, the individual employee can take steps to increase employment retention.

### **Individual Employees**

Effective solutions to the challenges faced by outdoor professionals are also the responsibility of the individuals themselves to discover and address. According to Udall (1986), in order to sustain oneself in this line of work "you have to develop ways of getting your needs met: spiritual, emotional, mental and physical" (p. 19). Strategies like career planning, use of one's social network and self-care options can be implemented solely by the individual

field instructor in order to address various work-related complications.

The outdoor field as a whole offers limited opportunities for employee advancement beyond the instructor level (Birmingham, 1989; Ross, 1986; Udall, 1986). Lack of a well-defined career path to follow or 'ladder' to ascend makes consideration of long-term employment in this field very difficult for both new and veteran field instructors (Allin & Humberstone, 2006; Ross, 1989; Thomas, 2003; Udall, 1986). Historically, career planning has been considered the domain of the individual, however, Thomas (2003) suggested the outdoor industry "needs to recognize the potential of career planning to meet both individual and organizational needs by improving employee motivation and creating a pool of promotable talent for the organization" (p. 61). High quality career planning can lead to benefits to employees and the organization like lower rates of front line turnover (Thomas, 2003).

Further, developing one's social network is often difficult due to communication constraints inherent to the nature of the job and the desire by some staff for aloneness when not at work (Birmingham, 1989). However, field instructors may place value on processing work-related emotional issues with coworkers, a trained mental health professional, or alternatively, with friends, family members, or significant others from outside the immediate work context. Therefore, open communication with others may serve an important purpose in sustaining field instructors as long-term employees in this demanding industry. Particularly, female field instructors are known to suffer higher anxiety levels associated with their job than males and may find relief from regular feedback from peers, mentors, or professional counseling (Marchand et al., 2009).

Working within an isolated, expeditionary wilderness program, one might employ methods of self-directed support when appropriate. Relaxation techniques that may be used unobtrusively while working might include diaphragmatic breathing,

meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery (Luquette, 1995). Journal writing often acts as a regular part of wilderness expedition programs and is a socially appropriate option for dealing with stresses by releasing negative emotions that may be interfering with one's ability to engage positively within the group (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011). Use of this method of self-directed support through written reflection and processing could be an important individual solution for dealing with one's work-related emotional demands while still physically present in the work context.

Current research has identified challenges for employees in this field. However, if one feels committed to spending a significant amount of time in this position, it is up to the individual employee to play a role in ensuring his or her personal needs are met. Evaluating one's perception of effectiveness from the implementation of strategies identified in this section will allow each employee to discover a combination of personalized methods for overcoming the challenges of this work. Collectively, this could create a stronger feeling of employee support, a more productive and positive staff team, and an extended time period one would choose to remain as a field instructor.

### **Conclusion**

The research reviewed in this manuscript highlights several challenges facing a population about which there is little research conducted to date: front line field instructors in wilderness-based expeditionary programs. The demands faced by these employees outside of the work context may lead to consequences like burnout and premature turnover, especially in females. In order for organizations to reap the benefits of retaining high quality staff and avoid the negative consequences that arise from frequent turnover, challenges perceived to be threatening an employee's relationships outside of work can no longer be overlooked. Whether effective solutions to these challenges come from creative changes to policy or program structure, implemented

by the management team within the employing organizations, or from self-care strategies initiated by the employees themselves, they must be personalized and specific to each situation. As these challenges are addressed and eventually become minimized, benefits to the organizations and the individual employees will grow, successfully reducing the rates of employee turnover. Additional research on topics like the social support networks or intimate relationships of field instructors will broaden the current understanding of what solutions are most effective for this varied population of employees.

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