

Rethinking How We Build Communities: The Future of Flexible Work

Amy L. Allen and Lori Birrell

As most academic libraries closed in March 2020 to help slow the spread of COVID-19, practitioners started working from home for the first time. After observing impacts on their own work, the authors sought to study the broader effects of remote work on practitioners' professional and personal life by conducting a longitudinal study between July 2020 and June 2021. The authors identified successful and unsuccessful practices and, based on this data, developed recommendations for how employers can support their employees as whole persons to ensure more productive professional performance and healthier personal lives.

Introduction

When picturing the future of academic library work, for many the picture looks blurrier than ever. The period during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when most employees in academic libraries were working remotely highlighted considerable inequities across the profession, amplified the positive and negative impact of particular organizational cultures, and provided a kind of flexibility and empowerment that many practitioners had never before experienced.

After examining how remote work was affecting their personal work and department, the authors wanted to examine how remote work was affecting the profession more broadly. They identified potential outcomes related to both work culture and life outside of work that might be affected by working remotely and what conditions were best suited for remote work. Through a longitudinal study the authors strove to understand the complexities and opportunities brought about from being forced to work remotely beginning in spring 2020. Survey questions included quantities of hours worked, communication, work/life balance, supervisor support, ability to concentrate, and desire to continue working remotely. This data can help inform supervisors going forward when making decisions about remote work and flexible work options while trying to navigate the changing landscape of work culture.¹

Literature Review

The unprecedented context of a global pandemic sets this study apart from previous research in the remote work literature. According to Felstead and Henseke,² previous studies have almost exclusively focused on single companies or sectors of specific fields and their approach and decision to offer or ask for remote work opportunities. By contrast, the research presented

* Amy L. Allen is University Archivist at University of Arkansas, email: ala005@uark.edu; Lori Birrell is Director of Special Collections and Museums at University of Delaware, email: lori@birrell.us. ©2024 Amy Allen and Lori Birrell, Attribution-NonCommercial (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) CC BY-NC.

here provides insight into the benefits and consequences of remote work in the library science profession when previously there were few, if any, alternative work arrangements. The authors limited the sources in this literature review to those written pre-pandemic to align with the data collection for this research project and expectations around remote work leading up to the pandemic. The literature review is divided into three parts: first, the personal and societal benefits and drawbacks of remote work; second, the impact of remote work on team and organizational dynamics; and third, the types of work assignments and work environments that best lend themselves to remote work opportunities.

In Kwon and Jeon's article "Why Permit Telework? Exploring the Determinants of California City Governments' Decisions to Permit Telework," the authors argue in favor of the climate benefits associated with reducing the number of commuting employees in California.³ Lowering emissions served as the primary driver of Kwon and Jeon's analysis. They recommend offering or mandating remote work based on city-specific contextual factors. This framing could be applied to the context of libraries as well. Post-pandemic, library administrators should conduct needs assessments of their user populations and employees to better understand their expectations. Climate change could be one factor that resonates with users and employees alike and should be considered alongside other indicators such as financial constraints due to fluctuating gas prices, ease of access to and within the physical library space, and evolving service models.

Analyzing the effects of working from home on employees in Australia, Dockery and Bawa argue "working from home through formal agreement was found to be positive and significant... Voluntariness mediates impact upon family functioning as assessed by employees' partners."⁴ The authors found no significant negative effect from non-voluntary work from home assignments. The research presented here offers a contribution to the literature that analyzes the impact of a global pandemic as a non-voluntary driver. The unique nature of working from home during the pandemic suggests the need for a broader analysis of the effects of remote work. Drilling down to look at other more specific effects, Dockery and Bawa examine the impact of work from home on division of household tasks. They found women experience satisfaction "with division of household tasks when male employee works substantial number of hours from home."⁵ Given the female dominated nature of librarianship, the authors' discussion of satisfaction in the home with male/female partners is particularly relevant to this study. The heteronormative focus of Dockery and Bawa's work does limit its broader generalizability.

In Nakrosienė, Buciuonienė, and Gostautaitė's 2017 analysis of the remote work literature, they codify 10 positive factors of such arrangements, including: time skills, possibility to work during an individual's most productive time, possibility to access work documents, reduced time for communication with co-workers, suitability of working at home, possibility to work from home due to illness, possibility to care for family, supervisor's trust, supervisor's support, and possibility to save on travel expenses.⁶ Similarly, in the weeks after the pandemic spread to the United States, *The New York Times* published an article outlining the benefits of working remotely, which included less time spent commuting, greater productivity, cleaner global environment, companies saving money on daily work-related expenses, increased job satisfaction, less illness, and more time spent on fitness.⁷ The author of that article did not analyze the many factors that might have a negative impact on working remotely, namely maintaining childcare and family responsibilities while meeting job demands. The library science profession is widely understood to be a female-dominated field in all areas, with

the exception of administration. The productivity and time spent on fitness or other hobbies identified in the article as benefits of remote work may not ring as true for women, who bear the brunt of family and household responsibilities, pandemic or not.

Narrowing to the library science literature, Wendy Kasper's spring 2020 editorial in *College & Research Libraries*, predicts the benefits library users may experience as a result of the pandemic. She states: "This pandemic has impacted institutions similarly by forcing an identification of what is essential to the operations of the university and priorities with everyone hopefully moving in the same direction reorienting [to them]."⁸ The concept of what is essential should compel library leaders to consider what tasks and services make their organizations valuable in their communities. As Kasper argues "When you strip all the extraneous busywork away to focus on what MUST happen, the core is exposed."⁹ The idea of exposing the core necessitates saying no to certain opportunities and expectations, and embracing the specific impact each library can make.

In their 2015 book chapter, "Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Remote Work for Academic Reference and Instruction Librarians," authors Hickey and Tang present a one-person case study and SWOT analysis of remote work. The authors identify the strengths of the SWOT as talent retention, work/life balance, and cost savings. The primary threat they identified was social isolation. In the weakness category the authors note:

Remote work is not for everyone. Successfully working from an off-site location requires a self-starter and manager, as well as strong communication skills for both the employee and the supervisor. If someone thrives on in-person office interactions, remote work may feel isolating. Burnout can also become an issue if the employee has trouble leaving work behind or the supervisor encourages being 'on' 24/7.¹⁰

The chapter ends with a helpful list of questions for employees and supervisors to ask when attempting to determine whether or not remote work is the right option.

Van Dyke, an Interlibrary Loan Librarian, notes pros and cons based on personal experience in a coauthored 2008 article with Smith.¹¹ Pros include the ability to retain skilled employees, saving time commuting, and saving money on gasoline and professional attire. The downsides listed include the inability to get away from work, family interruptions, and frustration with internet connections not working and internet service providers.

The second relevant body of literature includes studies of the impacts of remote work on work teams and organizations. When examining communication of distributed workers within the occupational health care field, Niyani, et al. identify a "Lack of physical proximity... which restricts the opportunity for face-to-face interaction that would otherwise facilitate leadership modelling"¹² as a main driver of how work culture develops. In addition, among those in the field, the authors found "Less frequent opportunity for informal... information exchange... [and] may be unable to communicate directly or seek advice."¹³ As a result of these two drivers in particular, the authors conclude that, "lack of goal clarity, role clarity and unrealistic management expectations were all sources of stress for distributed workers."¹⁴ Though outside the scope for their study, certainly workers can experience the same or similar lack of clarity when working onsite. Exploring the information sharing needs and communication styles of librarians will be important factors when determining the future of remote work in libraries. As the title of Niyani et al's article "Out of Sight and Out of Mind?"

suggests, librarians may feel disconnected from their colleagues and patrons when working some portion of their week offsite.

Pre-pandemic, Windeler, Chudoba, and Sundrup reported on two related studies they conducted. The first study included 51 IT workers and a subsequent study of 258 workers from various fields. The authors explored interpersonal interactions, interdependency on others to do work, and a comparison of external interactions with stakeholders between onsite employees as compared with those working remotely for all or part of their work week. Drawing on similar, previous studies, they found for an onsite worker that “Social interaction has a cost... collaboration overload... efficiency losses associated with open office layouts... reduced autonomy... accounts for nearly 60% of interruptions.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the authors found that providing the “opportunity to do work remotely served as a ‘timeout’ or mini-break from interpersonal interactions with colleagues.”¹⁶ Similarly, Müller and Niessen’s self-leadership study of 700 part-time remote workers found that employees may save personal energy because they avoid more interpersonal conflicts and are “less confronted with hindering bureaucratic obstacles or onerous and distracting rumors.”¹⁷ The authors found the employees in their study experienced “Higher self-goal setting, self-rewards, and vision of high performance on home days than on office days.”¹⁸ Implementing a flexible work schedule for library practitioners may offer them similar benefits, resulting in productivity gains—provided schools and care facilities are open—as they work in an environment with fewer interruptions and can better accomplish tasks that require deep concentration or are high, personal priorities.

Library practitioners have begun to reflect on their experiences leading remote teams during the pandemic. Michalak and Rysvay discuss how the library team and the office of institutional research and training at Goldey-Beacom College used technology to stay connected during the early months of forced remote work in 2020.¹⁹ The authors worked in an environment where nearly all services and collections were already virtual and dispersed schedules necessitated virtual communication before 2020. Once the pandemic began, they drastically increased their virtual communication with multiple tools, including using Slack all day, creating FlipGrid videos twice a day, and meeting on Zoom three times a week. In addition, the team used SharePoint to share files and the Notion app for project planning. As the study presented here argues, identifying and implementing specific communication tools enables remote or hybrid teams to remain connected to one another and to the workings of their organizations.

Types of work assignments and work environments that best lend themselves to remote work opportunities comprise a third facet of the literature. Kaplan, et al. explore the issue of managerial trust and found “managers who do not trust (particular employees) will tend not to allow telework, even when a) the task is seemingly suitable... (b) supportive technologies are in place, (c) there is a norm for allowing telework, (d) the employee has a more demanding commute.”²⁰ Similarly, Thulin, Vilhelmson, and Johansson found in their study about time pressure that “qualified workers” or those who have autonomous and analytical jobs, do not experience the same increase in demands as “routine workers” or those who are not knowledge workers. It is this later group that experiences pressure to “meet deadlines and prepare for future work and meetings.”²¹ These demands appear to come from management as a way of structuring accountability into remote work assignments, perhaps as Kaplan, et al. found, at the expense of mutual trust. The global pandemic forced organizations, including libraries, to place trust in their employees as the health crisis prevented all but essential employees from working onsite. The authors state: “even those practices that organizations

implement to enhance teleworking frequency and productivity, such as having management and employees set daily performance goals, do not appear to offset concerns about conscientiousness and a lack of trust.”²² The practices Kaplan, et al. highlight to mitigate mistrust should be considered as employees seek positions and work arrangements that keep them engaged and motivated post-pandemic.

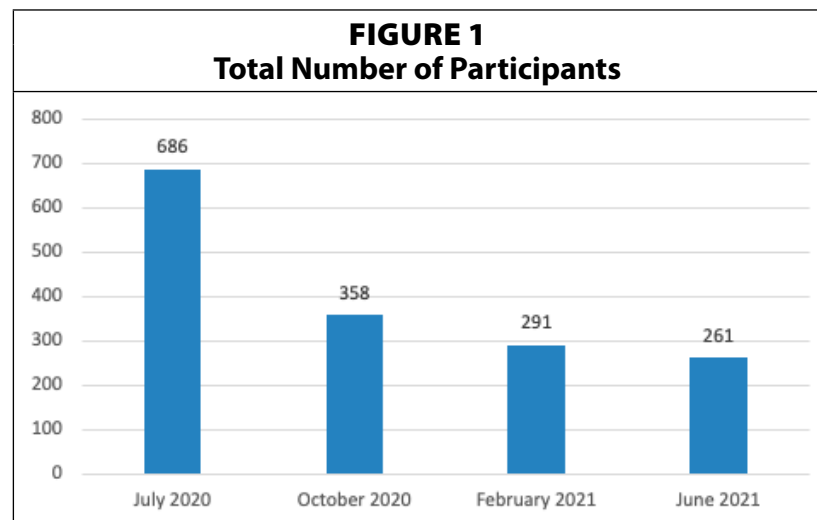
Job satisfaction drives many flexible work requests, as Neriotti, Raguseo, and Gastaldi examine in their study of blue and white-collar workers. The authors conclude that “superior job satisfaction occurs for employees that spend... [an] extent of time away from their office when their job is designed accordingly, and not because of the level of their skills or of their job position.”²³ In the library literature, Hickey and Tang and Van Dyke all describe cases of employees transitioning to full time remote work in order to retain employees needing to move physical locations. During the height of the pandemic, it may not have been feasible to redesign or make substantive changes to library practitioners’ job duties. However, to foster a professional culture that provides such flexibility going forward, when possible, managers should work with Human Resources and employees to fashion job duties and expectations—for those at various skill levels and positions within the organizational hierarchy—to meet the evolving expectations of employees, which may include time working offsite.

Pre-pandemic, the literature writ large reflected the choices individuals and companies made to take advantage of remote work or flexible schedules. The study presented here demonstrates the impact the lack of choice had on individuals, leaders, and organizations as all academic libraries closed to in-person work for some period of time. Once reopened, few organizations looked or operated exactly the same as they had previously. The results and analysis below seek to explore such impacts.

Methods

The authors used Qualtrics to create a survey which enabled them to capture participant responses and to conduct an initial analysis after data collection. They piloted the 30-question survey instrument by emailing it to four people who completed the survey and provided feedback. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas, the authors recruited participants by posting the survey to two library listservs and one e-newsletter beginning in June 2020.²⁴ (See Appendix.) The survey remained open for four weeks. The authors sent two follow-up messages to the listservs to encourage participation; 807 practitioners began the survey and 696 completed it for a total completion rate of 85%. The participants had the option of including their email address if they wished to be contacted to participate in three subsequent surveys emailed in October 2020, February 2021, and June 2021.

The surveys asked participants to reflect on their level



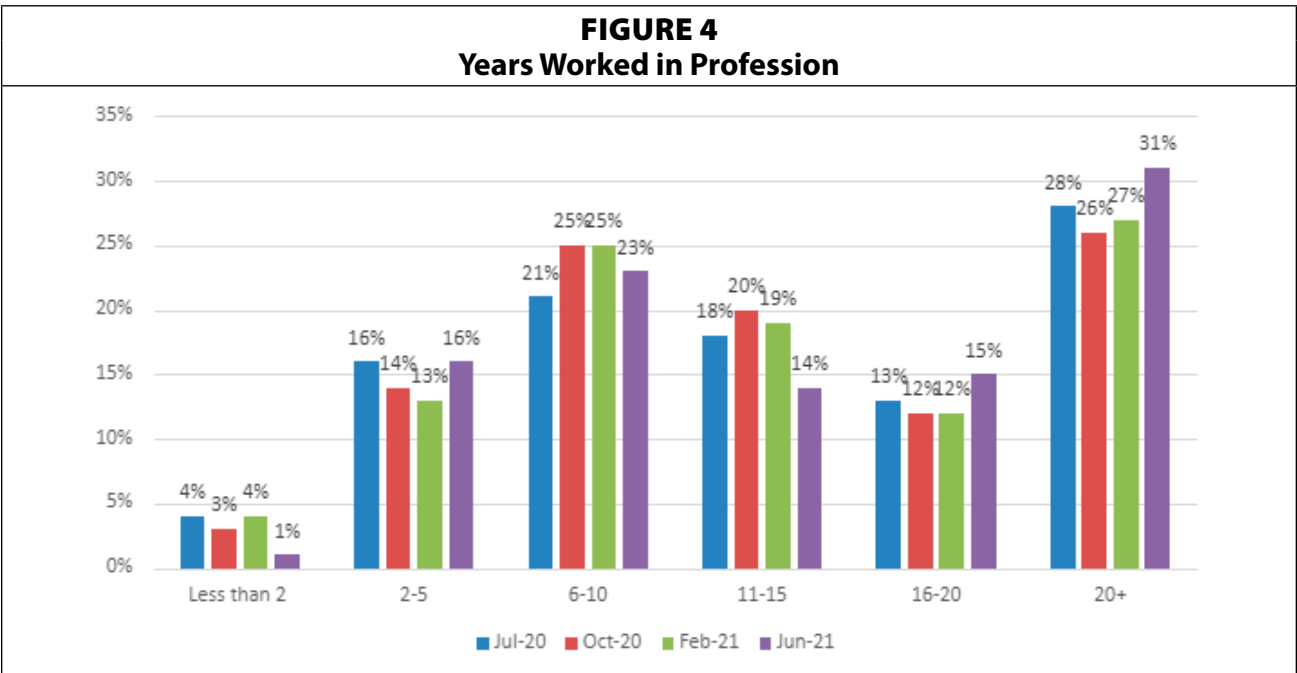
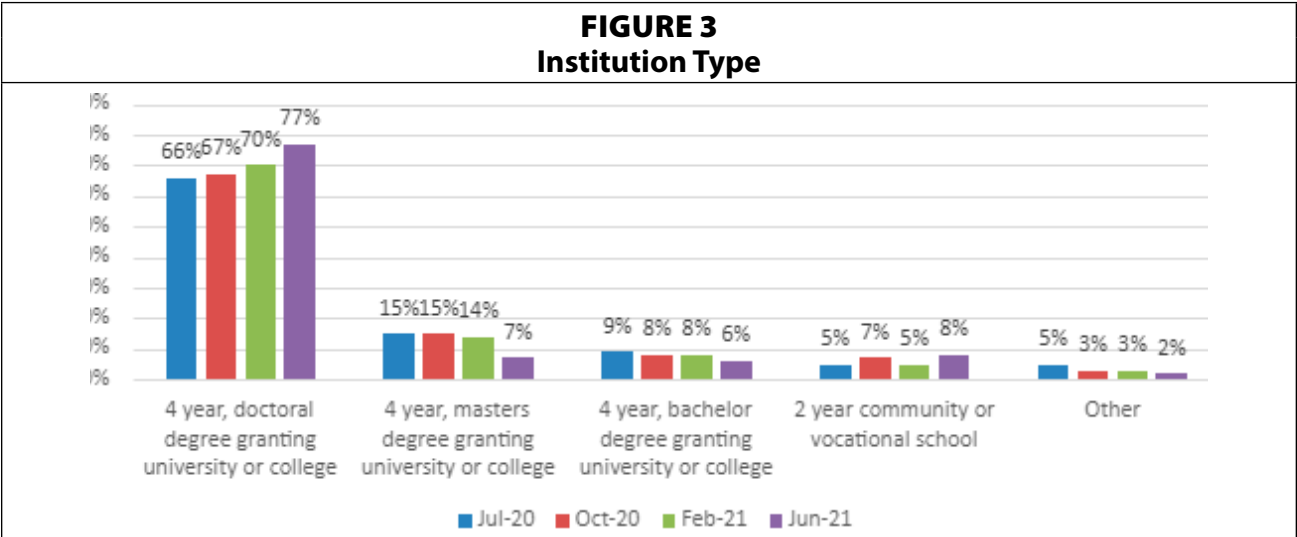
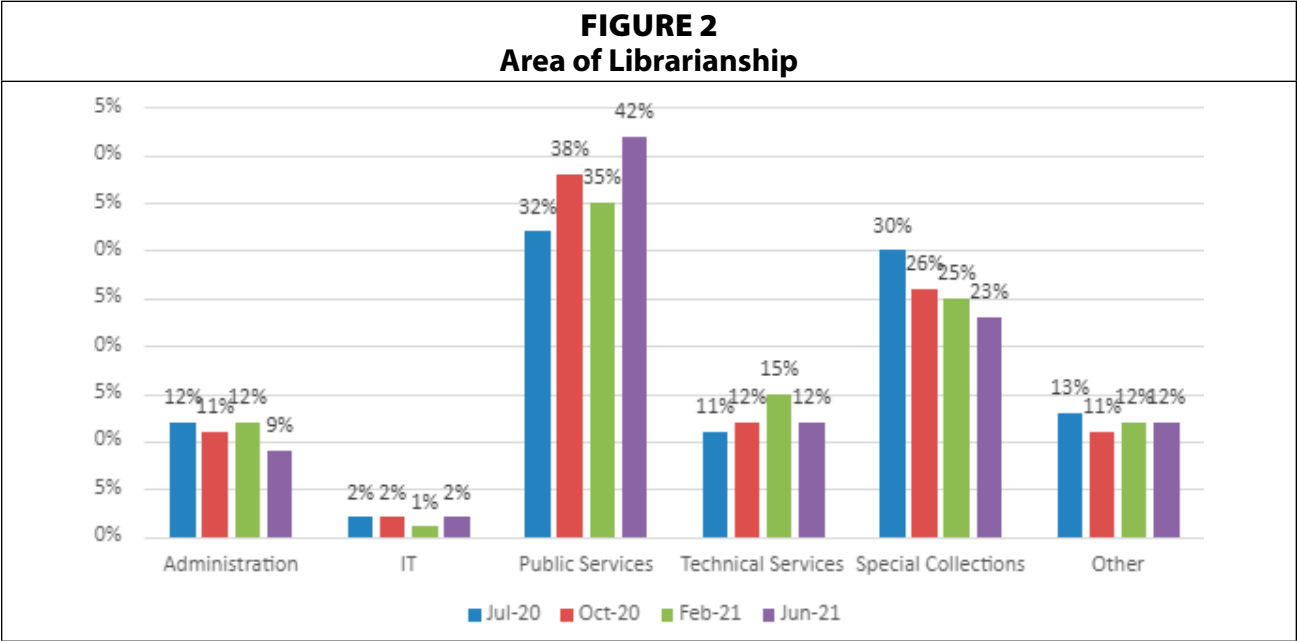


FIGURE 5
Age of Participants²⁵

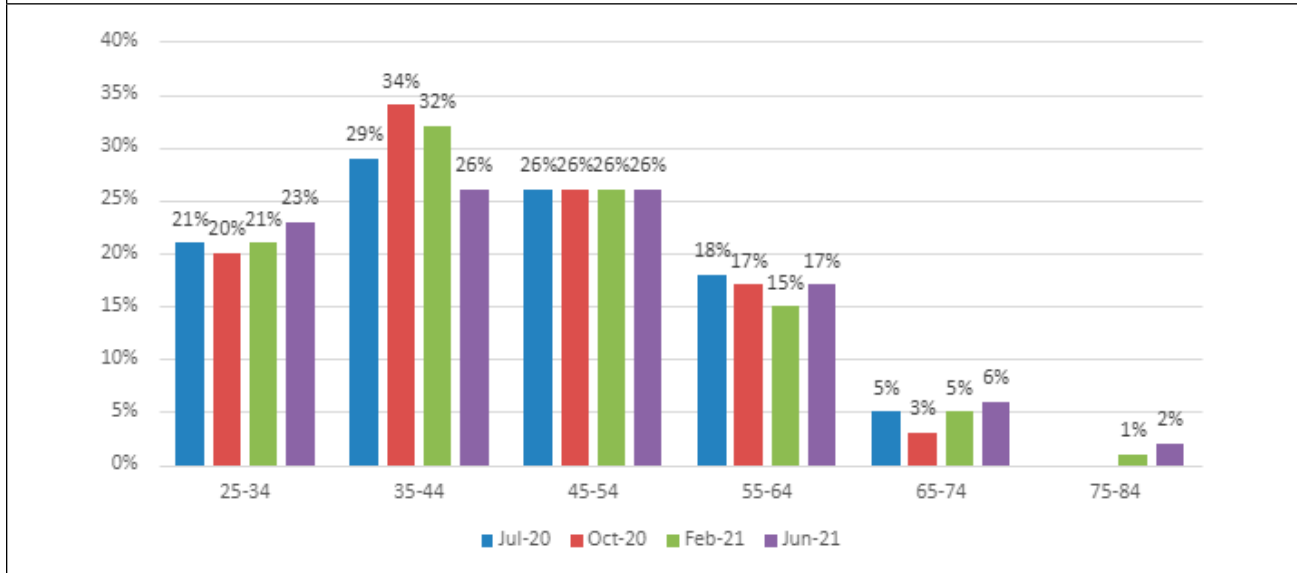
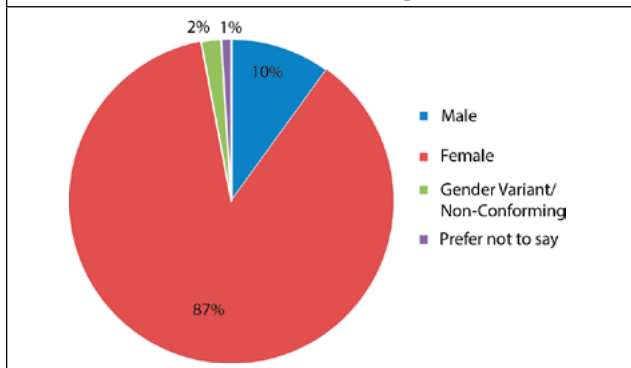


FIGURE 6
Gender of Participants



of concentration at home and in the office, the level of support they felt from their supervisor, their use of sick time, and the benefits and downsides of remote work on work/life balance. After each survey closed, the authors exported initial statistics from Qualtrics. They reviewed the demographic data and charts Qualtrics generated. Most participants worked in an area of public services (32%–42%) or special collections/archives (23%–30%). An average of 70% of all participants were working at a doctoral degree granting institution. The largest cohorts

of respondents had worked in the profession 6–10 years (23.5%) and 20 or more years (28%). The vast majority (87%) of all respondents identified as female.

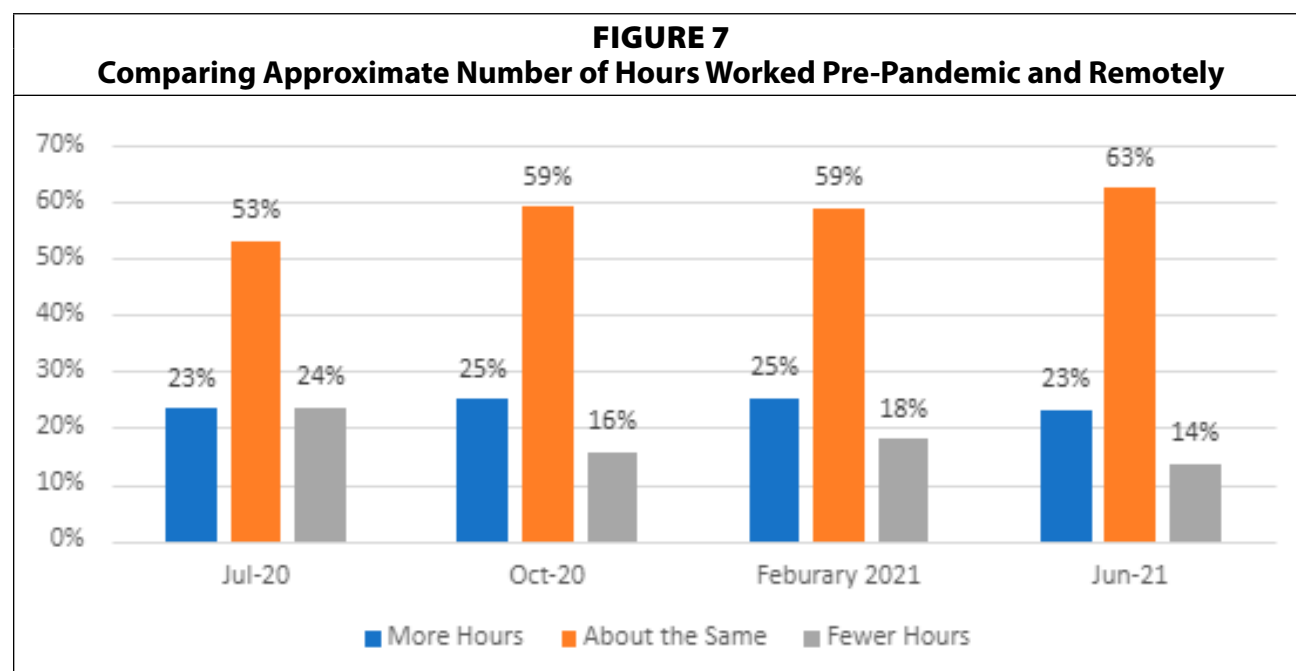
The authors used an open coding method to analyze the qualitative responses to open ended questions included in the survey.²⁶ First, they read through those responses. They identified common words, phrases, and ideas, which became initial codes. Then the authors reviewed the codes and determined themes common in the data. The authors divided up the questions and each analyzed the same questions in each of the four surveys. They discussed the codes and themes they identified through the data analysis phase of the project as a validity check on their work and potential biases. Those themes then informed the discussion and recommendations shared below.

Results

The authors' findings are divided into five sub-sections: a comparison of hours worked before and during the pandemic, participants' ability to concentrate, the benefits and negative impacts of remote work on work/life balance, perceived support from their supervisor, and practitioners' interest in continuing to work remotely beyond June 2021.

Hours Worked

When participants were asked to determine whether they work approximately more, about the same, or fewer hours per week when remote, over 50% of respondents in each survey throughout the year indicated they worked about the same number of hours. An average of 24% of respondents felt they worked more hours and an average of 18% felt they worked fewer hours over the course of the year.



The findings above echo the comments participants wrote in the open response question that followed. From those responses several themes emerged such as establishing flexibility, being able to set boundaries or not when it comes to completing tasks, and determining one's work schedule and being in a state of flow or productivity. A smaller subset of respondents shared experiences related to performative aspects of work that for some diminished or became amplified during the pandemic. Performative work included remaining onsite or—once remote—keeping email or a chat window open to appear available despite having finished one's work for the day.

Ability to Concentrate

In the July 2020 survey, respondents were asked to rank onsite interruptions from a list of eight options. All eight options were chosen as the greatest source of interruption for at least one respondent.²⁷ Meetings was chosen as the most frequent and respondents selected email as the second more frequent disruption. The percentages for respondents choosing each option are listed below.

In free text response, participants were asked to comment on their ability to concentrate on complex tasks. In the first surveys distributed in 2020, many respondents reported a lack of concentration due to worry, anxiety, depression, and fear for safety due to the COVID-19 pandemic and political and social unrest. While these issues still exist for some, these factors were mentioned less in later surveys. For reasons affecting ability to concentrate not specific to the pandemic frequently mentioned in free text responses, see Table 1.

FIGURE 8
Number One Ranked Disruptions Onsite

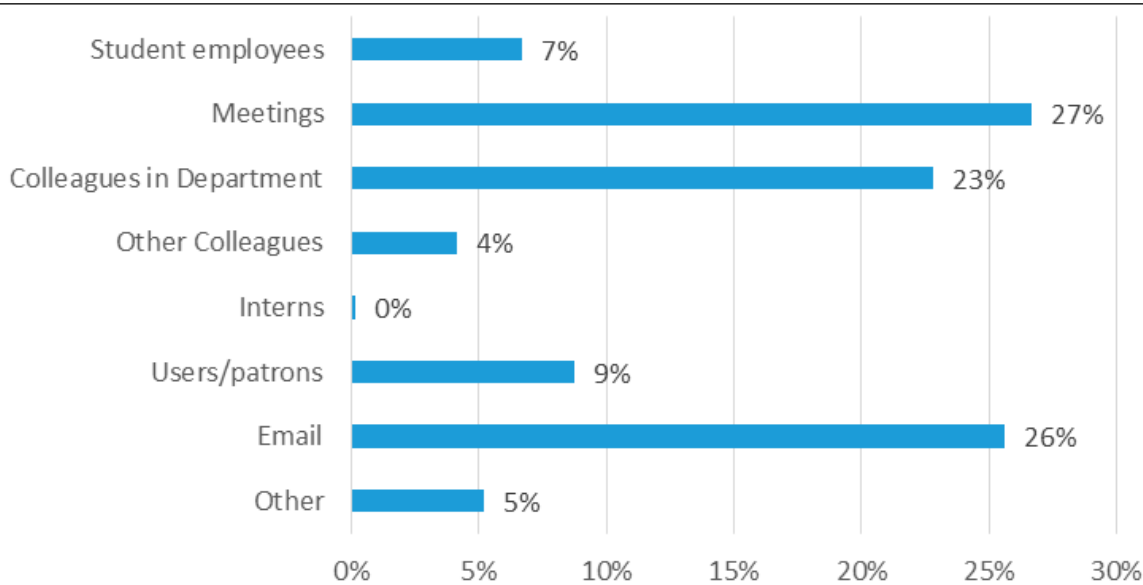


TABLE 1
Factors Affecting Concentration While Working on Campus and Working Remotely

On campus	Remote work
Meetings	Meetings
Co-workers	Insufficient resources
Student employees	Insufficient technology
Shifts on public service desks	Childcare needs
Noise (especially for those without offices)	Elder care needs
	Spouses
	Pets
	Noise

As the year went on, respondents were able to improve remote spaces and to mitigate a number, but certainly not all, of the interruptions that negatively impacted their ability to concentrate while working remotely. One person shared: “After almost a year of working from home, I’ve gotten better workspaces and workflows in place that allow me to concentrate. Consistent childcare is a large part of that, and hopefully our daycare will remain safely open through the next several months.” Whether a person was able to concentrate better onsite or remotely was highly dependent on individual circumstances and the expectations of their employer. For either place, finding space and time free of interruptions was key. Onsite, an office with a door and without interruptions from colleagues and patrons was important when doing concentrated work. Remotely, a separate, comfortable space free of family distractions was key for concentrated work.

Effects on Work Experience and Work/Life Balance: Benefits

Respondents were asked to consider the effects of remote work on their work/life balance and overall work experience. Key phrases from the open coded responses, included: time

management, ability to focus, ability to spend more time with family or pursuing hobbies, attend to self-care needs, and lack of commute. Many reported that the “life” part of work/life balance was easier to manage. They missed less work for issues such as doctor appointments and home repairs. As one respondent commented: “Working from home, I can work on my health, family, and wellness needs way better and still be productive, work all my hours (and more), and get my work done.” Others were more easily able to incorporate tasks into their day, including household chores, errands, meal prep, or taking children to school. As one person said: “I am able to handle issues like appointments without taking leave. I am also able to work during the hours that I focus best and take breaks when I need to.” Overall, respondents stated that they had fewer absences from work and greater productivity while working.

The most frequently mentioned benefit of improved work/life balance was the ability to spend more time with family. One practitioner shared: “I’m able to do more at home with my family because I am not commuting and because I am available for spur of the moment needs.”

Effects on Work Experience and Work/Life Balance: Downsides

For others working from home had specific negative impacts on themselves and their work/life balance. Several noted that working remotely during the pandemic introduced significant challenges not necessarily reflective of working remotely. Key phrases from the open coded responses included communication, collaboration, and work relationships, lack of work/life boundaries and the negative impact of care responsibilities, and physical health and well-being. One respondent who had worked part of their pre-pandemic schedule remotely reported: “Before I was alone, able to work without having to attend meetings, or hear others working. Now I am expected to be in meetings, sometimes most of the day, and I share my ‘workspace’ with family members who are also working from home.”

In the free text responses, several practitioners reported a general decline in mental health and some reported specific conditions worsening, such as increased bouts of depression due to either increased isolation or lack of structure. In the first two surveys, a number of respondents reported feelings of pandemic anxiety. Zoom fatigue was common and in some cases carried over into participants’ personal lives during lockdown periods when all social interaction had to take place online. As one person shared: “Living alone... most communication is texting or emailing with the occasional phone call. Sometimes I don’t call friends and family or skip a leisure zoom meeting because I am worn from being online all day for work... so I want a break from engaging with others.”

A frequently reported issue was the impact of daycare and school closures that resulted in parents juggling childcare and/or home schooling and work at the same time. As one caretaker commented: “I’m constantly interrupted and torn between childcare and work (doing poorly at each and feeling bad about it).”

Support from Supervisor

The majority of the responses indicated that supervisors who were supportive while onsite continued to be supportive when they began working remotely, while supervisors that were not supportive onsite continued to be unsupportive working remotely. One respondent shared: “I am constantly micromanaged whether working in-person or remotely and have never at any point in my job felt like this person values me on a professional or personal level.”

Respondents listed the following behaviors and traits of unsupportive supervisors:

Micromanaging	Poor communication	Appears uninterested
Unavailable	Doesn't provide or advocate for resources	Not empathetic

Others experienced very supportive supervisors, such as this respondent who said: “My supervisor is the most supportive supervisor I have ever had. The location that I work doesn’t change her character.” Behaviors and traits listed for supportive supervisors were:

Regularly communicates	Provides equipment and resources	Listens to employees
Makes employees feel valued	Shows interest without micromanaging	Empathetic

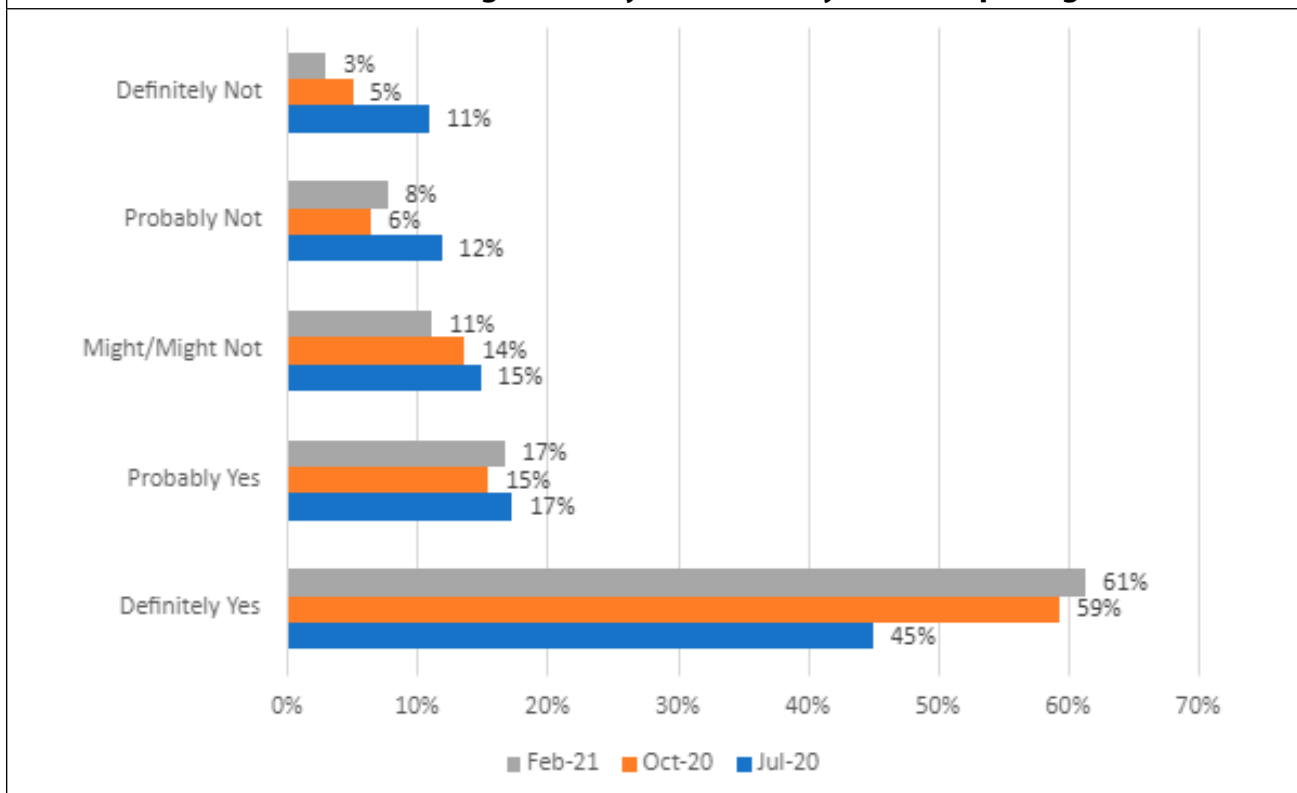
While support (or lack of support) remained consistent for many respondents, there were some that reported communication problems grew worse while working remotely. One respondent reported: “...because I was working on familiar tasks on-site, I needed less support. Off-site, I just didn’t receive the feedback I wanted. I’ve often felt as though my submitted work was going into a black hole.”

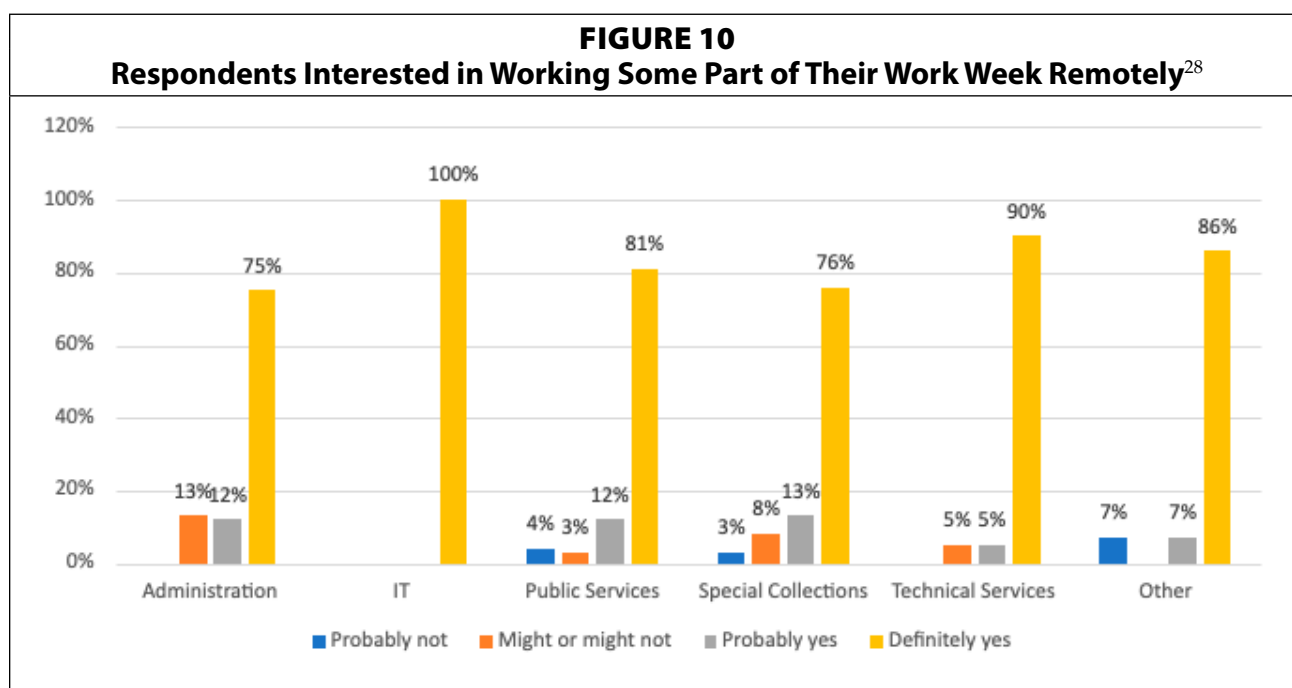
Interest in Continued Remote Work

Throughout the year, respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest in continuing to work remotely on a permanent basis after their libraries had reopened (see figure 9). Those responding “Definitely Interested” rose from 45% in July 2020 to 61% six months later. Similarly, those who responded “Definitely Not” decreased from 11% to 3%.

Recognizing that by July 2021 the majority of academic libraries had resumed many of their in-person services and work schedules, respondents were asked on the final survey distributed in July 2021, to indicate whether they would be interested in working some part

FIGURE 9
Interest in Working Remotely: Permanently After Reopening





of their work week remotely. Across all areas of librarianship, 81% of respondents selected “Definitely Yes” with fewer than 10% responding negatively (see figure 10 for a breakdown of responses by area of the profession).

Discussion

Looking ahead to what the future of work in academic libraries may look like, library leaders must consider how the expectations and needs of their employees have changed as a result of their remote work experience. Above all, participants articulated the need for a high degree of flexibility when determining their schedules. Whether an individual is more productive onsite or working remotely is highly individualized depending on job duties, personal preferences, and their onsite and remote environments. As such, managers should work with their employees to develop strategies that meet those individual needs, while ensuring that core tasks get done. Finally, library leaders must consider how frequency and types of communication and opportunities for collaboration (whether in-person or virtual) signal characteristics of organizational culture that contribute to employees’ sense of well-being and belonging.

Desire for Flexibility

Those respondents who reported considerable improvements to their experiences while working from home had an increased degree of control over how they managed their time and greater flexibility when determining their schedules. Flexibility included where, how, and when tasks got accomplished and allowed practitioners to follow their bodies’ natural habits for sleep and the ability to work during times of the day best for their body and mind, which had a positive effect on overall health. As one respondent shared: “I am able to work how and when I am most effective without the stifling confines of traditional work environments.” Such experiences speak to how aspects of flexibility fed a practitioner’s ability to focus and be productive. For example, one participant commented: “Working remotely has therefore allowed me to divide my activities based on the environment in which they can

best be accomplished, and I find I am better able to prioritize what can be worked on each day.” Flexible work schedules and arrangements may not be possible for all positions in academic libraries. Some tasks that will not adapt readily to remote work include working with physical materials, staffing public service desks, teaching in-person classes, and supervising employees who want more in-person support, especially new or less experienced employees. Managers should have candid conversations with their employees as part of the hiring and onboarding process so such opportunities become clear and are transparently communicated.

Reducing or eliminating one’s commute to campus was a critical aspect of desired flexibility. One respondent reported: “The main benefit is that I saved money on gas and didn’t use up free time with the commute.” At the time of writing this article, gas prices across the country had risen significantly and heavily impacted the finances of those driving to work. In addition to the financial impact, participants sought to begin and end their day according to their own needs. As one person reflected: “My morning[s] are more relaxed and I’m arriving to my at-home desk more relaxed and ready. Versus sitting down at work a tad frantic after a morning. It sets a better tone for the day.” Offering flexible schedules and remote work options, particularly for those in high population density areas would provide an employee benefit that could attract a broader candidate pool and aid in an organization’s retention efforts.

Individualized Strategies for Work

As managers discuss desired aspects of flexibility with their employees, they should also be listening to their employees to best understand their needs and the conditions in which they can do their best work. Some practitioners strongly preferred a nearly 100% onsite work schedule, like this participant who explained: “I am able to close my office door, silence my phone, and ignore my email for periods of time.” Some needed a physical separation between work and home as this respondent stated: “Home is my refuge and place of rest and relaxation. I don’t like mixing the two at all.” Others are more easily able to concentrate at home and reported: “I feel like I am able to focus more on the task at hand because I don’t have as many ‘fires’ to put out that come up on daily basis at the library.” There can be no single strategy to support employees. Rather, managers must invest the time needed to get to know their employees and to support them as they explore options.

Managers and employees must also acknowledge that some office environments are not conducive to all types of work tasks that practitioners may be charged with. Many participants thrived when working remotely due to a newfound ability to accomplish deep work assignments that required significant concentration and blocks of uninterrupted time. When reflecting on their ability to focus, one practitioner shared: “I love that if I’m working on something very taxing, I simply close my email & Teams so no one can interrupt me. Even when I closed my office door on campus, people would knock and press their faces against the glass in the door to see if I were there.” As academic librarians continue to analyze use of physical spaces to best respond to student and faculty needs, they must also consider what kinds of spaces to create for employees to do their best work. Those spaces are likely to look very different than they did pre-pandemic with a design focus on creating intentionality to support collaboration and in-person teamwork.

In addition to working with employees to best meet their needs for both preferred work locations and overall office environments, managers should create work cultures where employees feel empowered to think of work as part of their day that hopefully supports their non-work goals and needs. Physical health and well-being should not need to be sacrificed to meet the demands

of any job. Thinking of and treating their employees as human beings first recognizes that work is but one part of their lives. During the height of the pandemic practitioners found they were able to spend more time on personal care needs, which provided many with a greater feeling of control and improved personal health outcomes. One respondent reported: "After work I am able to do yoga, rest, read or talk with friends. I no longer arrive home at 930 PM as limp as a wet rag." Not all employees will want to incorporate exercise into their workday. A number of respondents indicated that remote work allowed them to manage chronic medical conditions more easily and as one person explained: "I am healthier and have more energy working from home, even while dealing with a chronic condition." Organizations that provide flexible options signal to their employees that they value their personal health; and for those who may be managing chronic conditions or disabilities, such flexibility signals that supervisors recognize the challenges associated with in-person work and therefore are providing structures of support.

Communication and Collaboration

Moving forward, managers and employees will need to carefully consider how modes of communication and opportunities to collaborate shape organizational culture. As managers strive to create flexible schedules and work arrangements for their employees, what impact will those changes have on organizational culture? How will managers allocate their time to best support their employees? Managing hybrid teams requires intentionality and raises a myriad of complications for both employees and managers. Employees quickly pick up on style differences when working such a schedule. For example, one participant commented: "My boss, the library director, is much more attentive to my requests for info and questions about procedures when I am working from home. She is less attentive when we are working in the building because more people are clamoring for her attention." To effectively manage hybrid teams, managers must consider how they allocate their own time and what tools they use to support employees when they work in-person and remotely. Furthermore, managers must consider their own skill development needs to effectively lead a hybrid team. Providing managers with trainings and research about managing hybrid work forces will be critical to an organization's success in the future.

In addition to the importance of maintaining equitable relationships between managers and employees, employees must consider how they will work together and collaborate moving forward. Whereas communication tools were the key hinderance early on in the pandemic, working remotely eventually drew attention to cultural limitations instead, as practitioners got more used to their work arrangements. One participant shared:

While I can work with the team remotely and get things done, there is an ineffable quality of relationship building that is more difficult remotely and I notice that my work relationships with those whom I might have had casual conversations in halls in passing have not grown like they otherwise might have and the loss is most notable in colleagues who joined us during the pandemic who I have not gotten to meet in person.

It behooves organizations to consider the place of in-person collaboration and connection. Many practitioners thrived while working remotely as they did not engage with colleagues in-person. Others actively sought out opportunities for such connections. Managers must think carefully about what kinds of work and non-work events can or perhaps should take place

in-person, and which can occur in a virtual space. Piloting different approaches for different projects or events will be an important part of creating an overarching strategy.

Maintaining a vibrant and engaged workforce demands that library leaders and managers create structures and systems for thoughtful and transparent communication. During the height of the pandemic, many felt as though management was not doing enough to keep them in the loop of current priorities, projects, and impacts on their work. One practitioner commented: “The communication went from bad to worse. The days I was onsite, I felt out of the loop as decisions were being made on weekdays when I wasn’t present. I had to rely on students sometimes to understand the new policies/procedures which was disheartening.” However, managers should balance the desire to foster open and frequent communication with clear signals that they respect individuals’ boundaries. One respondent reported, “my supervisor considers working from home to mean that I am on call 24 hours every day. Getting them to understand or accept boundaries can be frustrating.” As many academic libraries experience a high rate of turn over due to the Great Resignation, managers must be more cognizant than ever for signs of burnout and discontent.²⁹

Limitations

The gender breakdown of participants is the principal limitation of this study; 87% of the sample identified as female. Therefore, the analysis and recommendations presented here may not be generalizable to those practitioners who identify as male or gender variant/non-conforming. The authors also acknowledge that they did not collect data on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities, or other identity-related categorizations that could have provided further data on the social hierarchies inherent in libraries. The authors did not ask respondents to indicate their position rank or classification, job title, or salary, all of which may impact their remote work experiences and their ongoing interest in such work schedules. The authors suggest that further research be conducted to identify long-term impacts on organizational culture and employee satisfaction for those working hybrid or flexible schedules.

Conclusion

For leaders in academic libraries to chart an effective course going forward, they must bring intentionality to their leadership practice, organization’s policies, and expectations in order to keep their employees engaged and to best support them. Managers can face a tough balancing act to satisfy employees and administration and keep a physical building staffed. Whether an employee thrives best in a remote or in-person environment is highly individualized. Specifically, leaders should strive to work with each employee to determine what kind of work experience and environment is best for them, given their personal preferences and their particular role and try to adjust schedules accordingly. Second, leaders must provide employees with flexibility; whether that results in flexible schedules or hybrid work to maintain an engaged and motivated workforce. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, leaders must create systems and structures for clear and frequent communication to foster transparency and collaboration as they work with their staffs to create the kinds of organizational culture that works for everyone and not just those at the top of the organizational hierarchy.

Working remotely during the height of the pandemic and adjusting to new ways of working as libraries reopened and began to assume more in-person operations has impacted all practitioners. Looking ahead, employees and managers alike should leverage these experiences—the good, the bad, and in-between—to establish new norms that prioritizes the needs of individuals and recognizes that work will not and should not look the same as it did in February 2020.

Appendix. Survey Questions

What is the New Normal? Changing Nature of Academic Library Work in a post-COVID World

Start of Block: Block 2

Many, if not most, employees working in academic libraries transitioned to working remotely for the first time in their career in March 2020. Employees have been working remotely within the context of a global pandemic in which many of us juggle childcare, work duties, and possibly family or personal illness, in the midst of economic uncertainty.

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete one survey that will take about 15 minutes. This survey seeks to understand what that experience has been like for practitioners. The survey will ask questions about your experiences and/or feelings concerning your experience working remotely. It's estimated that approximately 1,000 practitioners will take part in this study. You will also be given the option at the end of the survey to give your email address if you're interested in participating in future surveys, to be sent out in 3, 6, and 12 months after the first survey period ends. It's anticipated that 1,000 practitioners will take part in this phase of the study.

Some of the survey questions may be upsetting or make you feel uncomfortable. You can skip any of the questions you do not want to answer. All of the information we collect will be stored in a secure manner and only study team members will have access to it. There are no other expected risks. There are also no expected benefits. You will not be paid for participating in this study. There will be no cost to you to participate in this study.

The University of Arkansas makes every effort to keep the information collected from you private. All the information received from you will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy, and will be stored on a password protected local (non-networked) hard drive. You will not be identified nor will any information that would make it possible for anyone to identify you be used in any presentation or written reports concerning this project. Only summarized data will be presented in any oral or written reports. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason. No matter what decision you make, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

The survey will remain open until July 13th. For more information or questions about this research you may contact Lori Birrell at 479-575-8443, lbirrell@uark.edu or Amy Allen at 479-575-6370, ala005@uark.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the IRB Compliance Coordinator at the University of Arkansas, at 479-575-2208 or irb@uark.edu.

By clicking on the red arrow below, you are agreeing to participate in this survey.

End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: Block 3

At any point between **January 1–February 29, 2020** (pre-COVID-19) did you experience any of the following:

- ☐ Furloughed
- ☐ Fired
- ☐ Laid off
- ☐ Job reduced
- ☐ Job eliminated
- ☐ Received a new job outside of academic libraries
- ☐ No, I did not have any of the experiences listed above

Skip To: End of Survey If At any point between January 1–February 29, 2020 (pre-COVID-19) did you experience any of the fol... = Furloughed

Skip To: End of Survey If At any point between January 1–February 29, 2020 (pre-COVID-19) did you experience any of the fol... = Fired

Skip To: End of Survey If At any point between January 1–February 29, 2020 (pre-COVID-19) did you experience any of the fol... = Job reduced

Skip To: End of Survey If At any point between January 1–February 29, 2020 (pre-COVID-19) did you experience any of the fol... = Job eliminated

Skip To: End of Survey If At any point between January 1–February 29, 2020 (pre-COVID-19) did you experience any of the fol... = Received a new job outside of academic libraries

End of Block: Block 3**Start of Block: Default Question Block**

At any point during the COVID-19 pandemic have you worked remotely?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Skip To: Q24 If At any point during the COVID-19 pandemic have you worked remotely? = Yes

Skip To: End of Survey If At any point during the COVID-19 pandemic have you worked remotely? = No

Are you currently working remotely?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Did your job responsibilities change in any way when you began working remotely?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

What percentage of tasks in your job description could you accomplish while working remotely?

- ☐ 0%
- ☐ 1–20%
- ☐ 21–40%
- ☐ 41–60%
- ☐ 61–80%
- ☐ 81–100%

Please indicate your overall ability to concentrate on complex tasks.

For this question, complex tasks refer to tasks such as: metadata creation or clean-up, responding to researchers’ questions, creating digital content, managing systems, analyzing statistics, budgeting, grant writing, doing research/writing.

	Always	Most of the time	About half the time	Sometimes	Never
When working remotely					
When working onsite					

Please share any additional details to explain your response to the previous question.

Please indicate how well the following statement describes your overall experience: I receive the desired level of support from my supervisor.

For this question, support refers to frequency of communication, responsiveness to communication, and overall feeling of being valued.

	Describes me extremely well	Describes me very well	Describes me moderately well	Describes me slightly well	Does not describe me
Received desired support when working remotely					
Received desired support when working onsite					

Please share any additional details to explain your response to the previous question.

When working onsite, what are the greatest disruptions to your ability to concentrate on projects and goals?

Please rank the responses based on which most impacts your ability to concentrate and do work on a daily basis, with 1 being the most impacted and 8 being the least impacted. To rank your selections, please drag each response into the correct order.

- _____ Student employees
- _____ Meetings
- _____ Colleagues in department/unit
- _____ Colleagues outside of department/unit
- _____ Interns
- _____ Users/patrons
- _____ Email
- _____ Other

When working onsite, what are the greatest disruptions to your ability to concentrate on projects and goals?

Please rank the responses based on which most impacts your ability to concentrate and do work on a daily basis, with 1 being the most impacted and 8 being the least impacted. To rank your selections, please drag each response into the correct order.

- _____ Student employees
- _____ Meetings
- _____ Colleagues in department/unit
- _____ Colleagues outside of department/unit
- _____ Interns
- _____ Users/patrons
- _____ Email
- _____ Other

If you responded “Other” in the previous question, please explain below.

Consider your use of sick time while working remotely during this pandemic. Which of the following statements best describes your experience?

- ☐ I’ve taken sick time.
- ☐ I haven’t taken sick time.

Skip To: Q42 If Consider your use of sick time while working remotely during this pandemic. Which of the followin... = I’ve taken sick time.

Skip To: Q43 If Consider your use of sick time while working remotely during this pandemic. Which of the followin... = I haven’t taken sick time.

Please select the statement that best describes the reason you’ve taken sick time.

- ☐ I’ve been sick.
- ☐ I’ve been caring for someone else.
- ☐ I’ve been doing something to prevent health problems.
- ☐ I’ve been dealing with a medical issue.

Please select the statement that best describes the reason you haven’t taken sick time.

- ☐ I haven’t been sick.
- ☐ I’ve been sick, but have been able to work from home even if I’m not feeling well.
- ☐ Tele-medicine has enabled me to work without taking time.
- ☐ Routine healthcare appointments have been cancelled/rescheduled.
- ☐ My day is more flexible; I’m able to compensate for time I need during another part of the day.

Do you find while working remotely, you work:

- ☐ More hours
- ☐ About the same
- ☐ Fewer hours

Please explain your answer.

How does working from home impact your work/life balance? Please explain any benefits below.

How does working from home impact your work/life balance? Please explain any downsides below.

For lifestyle or productivity reasons, would you be interested in working remotely for any part of your work week:

	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Might or might not	Probably not	Definitely not
Within 1 month after the library has reopened?					
Within 2–3 months after the library has reopened?					

Within 4–6 months after the library has reopened?					
Within 1 year after the library has reopened?					
On a permanent basis after the library has reopened?					

In a typical week, how often would you like to have the option of working remotely, for some part of your workday?

- ☐ Every day
- ☐ 3–4 times a week
- ☐ 2–3 times a week
- ☐ 1–2 times a week
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ Never

Has your library implemented furloughs for any library employees at this time?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not yet, but there's been discussions

Please share any other comments you have about the ways working remotely enhances your ability to do your work.

Please share any other comments you have about the ways working remotely hinders your ability to do your work.

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Block 1

The following are demographic questions: What kind of library do you currently work in?

- ☐ 4 year, doctoral degree granting university or college
- ☐ 4 year, masters degree granting university or college
- ☐ 4 year, bachelor degree granting university or college
- ☐ 2 year, community or vocational school
- ☐ Other (please describe below) _____

What area of librarianship do you currently work in? (For this question, we're asking about your primary job duty. Department heads, please indicate the functional area you work in)

- ☐ Administration
- ☐ IT
- ☐ Public Services
- ☐ Technical Services
- ☐ Special collections/archives
- ☐ Other (Please enter your area of librarianship in the text box.) _____

How many years have you worked in the library science profession?

- ☐ Less than 2 years
- ☐ 2–5 years
- ☐ 6–10 years
- ☐ 11–15 years
- ☐ 16–20 years
- ☐ 20+ years

Please select your age range.

- ☐ 18–24
- ☐ 25–34
- ☐ 35–44
- ☐ 45–54
- ☐ 55–64
- ☐ 65–74
- ☐ 75–84
- ☐ 85 or older

Please identify your gender.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

This survey is part of a longitudinal study. If you would like to participate in subsequent surveys (sent to you 3, 6, and 12 months from now), please enter your email address below. Please note, survey responses will be stored separately and anonymously from your email address.

End of Block: Block 1

Bibliography

- Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage, 2006.
- Cramer, Maria and Zaveri, Mihir. "What If You Don't Want to Go Back to the Office?" *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), May 5, 2020.
- Dockery, Alfred M. and Bawa, Sherry. "When Two Worlds Collude: Working from Home and Family Functioning in Australia." *International Labour Review* 157, no. 4 (2018): 609–630.
- Ewin, Laura. "Quitting Time: The Pandemic is Exacerbating Attrition Among Library Workers." *American Libraries*, June 2, 2022: <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2022/06/01/quitting-time/>.
- Felstead, Alan and Henseke, Golo. "Assessing the Growth of Remote Working and Its Consequences for Effort, Well-Being and Work-Life Balance," *New Technology, Work and Employment* 32, no. 3 (2017): 195–212.
- Hickey, Daniel and Tang, Neely. "Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Remote Work for Academic Reference and Instruction Librarians." *Library Staffing for the Future (Advances in Library Administration and Organization, Vol. 34)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited (2015): 177–200.
- Kaplan, Seth, Engelsted, Lia, Lei, Xue, and Lockwood, Karla. "Unpacking Manager Mistrust in Allowing Telework: Comparing and Integrating Theoretical Perspectives." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 33 (2018): 365–382.
- Kasper, Wendy Arant. "Work/Life Unbalanced." *College & Research Libraries* 81, no. 4 (2020): 594–598.
- Kwon, Myungjung and Jeon, So Hee. "Why Permit Telework? Exploring the Determinants of California City Governments' Decisions to Permit Telework." *Public Personnel Management* 46, no. 3 (2017): 239–262.
- Müller, Teresa and Niessen, Cornilia. "Self-Leadership in the Context of Part-Time Teleworking." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 40 (2019): 883–898.
- Michalak, Russell and Rysvay, Monica D.T. "Working from Home: How We Managed Our Team Remotely with Technology." *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 5 (2020): 532–542.
- Nakrosiene, Adrone, Buciuniene, Ilona, and Gostautaitė, Bernadeta. "Working From Home: Characteristics and Outcomes of Telework." *International Journal of Manpower* 40 no.1 (2019): 87–101.
- Nayani, Rachel J., Nielsen, Karina, Daniels, Kevin, Donaldson-Feilder, Emma J., and Lewis, Rachel C. "Out of Site and Out of Mind? A Literature Review of Occupational Safety and Health Leadership and Management of Distributed Workers." *Work & Stress* 32, no. 2 (2017): 124–146.
- Neirotti, Paolo, Raguseo, Elisabeth, and Gastaldi, Luca. "Designing Flexible Work Practices for Job Satisfaction: The Relation Between Job Characteristics and Work Disaggregation in Different Types of Work Arrangements." *New Technology, Work and Employment* 34, no. 2 (2019): 116–138.
- Rysavy, Monica D.T. and Michalak, Russell. "Working from Home: How We Managed Our Team Remotely with Technology." *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 5 (2020): 532–542.
- Smith, Dawn and Van Dyke, Teresa B. "A Telecommuting Interlibrary Loan Librarian's Experience: The Views of Both the Telecommuter and the On-Site Supervisor." *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve* 18, no. 5 (2008): 449–455.
- Thulin, Eva, Vilhelmson, Bertil, and Johansson, Martina. "New Telework, Time Pressure, and Time Use Control in Everyday Life." *Sustainability* 11 (2019): 1–17.
- Windeler, Jaime B., Chudoba, Katherine M., and Sundrup, Rui Z. "Getting Away from Them All: Managing Exhaustion from Social Interaction with Telework." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 38 (2017): 977–995.

Notes

1. The authors did not ask their participants to specify their work arrangements when responding to study questions. To remain eligible throughout the study, participants had to be working at least some of their time remotely. Since conducting this study, the landscape of work arrangements in academic libraries has changed dramatically. As such, the authors refer to: "remote," "flexible," and "hybrid" work arrangements throughout the article to best describe their participants' experiences and when making recommendations for employees and managers about the future of work arrangements.
2. Alan Felstead and Golo Henseke, "Assessing the Growth of Remote Working and Its Consequences for Effort, Well-Being and Work-Life Balance," *New Technology, Work and Employment* 32, no. 3 (2017): 196.
3. Myungjung Kwon and So Hee Jeon, "Why Permit Telework? Exploring the Determinants of California City Governments' Decisions to Permit Telework," *Public Personnel Management* 46, no. 3 (2017): 239–262.
4. Alfred M. Dockery and Sherry Bawa, "When Two Worlds Collude: Working from Home and Family Functioning in Australia," *International Labour Review* 157, no. 4 (2018): 625.
5. *Ibid.*, 626.
6. Adrone Nakrosiene, Ilona Buciuniene, and Bernadeta Gostautaitė, "Working from Home: Characteristics and Outcomes of Telework," *International Journal of Manpower* 40, no.1 (2019): 87–101.

7. Maria Cramer and Mihir Zaveri, "What If You Don't Want to Go Back to the Office?" *The New York Times*, May 5, 2020, <http://nytimes.com> (accessed May 5, 2020).
8. Wendy Arant Kasper, "Work/Life Unbalanced," *College & Research Libraries* 81, no. 4 (2020): 596.
9. Ibid.
10. Daniel Hickey and Neely Tang, "Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Remote Work for Academic Reference and Instruction Librarians," *Library Staffing for the Future (Advances in Library Administration and Organization*, Vol. 34), Emerald Group Publishing Limited (2015): 183.
11. Dawn Smith and Teresa B. Van Dyke, "A Telecommuting Interlibrary Loan Librarian's Experience: The Views of Both the Telecommuter and the On-Site Supervisor," *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve* 18, no. 5 (2008): 449–455.
12. Rachel J. Nayani, Karina Nielsen, Kevin Daniels, Emma J. Donaldson-Feilder, and Rachel C. Lewis, "Out of Site and Out of Mind? A Literature Review of Occupational Safety and Health Leadership and Management of Distributed Workers," *Work & Stress* 32, no. 2 (2017): 126.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 132.
15. Jaime B. Windeler, Katherine M. Chudoba, and Rui Z. Sundrup, "Getting Away from Them All: Managing Exhaustion from Social Interaction with Telework," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 38 (2017): 977.
16. Ibid., 989.
17. Teresa Müller and Cornilia Niessen, "Self-Leadership in the Context of Part-Time Teleworking," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 40 (2019): 893.
18. Ibid., 892.
19. Russell Michalak and Monica D.T. Rysvay, "Working from Home: How We Managed Our Team Remotely with Technology," *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 5 (2020): 532.
20. Seth Kaplan, Lia Engelsted, Xue Lei, and Karla Lockwood, "Unpacking Manager Mistrust in Allowing Telework: Comparing and Integrating Theoretical Perspectives," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 33 (2018): 379.
21. Eva Thulin, Bertil Vilhelmson, and Martina Johansson, "New Telework, Time Pressure, and Time Use Control in Everyday Life," *Sustainability* 11, (2019): 13.
22. Kaplan, Lei, Engelsted, and Lockwood, "Unpacking Manager Mistrust," 379.
23. Paolo Neirotti, Elisabeth Raguseo, and Luca Gastaldi, "Designing Flexible Work Practices for Job Satisfaction: The Relation Between Job Characteristics and Work Disaggregation in Different Types of Work Arrangements," *New Technology, Work and Employment* 34, no. 2 (2019): 134.
24. The survey was posted to the American Library Association's Academic College and Research Library section, the former Library Leadership and Management section (now part of CORE), and the *In the Loop* e-newsletter published by the Society of American Archivists.
25. Due to the longitudinal nature of this study, all participants turned one year older as the survey period continued over the course of the year.
26. For further reading about the use of open coding in qualitative research, please refer to Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage, 2006).
27. Please note: only one respondent (0.15%) of the sample selected the response "interns".
28. Please note that the use of the term "special collections" refers to both the areas of special collections and archives.
29. Laura Ewin, "Quitting Time: The Pandemic is Exacerbating Attrition Among Library Workers," *American Libraries*, June 2, 2022, (accessed October 30, 2022): <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2022/06/01/quitting-time/>.