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Starting a New Midcareer Librarian Position During COVID-19: Lessons to take into the future

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ABSTRACT

This article chronicles the experience of two midcareer librarians who were new hires at the University of South Florida one month before the entire campus was sent to work from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They recount the obstacles encountered and how they overcame them. They include lessons learned and ways to improve a transition to remote working. Specific areas that are discussed: technology, training, communication, self-advocacy, relationship building, and mentorship.

Keywords: working remotely, COVID-19, pandemic, technology, training, academic librarian, electronic resource librarian, new hire

INTRODUCTION

In any new job, there is a certain amount of training and orientation. Even if you are midcareer librarians who have either held the same or similar positions at another company or institution, every place has its unique ways of doing things. It has its own procedures and processes for achieving the same objective, whether it is acquiring a new addition for the collection or figuring out how to connect to the common area printer. But what if after little over a month at your new position you are sent home to work for an indefinite period of time because of a pandemic? This is a narrative of two newly hired electronic resource librarians and how they dealt with training, technology, and communication in an environment where even tried and true procedures and processes had to be changed to fit the new normal.

BACKGROUND

The transition to remote work was challenging to everyone at the University of South Florida (USF) Libraries as they struggled to learn new tools and ways to communicate. The established staff and faculty had an easier time transitioning than the new hires working remotely for a couple of reasons. Longtime employees had clearly established day-to-day work routines and, most importantly, had already built relationships and institutional knowledge. Knowing job duties and who does what is essential, but the soft skills of how to work with individuals in an organization are equally vital for a well running workplace. All staff struggled learning how to use new tools and how to communicate in a virtual environment. Moving from the traditional onsite library location with desks and conference tables, the staff struggled with what online work should look

like. Should an office environment be replicated? How many meetings is too many meetings? Should cameras be used? How to deal with isolation? How to handle meeting fatigue? How does one work from home? The whole library staff faced these challenges together.

In some ways it was an equalizer for the new hires. Everyone was lost and struggling with the new work reality, but the established staff knew how to work with each other. The new employees were unknown quantities and did not fit in already created routines and groups. The authors felt restrained in their ability to work and communicate as they did not know the personalities of their coworkers and did not wish to offend and start new careers on a bad note. This was exacerbated by the loss of body language that comes with the online environment. Using teleconferencing without body language is akin to reading a room with closed eyes.

The hiring of two new e-resource librarians was to be part of the rebuilding of the Collections Development team and the library faculty. Due to hiring freezes the e-resource positions were the first faculty hired in over five years. This meant onboarding new faculty had not been done in some time and all current faculty were well established.

The Collections Development department, of which the e-resources unit is a part, along with the fiscal units that support the work, were decimated by retirements and thrown into disarray by reorganization. With new people and new systems in play, the processes are being built from the ground up. Part of the responsibility of the new e-resource positions is to create and refine workflows, and create supporting documentation. The sudden cut off from constant and direct access to in-office resources and supervisors, along with a lack of documentation, made starting a new position remotely even more challenging.

This unprecedented experience of starting a new position remotely during a pandemic in a field that has traditionally been an onsite experience has been challenging but filled with interesting opportunities. There are advantages to coming into a position with no expectations about how things were done in the past and in person. As outsiders ignorant of precedent, the authors brought a fresh perspective on workflow and communication. As noted above, the faculty and staff were well established for years. The new hires came in with different experiences, styles, and expectations of how communication should occur, from things like how meetings should be conducted to how projects should be managed and organized. As new people looking in, the authors can offer suggestions and refinements to what had become the accepted day-to-day operation.

As new employees, the authors are also the most desperate to receive information about their workplace for both job performance and acceptance into the wider culture. Beyond the stressors of figuring out how to accomplish job duties, there is the need to figure out the rhythm and flow of the library year. COVID-19 blew up the standard flow of the year, depriving the library staff of the social interactions of holidays, birthdays, celebration of achievements, and participation in the wider university culture. It was a real blow to integrating into the work culture. The new hires needed to learn fiscal cycles, time-reporting calendars, schedules of evaluations, frequency of standing meetings, and the myriad of other small details that make up the day-to-day ebb and flow of work in an academic library. This heightened their awareness of how communication worked with coworkers and supervisors as they tried to navigate a new career and environment.

The authors' experiences as seasoned professionals entering a new position during the pandemic provide lessons that could be applicable moving forward both during and after the pandemic. At the University of South Florida, it seems a hybrid work environment of both on- and offsite might continue indefinitely. Remote work appears to be here to stay in some capacity. Even outside of the pandemic, librarians communicate every day with vendors and professional committees that span the globe. Learning to work in the virtual environment is a fundamental skill that will be useful moving forward. But even if the authors were to return to the old "normal" of reporting on campus during regular business hours, it is still necessary to assess how an organization communicates and works with its staff. This paper presents the lessons learned while starting a new position during the pandemic that can be applied moving forward no matter the physical location. These suggestions come through the lens of professionals onboarding to new positions and what they need to successfully integrate into the job and workspace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the COVID-19 crisis is ongoing the literature reflects the mutability of the situation and the responses being taken in the moment. For a professional coming into a new position during this unique time it is important to look at literature about the state of libraries during COVID-19 and how library closures are affecting librarians.

Even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, academic libraries were facing financial pressures and turning to canceling the "Big Deals" in response (Aiwuyor, 2020). As states are deeply hurting for revenue due to COVID-19, the situation has become exacerbated for academic institutions. As Roger Schonfeld, director of Ithaka S+R's Libraries, Scholarly Communication, and Museums Program, explains, "It's all contingent on what will enrollment look like, what will happen to state appropriations, and the potential for clawbacks of authorized state budget funding" (Peet, 2020b). Academic institutions are facing a profound uncertainty. Libraries are having to come up with tough "survival strategies" about where to make cuts and when and how to lay off employees (Peet, 2020b). Bad communication and transparency at some libraries about layoffs and potential furloughs for staff are making a terrible situation worse causing stress and anxiety (Peet, 2020a). This is hardly an ideal situation and time for a professional to be starting a new position with security.

Beyond budgetary concerns, the very way libraries operate day-to-day and the services being offered have changed to meet the challenge of COVID-19. Marshall Breeding (2020) identifies as three of the biggest changes to library operations: closing physical facilities, rapid pivoting to all digital services, and librarians working from home. Working from home is a unique challenge most librarians are experiencing for the first time. A literature review by Ann Craft shows there have been several case studies published on librarians working from home, but they have all been small-scale case studies affecting either one person or unit (Craft, 2020). The case studies focus on the careful planning and approval processes that the participants had to go through to implement a new work environment, a planning process that could not be followed through given the very sudden closures due to COVID-19 (Craft, 2020). Craft's literature review shows that the work from home experiments were successful in terms of meeting work goals, but the social impacts are far more ambiguous.

The previous literature about telecommuting for library work exposes that there is socio-economic inequity for success in working from home. This is a possible concern for a librarian beginning a new position. Jennifer Duncan wrote that in setting up a six-month telecommuting arrangement, she needed to get a support grant from the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE Program to make her cross-country telecommute work because the university library she worked for would not pay for essential hardware she needed for her job and required her to make a cross-country flight twice to report back to work with no reimbursement (Duncan, 2008). In 2000, the University of New Mexico offered remote work options to its cataloging team but since there was no institutional support of hardware or internet, it became an opportunity that only employees that could provide the services for themselves could participate in (Bénaud et al., 2000). Marshall Breeding (2020) points out that for work at home to be successful, it will "add to the burden of technical support in the library" and put a burden on infrastructure. This is a necessary step if working from home is to be a viable, long-term strategy for librarians.

TECHNOLOGY

The authors had just finished setting up our logins and were working on our first assignments when we went remote. Fortunately, USF employees could login to My USF, USF's virtual workplace which provides employees access to their email, Microsoft 365 software, GEMS (the payroll and personnel management system), Canvas, TEAMS, and other learning and collaboration tools from most off-premises computers. USF provides a VPN login as well. The library's electronic services were also available online remotely, including the integrated library system, LibGuides, and the interlibrary loan software.

Some of these are cloud systems which required a URL and a login. Others required the user to download software on to their home computer before they could login. As midcareer librarians, the authors did have the advantage of having at least worked with various integrated library systems and content management systems which made using these systems without face-to-face training much simpler.

Proactively, the library administration sent a survey to all library employees to determine if they could perform their job duties from home, if those duties require technology, and whether their technology at home was sufficient to make it work. Being electronic resource librarians, most of our work is done with a computer. Unfortunately, outside the workplace, access to computers, fast internet service, and software is not equal among all. Some did not have access to a computer or only partial access because someone else in their home was also using it. Others did not have adequate internet service causing the computer to slow down or disconnect from the university's VPN. The library administration made it possible for employees who had the need to take home their work computers, monitors, keyboards, headsets, etc., by signing them out with the understanding that eventually they would be returning the equipment and themselves to campus once the crisis was over.

The transition did not end there. Now everyone had to be instructed on how to download and setup the VPN and those systems requiring a software download. Instructions were both posted virtually and emailed. All relevant information needed to contact the IT helpdesk was made

available. Our area checked in with our supervisor on a daily basis through TEAMS, so if anyone had difficulties, they could be addressed. TEAMS became a powerful and essential tool in communicating with others, but there were many technical issues in the beginning. Many people had never used TEAMS on a regular basis, so they had to quickly learn. Also, TEAMS had never been used on such a large scale and sometimes crashed. Not everyone had a camera and sometimes if they did, too many people using the video function slowed it down or it crashed. The number of people who could use TEAMS at once had to keep being increased.

Lessons Learned

1. Do not assume that everyone has the same access and level of technology at home that they have at work. They do not. Having this information and a plan before a crisis, such as COVID-19, a hurricane, etc., happens allows employees to transition to working remotely more quickly and prevents loss of working hours.

2. It behooves a library to have as many systems and software as possible, assuming they can be used properly, available remotely via VPN or in a cloud (privacy and security should always be considered). Already having this ability for most of our systems prior to the pandemic helped immensely.

3. Even without a pandemic, being able to conduct most of our job responsibilities productively from home helps provide some arguments for working at least a hybrid work schedule. In the future, having two days at home to conduct work that requires a quieter space than a cubicle can provide could possibly increase work productivity. Be open to personnel working from home. If someone is not doing the work, it will be noticed.

4. Concerning technology, when working from home, keep your work and home life separate. If you use your computer for entertainment, such as streaming videos, music, or gaming, you may want to designate which time of day you play and which time of day you work. For example, always work from 8AM to 5PM and only use the computer for entertainment during evening hours. This prevents distractions during working hours. Also, if you start associating your computer with work, if you have one, use another computer for play, so as to break up the hours sitting in one place and avoid spoiling your playtime thinking about work.

TRAINING

Most businesses have some sort of standard orientation for new hires, regardless of your field. This includes onboarding training from Human Resources, Information Technology, accounting, and various other departments concerning such matters as benefits, setting up your computer, connecting to the local printer, and setting up automated pay. Then, you are let loose with your supervisor to discuss expectations, procedures, and sharing institutional knowledge. During this period, you are introduced to your co-workers, told their responsibilities, how their job interacts with yours, and where they sit, so when you have a question, you can find them. Going to your first meetings helps solidify faces and roles in your memory. Unfortunately, this was about the time that the authors were sent home to work remotely.

Initially, everyone (supervisors, staff, faculty, etc.) had to scramble with the technological logistics with working remotely. Therefore, nontechnical training essentially stopped for a short period of time just to make sure that everyone could log into the necessary areas of the USF online tools in order to do their job. The authors had daily meetings with our supervisors to make sure the authors had all the support that the authors needed. Once this was completed, the priority, as stated above, was to make sure the students were taken care of. One of our first tasks was creating a LibGuide of free and vetted e-resources online for students to use. Having a familiarity with both of these tasks from prior library positions helped us tremendously.

Unfortunately, learning the way this particular library performed its day-to-day tasks was made more difficult by working remotely. The imparting of local knowledge, policies and procedures is much better done face-to-face than via TEAMS. When you are new and have questions, sometimes there is a certain level of timidity in asking people with whom you have not spent much time. Add to that not being able to just go by their office and knock on the door but having to call them on TEAMS at home even though they are working, not always knowing if they are busy, and not being able to read their body language, makes it more intimidating. Another concern is having to rely on written procedures that may be outdated or incomplete.

Fortunately, our supervisors held daily meetings with those whom the authors work most to discuss anything that the authors needed. This eventually became a Monday, Wednesday, and Friday meeting as so not to create meeting burnout. Communication was key in our training, but the authors couldn't help feeling at a disadvantage for not being in the facility for our training.

Lessons Learned

1. If you have a question, ask it. Communication is key. Do not be unnecessarily intimidated asking questions in the new normal.
2. If someone asks you a question, be patient and open to answering it.
3. Having to rely more on written procedures gives everyone an opportunity to revisit and make changes to them.

COMMUNICATION

A study conducted on 5,453 Finnish employees explores how the abrupt change to remote work due to COVID-19 affected employees and how communication could moderate these effects. The study found that clarity of job requirements was a good predictor of an employee's ability to transition to remote work (van Zoonen et al., 2021). The study also found that pre-existing trust in working relationships was negatively affected by an employee's working remotely. This could be interpreted to show that the stronger bonds employees have, the less satisfaction they feel working remotely. Supporting this, the study found the increased Communication Technology USE (CTU) could eliminate the negative results on trusting employees, meaning more and frequent use of communication can foster relationships and work satisfaction. Interestingly, the organization's communication did not affect employee's ability to work remotely. This suggests that remote work

ability is reliant on interpersonal interactions and not the organizational communication of the library.

Communication and transmission of knowledge has been radically altered by COVID-19 shutting down physical library spaces. Everyone is struggling to learn the new tools and master the new pace and flow of online meetings. There is a new rhythm the authors must master in muting and unmuting, not talking over each other, and remembering to check the chat. Conversations are often splintered and occurring in an online conference room, email, and chat all at the same time. It is a tricky balancing act. A librarian starting a new position during COVID-19 cones into this already tense situation with a distinct disadvantage.

As any experienced librarian knows, no task works within the isolation of their unit. The seemingly basic task of a renewal decision can cross between technical services, public services, administration, and fiscal units. It may even go outside the library completely for approval or legal review. As a newcomer to an institution, there is a lack of knowledge about how all the gears fit together. Who needs to be talked to? What is the timing of things? What are the personalities?

If lucky, some documentation exists to guide workflows but even that does not necessarily tell you who needs to be consulted, and certainly does not tell you anything about the person you are working with. Do they want it early? Can you trust them to meet a deadline? Are they overwhelmed? Are they detail oriented? How much or how little do they need in guidance? There is much more to know about how to get work done an institution beyond simple onboarding.

Some additional communication difficulties faced by being new and working solely online are:

- Not knowing everybody on the call or not knowing them in any other way but on calls.
- Not being able to read physical body language and not knowing co-workers long enough to know how they would ordinarily be reacting.
- Not having the chance to catch someone before or after a meeting for a one-on-one interaction.
- Being overwhelmed by different tools and communications from an institution and not knowing which to filter out and which to act on.
- Not doing serendipitous brainstorming in chance encounters.
- Difficulty building shared trust.
- Meeting burnout.
- A sense of having Imposter Syndrome.

Lessons Learned

1. Listen

Studies show that 40%-60% of communication time is spent listening instead of speaking, reading, or writing (Purdy, 1997). Listening is key to effective communication but can very easily be forgotten when working remotely.

Judi Brownell, in her book *Listening: Attitudes, Principles, and Skills* (Brownell, 2017), lays out the HURIER model for listening that gives a framework for how to listen effectively:

H=hearing
U=understanding
R=remembering
I=interpreting
E=evaluating
R=responding

The Nevada Legislature has a document posted online (<https://www.leg.state.nv.us/App/InterimCommittee/REL/Document/3460>) that breaks down how to interpret and use this framework while in a meeting, creating a practical application. Some selections that apply to remote work include:

Develop Hearing

- Do not multi-task when listening—focus entirely on the speaker
- Eliminate distractions

Increase Understanding

- Ask for clarification when vocabulary or jargon is unfamiliar
- Restate to ensure that you have understood completely
- Refrain from interrupting the person speaking

Improve Remembering

- Quickly identify good reasons to remember what you hear
- Stay calm and focused—stress interferes with memory

Interpret Accurately

- Listen for emotional messages as well as words

- Take the context of the communication into account
- Recognize and account for individual differences

Evaluate Wisely

- Listen to the entire message before responding
- Recognize the influence of your personal bias and values
- Differentiate between the ideas presented and the person speaking

Respond Appropriately

- Be aware of your unintentional nonverbal communication
- Distinguish among different types of response—including judgments, empathy, opinions, and questions
- Expand your behavioral flexibility—make choices based on the needs of the situation rather than your habits and comfort level

Listening is a key skill in communication that is easily lost in a remote work environment. It is difficult to both read and use body language online. It is also easy to become distracted when not physically present when communicating. For these reasons, it is essential to actively concentrate to improve work and relationships.

Self-Advocacy

Midcareer librarians are sought out for their experience and skill set. They have something to offer to the dialog and need to speak out in conversation. Ask the questions needed to get work done successfully. This not only shows engagement but demonstrates what kind of communication and information the librarian needs. Being part of the work will also make you a known quantity.

One of the biggest difficulties being a new employee is the need to be integrated into workflows. Someone, usually a supervisor, needs to pass on work, demonstrate the work, and integrate the new librarian into the communication chains. This is one of the biggest hurdles to overcome in any new position, made more difficult by working remotely. It is easy for the trainer to keep doing the work because it takes time and a break in workflow to pass it on, and it is easy for a new employee to be invisible in an online environment. The new librarian in this case must advocate for themselves to be inserted into the workflow. Ask for the work in online meetings and follow-up in emails. The new librarian needs to offer themselves loudly and persistently in the online environment.

As experienced employees, midcareer librarians should know what they need in order to be successful at work and should not be afraid to ask for it.

Lessons Learned

1. Ask questions.
2. Ask for work to be relinquished to you.
3. Make sure you are heard and your presence is felt in the virtual space.
4. Do not be afraid to put yourself out there. You were hired for your skill and their need.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Creating and building relationships is a challenge in an online environment in a work setting. Meetings are called to specifically address some aspect of a job. Being focused purely on the work subject leaves no space for socialization, but unchecked chatting can lead to the derailment of a meeting and wasted time.

A good compromise is to have check-in meetings. These less formal meetings promote conversation among members. It is also useful to have a leader or meeting member who might ask leading questions or share anecdotes. To respect people's time, schedule these meetings during slower work periods like a Friday afternoon.

The burden is on the meeting participants to consciously participate in conversation. Communicating online can be awkward and it takes effort to overcome the limitations.

Lessons Learned

1. Make space for conversations online.
2. Participate in conversation to deepen relationships.
3. Respect people's time but balance it with the need to build working relationships.

MENTORSHIP

Mentorship at the midcareer level looks different than that of a new career librarian. A newly hired, midcareer librarian needs a sympathetic person who is intimately familiar with the specific requirements of the institution. Psychosocial mentorship may be a better fit in these situations. In this model of mentorship, the mentor may encompass role modeling, counseling, friendship, and providing acceptance and confirmation (Kram, 1985).

The mentor will be able to fill in critical information a new hire may need but not necessarily get through formal channels, such as advice on evaluations, timeline, and promotion. An ideal mentor will help the new hire through the difficult first year and keep them informed of upcoming events both formal and informal. The mentor can serve as a good source of institutional

knowledge and culture. Since the mentor and mentee are peers, the relationship can grow into a mutually beneficial arrangement, and each can be a sounding board for the other.

Mentors can also serve the important function of helping their colleagues with racial micro-aggressions, imposter syndrome, and burn-out (Farrell et al., 2017). They can offer support, encourage their mentee to speak out, or advocate on their behalf should it become necessary (Farrell et al., 2017).

Lessons learned

1. A mentor can help the librarian become familiar with their institution in ways formal supervision and communication do not.

2. Mentors can serve as emotional help and strength in overcoming common stressors and difficulties in the workplace.

Kindness

The COVID-19 crisis is hard on everyone at an institution. Be kind to yourself and everyone you interact with.

1. Assume good intentions.

2. Remember to treat yourself with forgiveness in this new situation.

CONCLUSION

As of December 2021, the authors have thus far survived COVID-19 and their first, nearly two years at the University of South Florida Library. They are still working from home, but are allowed to come into the office, if needed or desired. Thus far, neither author has regularly scheduled days that they work in the office. For the most part, they are trained. Communication and navigating the technology has become easier with experience. There are a few takeaways from the experience that the authors would like to express that could be implemented in other emergency situations.

Technology

Businesses and educational institutions should have plans for remote working in case of an emergency. This should include a survey of their employees' technological needs to be able to work from home, so that if the need arises, they are ready to fulfill them. The University of South Florida let their employees take their computers home. Some of these computers were bulky. Perhaps, as the older computers are retired, they could look into purchasing laptop computers with a docking port set at their office desk. This way they could just take the computer home when needed, even in non-emergencies, such as to conferences. This allows work to continue whether the library has to close for building maintenance, a hurricane, or a pandemic. Also, VPN and electronic resources that can be logged into remotely should be provided.

Hybrid Work Schedules

Now that it has been shown that personnel can be productive from home, at least in the authors' case, a hybrid schedule of working part of the week remotely and part of it in the office can be more productive than just working at the office. When working on products that require quiet and no interruptions, working at home can be more conducive than a desk in a cubicle farm. For example, work Mondays and Fridays from home and Tuesdays through Thursdays from the office. It may be easier to have everyone on the same schedule, so meetings can be scheduled the days that everyone is in the office.

Etiquette

New forms of communication and new situations can make for tense and sometimes unpleasant interactions. Using new telecommuting tools requires a new etiquette to be developed. Here are some suggestions based on experiences working remotely during COVID-19:

1. Do not multitask during meetings. You are not fully listening while participating in another activity.
2. Do not speak over another person. Wait for them to finish.
3. As a speaker, pause at the end of a thought to allow for conversation. Do not monologue.
4. Do not start side conversations. Teleconferencing does not allow for multiple conversations to be happening.
5. Do not repeatedly bring up technical difficulties. Clearly state the problem once and try to move on as seamlessly as possible. Constant repetition of problems only frustrates the listener and brings negativity to the proceedings.
6. Consider how you would behave in an in-person meeting. Do not engage in behavior you would not do in person.
7. Do not make the speaker feel alone. Meetings should be an interaction. They should not wonder if they were disconnected.
8. Give participants a chance to walk away and think about complex problems.

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