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Authors	Owens, Alexander;Holmes, Mark R;Cooper, Cyrus
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How Do Restaurants Grapple with Stress when Attempting to Achieve and Keep the Michelin Star? A Qualitative Investigation in the Canadian Market

Dr. Mark Holmes
Cyrus Cooper
Alexander Owens

Introduction

While every job has stressors, more demanding operations typically put greater pressure on employees, which in turn, increases their stress levels (Teasdale, 2006). Workplace stress has been found to have negative ramifications for organizations, such as decreased organizational commitment (Karacsony, 2019) and job satisfaction (Padmanabham, 2021). Organizational stress also has a negative influence on productivity and employee well-being, including being associated with a higher incidence of health conditions such as obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and others (Billing et al., 2014; Teasdale, 2006). These high levels of stress not only have a negative impact on a worker's physical and mental health, but prolonged exposure to stress is linked to an increase in absenteeism and a decline in productivity (Duxbury & Higgins, 2001). Overall, workplace stress puts a great burden on a worker's health and leads to poor work performance (Holmlund-Rytkönen & Strandvik, 2005).

Research has found that chefs typically experience “overload, excessive stress, and limited public recognition” (Ariza-Montes et al., 2018; Gibbons & Murray-Gibbons, 2007). This increased level of stress is not only felt by back-of-house employees, but also by waiters and other front-of-house positions in upscale restaurants (Jung & Yoon, 2014; Saah et al., 2021). The constant need for hospitality associates to suppress and evocate their emotions causes them to become highly stressed and emotionally exhausted (Grandey et al., 2005; Lee & Madera, 2019). In a time when a world pandemic has wreaked havoc on the restaurant industry, stress experienced by restaurant associates is magnified in operations that seek to retain and maintain a rating such as the Michelin Star (Johri, 2013). Despite these stress levels, no study has investigated how restaurants trying to maintain or obtain a Michelin-star prepare for and manage the stress that comes with these endeavours. Additionally, with Michelin's recent entrance into the Canadian market (The Michelin Guide, 2022b), this study will fill a gap in the restaurant industry by investigating what stressors exist in Canadian restaurants trying to keep or obtain a Michelin Star, and how it can be managed in the workplace. To answer this, semi-structured interviews with chefs and management of these Canadian restaurants will be conducted.

Literature Review

Michelin Star Restaurants

Sometimes referred to as the “Guide Rouge”, The Michelin Star guide was first developed in 1900 to help people with their travel adventures by offering car repair advice and where to locate gas stations (Michelin, n.d.). Following a shift to focus more on tourism, in 1926 it served as a gastronomy guide and awarded stars to restaurants delivering superior quality products and services (Bang et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2005; Michelin, n.d.). Since then, it has become one of the most prestigious accolades a restaurant can receive. The Michelin Guide continues to grow geographically; however, expansion into new destinations depends on the quality and talent of local chefs, creating an elevated culinary landscape in their respective centres. Due to Toronto's up-and-coming world-class dining scene, Canada saw their first taste of The Michelin Guide when numerous restaurants in Toronto were awarded a Michelin Star or a Bib Gourmand in the fall of 2022 (The Michelin Guide, 2022b). According to the president and CEO of Destination Toronto, The Michelin Guide will introduce new audiences from around the

world to Toronto's dining experience, showcasing the highly talented chefs from around the city (The Michelin Guide, 2022b).

To obtain a Michelin Star, judges critique the food from 5 criteria, including "the quality of the ingredients, the harmony of flavours, the mastery of techniques, the personality of the chef as expressed through their cuisine and, just as importantly, consistency both across the entire menu and over time" (The Michelin Guide, 2022a). The style, formality, and service of the restaurant have no influence on dictating whether they will receive a Michelin Star, and any style of restaurant can receive a Michelin Star (The Michelin Guide, 2022a). While it mainly focuses on the dish itself, 30-40 years ago, some of the best cuisine in Europe were found in formal restaurants, setting today's misconception that only formal restaurants are able to obtain a Michelin Star (The Michelin Guide, 2022a). While Michelin claims they do not discriminate based on a restaurant's formality, The Michelin Guide is still regarded as elitist in the restaurants they chose to award stars to, something The Michelin Guide is trying to distance themselves from (Lane, 2013).

The Michelin Guide has a significant influence on consumer demand, as restaurants with Michelin Stars have attracted more foreign tourism (Castillo-Manzano et al., 2021). Restaurant consumers react more to third-party accolades, with none being as influential as a Michelin Star (Bang et al., 2022). Due to the reputation that is associated with obtaining a Michelin Star, the turnover is considerably less in restaurants with a Michelin Star compared to restaurants without (Johnson et al., 2005). With this prestige comes an elevated level of expectation from owners, management, and consumers; thus, leading to an increase in stress (Johnson et al., 2005). When a restaurant loses one of its Michelin Stars, it can cause a revenue cut by as much as 50% (Johnson et al., 2005); therefore, gaining and obtaining a Michelin star puts a great deal of stress on chefs, owners, and management as they try to meet the elevated expectations that are now coming from their consumers.

Workplace Stress

Stress has also been shown to be essential for our complex brains and allows individuals to adapt to undesirable situations (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004); however, long-term exposure to high doses of stress can lead to serious health concerns, such as depression and even heart disease (Dankwa, 2017). Stress in organizations can manifest in response to physiological, emotional, or behavioural workplace conditions (Cooper & Marshall, 1976; Glazer & Kruse, 2008). According to the World Health Organization (2023), stress can be defined as "a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation. Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives". Similarly, Statistics Canada defines stress through their National Population Health Survey as "trying to take on too much at once; feeling pressure to be like other people; feeling that others expect too much; feeling that your work around the home is not appreciated; and feeling that others are too critical of you" (Statistics Canada, 2001). With that in mind, workplace stress can be defined as a person's inability to cope with the demands of their job. This is due to a lack of resources, limitations on the person's capabilities, or the job does not meet the needs of the worker (Raja & Joseph, 2007). This can lead to poor work performance and a decline in the workers' physical and mental health (Holmlund-Rytkönen & Strandvik, 2005).

In 2010, Statistics Canada found 27% of workers in Canada claimed to experience high or extreme levels of stress at work (Dankwa, 2017). Workplace stress is still a concern for those who do not experience frequent doses of high or extreme levels of stress, as 62% of workers claim that the main source of stress in their life stems from work (Dankwa, 2017). Some of the long-term effects associated with prolonged exposure to high levels of stress include depression, heart disease, and being at risk for substance abuse (Dankwa, 2017). Adding to this stress, approximately 15% of adults who were of age to work suffered from a mental disorder in 2019 (World Health Organization, 2022).

The hospitality industry has a unique set of demands that involves more emotional labour than other industries, especially for front-line associates (Shani et al., 2014; Wong & Wang, 2009). Emotion work can be split into 2 categories: evocation of emotions and suppression of emotions. Suppression is focusing on avoiding an emotion that is present, and evocation is focusing on an emotion that is absent (Hochschild, 1979). While healthy adults have a considerable amount of emotional control, it isn't always beneficial (Hochschild, 1979). The acts of evocating and suppressing emotions are positively related to stress; thus, having a negative impact on hospitality workers (Lee & Madera, 2019). To combat this stress, people will attempt to regulate their emotions by either changing what they are feeling or changing what they are portraying (Hochschild, 2012). This emotional regulation is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, meaning the more employees attempt to regulate their emotions at work, the more burnout they will experience (Grandey et al., 2005).

Within restaurants, this emotion work can be found predominantly in front-of-house positions where associates deal directly with consumers; however, chefs and other back-of-house staff are still susceptible to high levels of workplace stress. For chefs, the nature of their job is much different than the traditional model of following recipes to prepare meals. They are managers overseeing an entire kitchen staff, armed with financial and accounting knowledge to ensure they remain on budget with ingredients and kitchen supplies (Pizam, 2016). Their job demands a lot more out of them than ever before. Adding to these demands, the industry is dominated by young-adult workers who tend to have a high level of stress from factors outside of just work such as financial position and a lack of life direction (Petree et al., 2012). Cooper et al. (2017) found that these young workers are also susceptible to workplace bullying in Michelin Star restaurants due to the consistent banter between chefs in the kitchen. Since there is this abundance of stress within the restaurant industry, there is a high rate of turnover (Jung & Yoon, 2014), leading to constant training, inconsistent work environments, and a high probability of human error in the operation (Petree et al., 2012).

To deal with these high levels of stress and work demands, alcohol abuse in high-end kitchens is a long and common practice that harms chefs around the world. Alcohol used to be used as a motivator for chefs to work longer and harder hours and was even abused during split shifts between lunch and dinner services (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). While alcohol consumption during a service and between lunch and dinner shifts is much less common and often illegal, Giousmpasoglou et al.'s study (2008) found that alcohol and drugs are now used to help Michelin Star chefs calm down after a busy and adrenaline-filled shift and is sometimes used as a sleep aid. Some chefs in Giousmpasoglou et al.'s study (2018) also found that the high-

end restaurant industry has become so competitive, that drugs are almost a necessity to survive and thrive.

This work overload, emotional work involved at the front-of-house, high turnover rates, and substance abuse have led academics to investigate workplace stress and mental health within the restaurant industry and understand the influence of stress on alcohol use (Bufquin et al., 2021), workplace performance, satisfaction (Radwan, 2013), the intention of leaving, and burnout (Nawar et al., 2022; Yazicioglu & Kizanlikli, 2019). Literature in the restaurant sphere has also looked at how restaurant leadership manages mental health issues (McAdams & Gallant, 2022). Some examples of academic work specifically involving Michelin Star restaurants include the impact and culture of alcohol and substance abuse of chefs in Michelin star restaurants (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018), the impact of Michelin Star restaurants on tourism (Castillo-Manzano et al., 2021), and the occupational culture in Michelin Star restaurants (Cooper et al., 2017).

5 Sources of Stress at Work – Cooper & Marshall, 1976

Past studies investigating stress have used models such as the Personal Stress Scale (Petree et al., 2012), Goldgerg's 12-item General Health Questionnaire developed in 1978 (Gibbons & Murray-Gibbons, 2007), Parker & DeCotiis' 15-item job stress scale developed in 1983 (Glazer and Kruse, 2008), and the Workplace Stress Survey by The American Institute of Stress (Padmanabhan, 2021). Another popular model of workplace stress, developed in 1976, is Cooper & Marshall's model which highlights the five sources of stress that occur in a workplace (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). The first source is stressors that is intrinsic to the job, including poor physical conditions at work, work overload, and time pressure. The second stressor is a person's role in an organization, which encompasses role ambiguity, role conflict, and having responsibility for people. The third stressor, career development, is the under-promotion or over-promotion of a worker, and the lack of job security. The fourth stressor is workplace relationships, including subordinates, bosses, and co-workers. The fifth and final stressor is the organizational structure and climate, encompassing limited participation in decision making, behavioural restrictions in the workplace, and job-related politics (Cooper & Marshall, 1976).

While this model was developed in 1976, the five stressors indicated by Cooper & Marshall take an in-depth look at the development of stress within the workplace, and despite its age, still holds true to this day. Finney et al., (2013) used this model to organize their systematic literature review on stress and burnout with correctional officers, and Liu et al. (2023) used this model to investigate personal characteristics and environmental stressors on the mental health of construction workers. Within hospitality, there are many studies that use Cooper & Marshall's model of workplace stress in their research (Akgunduz, 2015; Jung & Yoon, 2013; Jung et al., 2012; Moreo et al., 2020). Specific examples include Akgunduz's study (2015) where they used Cooper & Marshall's model (1976) to help with their investigation concerning self-esteem and role stress on job performance, and Moreo et al. (2020) who used this model to help measure anger in restaurant employees. To ensure stress is measured and addressed accurately, this study will use Cooper & Marshall's model (1976) to build interview questions based on their 5 sources of workplace stress.

Methodology

Beyond investigating how stress influences restaurant employees, this research looks to understand how stress might manifest itself in award-winning restaurant operations. While previous research has looked at how stress influences restaurants in general (Bufquin et al., 2021; Nawar et al., 2022; Radwan, 2013; Yazicioglu & Kizanlikli, 2019), or at how stress can be managed in restaurants (McAdams & Gallant, 2022), no study has looked to specifically investigate how restaurants looking to acquire or maintain a Michelin-star prepare for, mitigate, and manage the stress that comes with these endeavours. As suggested by Spector & Pindek (2016), qualitative research is needed to advance our “understanding of workplace well-being”; therefore, this study will use a qualitative approach by interviewing restaurateurs in operations that are working towards achieving, have recently achieved, or have held for some time a Michelin Star. Using the Michelin Guide and restaurant websites, the emails of managers and chefs working in these Canadian restaurants will be obtained for recruitment. Interviews in this qualitative study will be semi-structured, and questions regarding workplace stress will encompass 5 workplace stress categories as indicated by Cooper & Marshall in 1976. These include (1) stressors intrinsic to the job, (2) role in the organization, (3) career development, (4) workplace relationships, and (5) organizational structure and climate (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). Interviews will be conducted until theoretical saturation is reached, with two further interviews to confirm (McAdams & Gallant, 2022; Morse, 2004).

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