Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Experiences, Benefits, and Challenges of Virtual Teamwork for Public Libraries in the US Midwest during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Objective – To learn about public libraries' transition to virtual teams before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to uncover the benefits, as well as challenges, of using technology and tools for virtual teamwork.

Design – Qualitative, online, semi-structured interviews with thematic analysis of data.

Setting – Public libraries in the midwestern United States.

Subjects – Eight leaders of public libraries or library systems and a state library.

Methods – The authors conducted a snowball sampling technique to recruit participants in the midwestern United States. Through 30 to 60 minute Zoom sessions, the authors conducted interviews with the study participants. Each session was led by one interviewer and a note-taker and all

interviews, with one exception, were recorded. Interviewers relied on an interview protocol, shared in the appendices of the paper, that addressed demographic questions as well as questions related to the study objectives. The authors comment that they reached data saturation after conducting interviews with eight subjects and decided to stop recruitment. Using the notes from the interview and Zoom session transcripts, the authors individually analyzed the data and then collectively discussed the themes as well as similarities and differences of participant responses.

Main Results – Study respondents were mid- to late-career professionals in medium to large organizations. All respondents were white and a majority were women ($n = 6$) with only two men. A majority ($n = 7$) had a Master's degree in Library and Information Science, and one had a PhD in a related field. Thematic analysis of the eight interviews uncovered several broader themes, including changes to staffing structures during the pandemic, the adoption of new technologies, the impact and experiences of using new technologies, the implementation of remote work, and the changes in services during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, library staff were involved in a variety of teams at various levels, including within the library, among consortia, and even throughout community organizations. These teams continued to meet during the pandemic using various technologies. The COVID-19 pandemic created the need to create new teams quickly to address safety protocols and the continuation of library services. Many libraries closed their physical locations during the pandemic with many in-person services offered digitally or re-envisioned to comply with current safety protocols. Technology adoption varied depending on the size of the library and the ease of use and familiarity with certain tools. Many teams adopted video conferencing tools to continue to meet as a group, platforms to share documents, and messaging apps to enhance group communication. Some libraries applied for grant funding to expand their technology access or digital services. Though there was widespread adoption of technology, libraries prioritized communication among their teams, which resulted in less emphasis on technology security and privacy.

Benefits of the adoption of new technologies were enhanced participation and accessibility at team meetings and virtual programming, expansion in skill development and training for staff, and the ability to continue working while adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols. Teams were able to meet virtually across multiple locations, and the online format of meetings allowed for more equitable participation among attendees. Travel costs and travel time were eliminated, and the online meeting chat feature ensured that typically quieter participants could engage with the conversation. Additionally, libraries were able to host larger library programs online by eliminating travel cost and time. The COVID-19 pandemic created the need for rapid team formation in order to address safety protocols, ensure continuity of library services, and support the use of digital services. Challenges included a steep learning curve for some staff using new technologies, a lack of access to adequate devices or broadband for library workers living in rural areas, the development of virtual meeting fatigue leading to disengagement, and a lack of a sense of community. Though many libraries embraced remote work, front line staff were still expected to return to work physically. While remote work helped in some ways, it also presented a challenge for staff who did not have quiet spaces to focus, appropriate work setups at home, or consistent access to good internet.

Conclusion – The COVID-19 pandemic forced many libraries to adapt quickly to a new environment of digital and hybrid teamwork while still attempting to maintain community-oriented services. Library leaders explored how flexible working environments could enhance employee engagement by using technology and addressed many challenges in adopting new technologies and making them accessible for staff. As well, library leaders addressed staff morale by extending grace to staff members, providing professional development in new areas of librarianship, and creating scheduling shifts for remote and in-person work. Many organizations returned to physical meetings when it became safe to do so but also continued to offer hybrid work options and use some technology adopted during the pandemic. The pandemic required flexible and creative problem solving. The experience enabled library leaders to identify the benefits and challenges of adopting new technology,

maintaining service continuity, emphasizing the need to think about information security, and adapting and creating teams as needed.

Commentary

The authors address a gap in the literature on how public libraries adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically through forming virtual teams, adopting digital technologies, and revisioning library services. Similarly, Chamakiotis and colleagues (2021) conducted a state-of-the-art literature review to examine how virtual teams changed before and during the pandemic and highlight the impact that the pandemic had on team reconfiguration and characteristics. Chamakiotis et al. (2021) specifically outline how leaders of virtual teams can adapt for team success by establishing work-life guardrails for the team, adapting former virtual team practices, keeping team well-being at top of mind, creating new methods of team engagement, and fostering creativity and innovation. Research by Efimov et al. (2022) uncovers a positive correlation between virtual leadership styles and employee mental health outcomes, job satisfaction, and perceptions of isolation. Schlaegel et al. (2023) investigate how geographical COVID-19 severity and individual self-regulation impacts individual performance further impacting engagement and success of virtual teams. A more specific case example explores how public and academic libraries transitioned partnerships and teamwork through the pandemic to continue community outreach initiatives and build health literacy at a critical moment (Swanberg et al., 2022).

I used an adapted version of Russell and Gregory's (2003) qualitative research appraisal questions to evaluate this article (Suarez, 2010). The authors present three research questions that investigate how teamwork evolved before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they explore the benefits and challenges of tools on team development and sustainability. The use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews was appropriate to address the research questions, though the sampling method could be clearer. The authors note that they sent invitations to librarians in the midwestern region, but they did not provide more details about how they initially identified librarians, or why they explicitly selected only library leaders to be interviewed as opposed to other library managers who have decision-making power over team formation and technology adoption. It was also unclear whether the authors used other tools for data collection and analysis aside from hand-written notes and Zoom transcripts. However, the authors' description of data analysis seems appropriate.

In their findings, the authors provide an in-depth description of the impacts, benefits, and challenges of using new technologies on individual work as well as teamwork. They explore a wide variety of experiences and highlight the practical, financial, geographical, and learning challenges of virtual teamwork but also underscore the benefits such as increased accessibility and engagement with team meetings. The authors describe the types of teams that existed prior to the pandemic and note that they did not change during the pandemic or return to their initial team structures after returning to in-person or hybrid work. The authors also indicate how teams used technology to enhance and facilitate meetings, informal communications, and document sharing. The findings of this article illuminate pathways for public libraries to nimbly respond to emergencies and uncover the overall benefit of virtual teams for meeting accessibility and equity in participation, ensuring library service continuity. Results also underscore the need to improve staff preparation for remote working environments, especially for those with limited workspace setups and insufficient internet access. However, there was no discussion of whether team makeup, team leadership, expectations, or dynamics changed during the shift to virtual work. In their implications, the authors briefly introduce the concept of agile project management, which is outside of the scope of their original research objectives. Moreover, there was little exploration of how library leadership guided and facilitated the creation of teams and the impact leadership had on team success. Exploring these questions could help illustrate a fuller picture of the challenges and successes of teamwork in virtual settings and if leadership approaches need to adapt based on the setting.

This study highlights the capacity of library teams to adapt quickly to emergency situations and shows how teams responded to technological challenges as they arose. The authors additionally note some benefits of technology practices that have carried over into hybrid and in-person work environments. Study responses are limited to high-level leadership positions in a specific geographic region, which does not fully capture the scope of the experience of public libraries and their staff. The specific timeframe during which the authors conducted these interviews is unclear; this is key information given the rapidly changing context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Successful and unsuccessful virtual team dynamics and expectations could have been explored further to identify best practices for creating and sustaining virtual and hybrid teams. Future research should focus on the perspectives of public library staff who can share their direct experiences working on virtual teams to paint a more robust picture of the experiences of virtual teamwork.

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