

# The Museum Sacrifice Measure

Elizabeth Merritt, vice president for strategic foresight and founding director,  
Center for the Future of Museums, American Alliance of Museums

*This article is adapted from a series of essays that first appeared on the Center  
for the Future of Museums Blog ([futureofmuseums.blogspot.com](http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.com)).*





**H**ow much are you willing to give up to work in a museum? How much did you give up to work in a museum?

I'm not talking about quality-of-life issues, such as relocating to a new city, having to explain over and over again at parties what a "registrar" is or spending the day in a windowless cubicle tucked in next to collections storage.

I'm talking about cold hard cash.

This question is prompted by an article I read in the *New York Times* about the motivations that lead well-educated young people to flock to Portland, Oregon, despite the dearth of jobs there. Evidently, many people are willing to sacrifice income for "vibe." They choose to live on a barista's wages, rather than finding a higher-paying job that actually uses their degree, in order to enjoy "a politically open culture that supports gay rights and the legalization of marijuana—in addition to the right of way for unicyclists or the ability to marry in a 24/7 doughnut shop."

What caught my eye was an attempt to quantify this seemingly irrational decision-making. The article noted that David Albouy, a University of Illinois economics professor, "has created a metric, the sacrifice measure, which essentially charts how poor a person is willing to be in order to live in a particular city."

I think we need to work out a similar metric quantifying how poor people are willing to be in order to work in a museum.

A lot of highly educated, seriously smart people work in museums. Among respondents to the 2014 National Museum Salary Survey, 90 percent had earned at least a bachelor's degree (compared to 30.4 percent of the general population). Of the museum staff who hold certain positions, such as that of director, curator or educator, well over half have a graduate degree, compared to 10.9 percent of the general populace. I suspect that lurking in the back of the psyche of many museum folk is the belief that, given our smarts and the time and money we put into higher education, we could have chosen a more lucrative profession. (I know my dad

not-so-secretly hoped I would become a doctor. When I took my first museum job, which paid \$12,500 per year, he was, shall we say, less than thrilled.)

This sacrifice measure is important because it has a pernicious influence on many aspects of our field. It depresses wages, since we have, in effect, an oversupply of highly qualified people willing to underbid each other to secure the non-financial benefits of museum work. In turn, low wages may contribute to a lack of diversity in the field. Fierce competition for desirable positions favors those who are willing and able to beef up their resumes with unpaid or underpaid internships, and that definitely disadvantages young people who are not economically privileged.

And I fear that the psychology of sacrifice helps create a culture of entitlement and resistance to change. Some people seem to feel that the money they left on the table to work in our field—the wages they could have earned as doctors or lawyers or business consultants—has bought them autonomy. Not everybody shares this attitude, of course, but I encounter it, voiced or implied, at every conference I attend and at many of the museums I work with.

Some are people who have spent years (or decades) becoming experts in their scholarly fields. They've put in their time, paid their dues and matured into positions where they can do work they know to be excellent. So, they may listen to colleagues enthusing about the need for

participatory engagement, crowdsourced input and curators to act as facilitators and feel, quite reasonably, that somebody “moved their cheese” (a phrase writer Spencer Johnson uses to describe the indignation caused by disruption to a comfortable routine). Some went into the field to help create the kind of museum experience they fell in love with—a traditional one of scholarship and quiet contemplation—and are frustrated to find that not everyone loves (or is willing to support) that tradition.

In the United States, where museums generally do not receive a majority of their budget from the government, we are subject to the same market forces as any other business. Even within the constraints of our missions, we have to provide an experience people are willing to pay for—if not because they actually enjoy it, at least because they are willing to support it as an abstract “good.” And yet, I have had multiple conversations with museum professionals who expressed resentment that no one is willing to pay them for what *they* want to produce and that their wages don't reflect their real value to society.

Now I wonder if I've misunderstood these conversations, to some degree. I wonder whether it isn't so much that the aggrieved party feels people ought to support museums regardless of whether they actually enjoy going to them. Instead, I wonder if the complainants feel, to some extent, that they *themselves* have paid the

I suspect that lurking in the back of the psyche of many museum folk is the belief that, given our smarts and the time and money we put into higher education, we could have chosen a more lucrative profession.

cost of supporting their museum with the sacrifice of wages they might have earned had they chosen another path. If I chose to work as a curator for \$40,000 a year, rather than earning \$140,000 as a doctor, I might feel what I “bought” with that \$100,000 difference is creative and intellectual freedom. After all (I might think, in moments of frustration), I am, in effect, *giving* this \$100,000 to the museum, in the form of my undervalued work. In return, I might reason, the museum owes me the kind of workplace I was willing to sacrifice for.

When I first published these thoughts on the CFM Blog, a number of commenters pointed out that various categories of people, in museums and other sectors, have sacrificed income for their chosen careers, but they are quite pleased with the trade and remain open to new ideas. For example, when Nina Simon (@NinaKSimon, director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History) summarized my original post on Twitter (“Thought bomb from @futureofmuseums: does making salary sacrifices make museum staff more resistant to change?”), Mia Ridge (@Mia\_out, digital curator at the British Library) observed that, by that logic, technologists should be the most resistant of all—yet they’re the ones “pushing for org change.” (Her reasoning was based on the fact that technologists have greater earning power in the non-museum marketplace than do curators and registrars. Depressing, but true.) Ridge’s comment prompted me to refine my thesis, untangling why some people are happy taking lower pay to work in a museum while others aren’t and, in a bigger sense, what constitutes a fair wage for museum work.

Since we are exploring the value of labor, let’s adapt an economic concept to define the fair market value for a job. Following the formula



for a standard fair market value, we can equate a job’s worth with the compensation (cash + intangibles) that an employer and a job applicant agree on when both parties are knowledgeable, willing and unpressured. If this is so, what leads some employees to feel that their compensation is, indeed, fair and others to feel they are being exploited and undercompensated? Why might a person who forwent a hefty salary to work in a museum be happy to deal with the rapid changes taking place in our field, while someone who sacrificed less might be both unhappy and resistant to change?

I suspect that our valuable, marketable technology types are open to change because they *want* to move museums in the direction market forces are driving the field: away from authority and control and toward openness and collaboration. I leave it to technologists such as Ridge and her peers to comment on how much pay they think they gave up to work in museums and what they have gotten in return for that sacrifice. I’m guessing the payoff has something to do with the joy of inventing a role that did not exist before and of messing about with really cool content. Because their expectations of how technology can transform museums are in line with those of their employers, technologists have



an accurate understanding of the job when they accept an offer. They know what they're getting in return for passing up higher pay in the private sector.

When I encounter the “who moved my cheese” reaction, it tends to be from museum staff who occupy more traditional roles. I suspect many of these people went into museum work with a vision of the job based on the norms of decades ago. Or, they believed in a romantic version of museum work that was compelling and attractive but never entirely accurate. In either case, they *thought* they knew what they were getting into...but they were wrong. Either it wasn't that way when they arrived, or it was true when they started in the field decades ago, but the world has changed. They may feel they traded salary for non-financial benefits, such as authority or the freedom to pursue their own interests, but the reality of the situation is something very different.

What about the other two factors that go into calculating fair market value—being “willing and unpressured”? In a post on the blog *Static Made*, Jeffrey Inscho lamented the high rate of churn among museum technology staff. He wrote, “It's no secret the cultural sector can't compete with the private sector in terms of salaries and benefits. Many people make their lifeswork with technology not because they're passionate about

hardware and code, but because it can be a lucrative profession.”

Once museum technologists have gotten “a few years of success under their belt,” he went on, “they jump ship for more sustainable financial waters. Who can blame them? I must admit I don't think technologists are isolated here, as I'm hard-pressed to name another museum role (other than curator and maybe conservator?) that couldn't earn more outside the sector.”

I think Inscho hit the psychological nail on the head. People who feel they have a lot of options may stay in a given job because they are “willing and unpressured.” Each time museum technologists pass up applying for higher-paying jobs outside the sector or turn down actual offers, they reaffirm to themselves that the choice they have made to stay in museums is fair—that it fits their needs and values.

By contrast, when I was a registrar-cum-collections manager, at conferences I'd get together with fellow collections types over beer and we'd air our anxieties over what other kind of work we *could* get if we decided to leave. What the heck would prospective employers make of “I was a collections manager for 10 years” (even *after* you explain that it doesn't have anything to do with repossessing cars)?

When I worked in museums, more than once I had to manage the expectations of curators

who felt certain that, if they were working in a university, they would have more respect, more autonomy and better pay—plus tenure. Now, I listen to friends with university appointments lament how they are treated as second-class citizens until they *get* tenure (if they ever do), moan about their teaching load and stress about the grants and overhead they are expected to bring in. Quality-of-life issues aside, there is a huge oversupply of qualified applicants for full-time research positions in colleges and universities. A curator may calculate that the chance of getting the non-museum job that most closely aligns to his or her training is roughly on par with winning the lottery.

So, changing expectations + lack of other options = unhappy and resistant to change. Put like that, it seems dead obvious—and it suggests the most crucial steps museum managers can take to forestall resentment and resistance. When guiding staff through times of major change, it may be both compassionate and effective to provide access to high-quality, thoughtful career counseling and life coaching. This may help an unhappy employee think through his or her options and choose to either recommit to the museum or to leave, but feel good about the outcome. When filling positions, museums can create processes that ensure applicants understand the institution's culture and that interviewers understand each applicant's vision for working in a museum. No organization should take institutional culture for granted—it should be as thoughtfully cultivated as any other strategic goal. Many elements contribute to the “vibe” that makes Portland (or a museum) a desirable place to work.

Finally, museums need to bootstrap their bureaucracies into the 21st century. Many of the frustrations I hear museum workers voice are about practices that are quickly becoming anachronisms. In this rapidly changing era, both

startups and large, established companies are pioneering new management tactics. Flex time and telecommuting are on the rise. Consensus is building that the dreaded annual performance review is both ineffective and a poor use of time. New organizational structures—whether flat, team-based or holacratic—offer increased authority and autonomy to all staff. Since museums can't compete with the private sector on wages, it is even more important that we become early adopters of such practices that create attractive (and high-performing) workplaces.

We all know there are economic inequities that need to be addressed in our sector: the pay ratio between directors and frontline staff, the need to pay a living wage, the debt young people take on in order to enter the profession. We can and should redress those issues—but even then, our field is probably going to pay less than the private sector. Creating a supportive environment, building a shared understanding of the work and helping staff plan their careers may ensure that talented, dedicated people remain willing to sacrifice salaries to work in a museum.

## The National Comparative Salary Survey

All six regional associations—AMM, MAAM, MPMA, NEMA, SEMC and WMA—partnered with AAM

to produce the first field-wide salary survey. View data on 51 positions sorted by museum type, budget size, region, governance, gender and education level.

AAM Members save 40%.

Order yours today!

[aam-us.org/resources/bookstore](http://aam-us.org/resources/bookstore)

