



Evidence Summary

Flexible Work Agreements: Here to Stay but Uneven in Equity and Promoting Success

A Review of:

Hosoi, M., Reiter, L., & Zabel, D. (2021). Reshaping Perspectives on Flexible Work: The Impact of COVID-19 on Academic Library Management. *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 21(4), 695-713. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2021.0038>

Reviewed by:

Samantha J. Kaplan
Research & Education Librarian, Liaison to the School of Medicine
Duke University Medical Center Library & Archives
Durham, North Carolina, United States of America
Email: samantha.kaplan@duke.edu

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Abstract

Objective – The article seeks to assess the current state and the future of flexible work agreements (FWAs) in research libraries.

Design – The authors held semi-structured interviews with 31 individuals in library leadership roles.

Setting – Large American or Canadian research libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subjects – 31 individuals in senior leadership roles (ex: associate dean, director) at the top 50 research libraries in North America (based on the Association of Research Libraries Investment Index).

Methods – Interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom with participant, investigator, and note taker. Investigators developed a quantitative coding instrument based on a selection of the interviews, then coded all interviews independently. Coded data were evaluated for broader themes in a collaborative fashion.

Main Results – All participants had employees working partially or fully remotely at the time of the interviews. Half of participants observed gains in productivity during the pandemic, although even more commented on technology challenges. Other positives included remote project success and more inclusive meetings; other negatives included caregiving and job duties that did not allow for remote work.

Conclusion – While FWAs were widely available pre-pandemic, they were not normative. The majority of participants think flexible work will only increase in libraries and will influence recruitment and retention of employees, as well as utilization of library space.

Commentary

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust many industries and workers into remote and flexible work overnight, including large academic and research libraries. Several years into this pandemic, remote and flexible work options remain while generating larger questions about the future of library work and library spaces.

Utilizing Lett's et al. (2007) critical review form for qualitative studies clarifies certain strengths and weaknesses of the article which reports the findings from interviewing senior administration and leadership at the largest research libraries in North America. While the purpose of the research is clearly stated with a review of relevant literature, the study design is not clearly named by the authors and no theoretical perspective is identified. Without a named theoretical influence, it is impossible to discern if the methods are congruent with the philosophical underpinnings. However, the article does excel at describing the sampling process, but it would benefit from details about the consent process, as many of the participants hold positions of influence in powerful libraries. There is also minimal information about the participants; faculty status, pronouns, and generation are the only demographic characteristics provided. Knowing how long these individuals had occupied their roles or their area's COVID-19 restrictions would have made their responses more meaningful. The authors employed a quantitative coding instrument, but it is difficult to judge the audit trail without any report of agreement rate among raters or information about sources of disagreement. The description of data analysis methods is much improved by providing the coding instrument.

Even though the authors used an interview instrument that was a mix of structured and semi-structured questions, their use of the term “validity” to describe their findings, and their description of their coding process suggests a quantitative perspective. A survey may have been a more appropriate methodology choice to achieve their desired goal.

The findings have significant implications for academic libraries of all sizes in North America, though by the authors' own acknowledgment, data were gathered early in the pandemic (August and September of 2020). Since that time, many library workers have returned to work part or full-time, especially given the availability of effective vaccines and high-quality masks. The economic atmosphere, as well as the labor market, have also undergone significant shifts that have influenced flexible work's role in the workplace, retention, and recruitment. It is of vital importance to remember that this research was conducted prior to vaccine mandates and that depending on one's place of residence, there were varying political, economic, and campus pressures to return to the workplace.

The authors' focus on senior library leadership allows for a more aggregate picture of flexible work in libraries – particularly the inherent complexity if not impossibility of implementing FWAs with equity as some roles require on-site presence. The participants also painted a greyer picture of flexible work, particularly in technology and caregiving. While libraries have spent decades discussing the digital divide's implications for patrons, this research and the issue of flexible work makes an important contribution that it can be a workplace issue, with not all employees prepared to work at home. While participants did report productivity gains by their staffs, especially with remote projects, the authors

could have interrogated this further. Shifting many library services and almost all library workers to remote work necessitated creating new workflows and policies. At the same time, library workers experienced increased demand from patrons. People may have been more productive because there was significantly more work to do, with flexible work as a confounder. This article captures flexible work in academic libraries at a particular moment in time, but their future and how they will change library workflows, workforces, and spaces is still in process. These findings should be examined by library administrators implementing flexible work agreements as a guide to some of the potential issues their staffs may experience.

References

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