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# Remote Work in Library Technical Services: Connecting Historical Perspectives to Realities of the Developing COVID-19 Pandemic

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**ABSTRACT**

The concept and practice of remote work in library technical services is not new, but the scale and speed of the transition to remote work for many libraries due to the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented. This column provides an overview of pre-pandemic literature on remote work in library technical services and briefly examines the history, planning, case studies, technology and equity concerns, challenges, and potential benefits of remote work. Initial connections are drawn between existing literature and the impact of the pandemic on remote work, and future directions for research and discussion are offered.

## Introduction

This column was developed in the spring of 2020, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. The pandemic continues to affect lives, communities, and organizations across the country and around the world. Libraries have seen the significant and ongoing impact on services, spaces, and many other aspects of the profession, with many libraries providing services entirely online and many personnel working remotely. This column examines remote work considerations in library technical services, with a primary focus on academic libraries, and looks at how the history and existing literature on remote work has laid the groundwork for understanding and facing some of the issues that many libraries are confronted with as a result of the pandemic.

## Remote work in library technical services

Explorations of remote work in libraries and library technical services units predate the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is a significant body of literature about remote work in non-library settings, this column focuses its examination on works with direct relationships to libraries, and particularly those that address library technical services. The following sections examine what can be learned from the existing literature and consider how these lessons may–or may not–apply to remote work in the current pandemic.

## Early explorations of remote work in library technical services

The consideration and implementation of remote work in library technical services is not new to the profession in concept or practice. Library literature from the 1990s reflects early explorations of remote work in technical services–particularly in the area of cataloging–through discussion and testing. Michigan State University tested a telecommuting pilot project for a cataloger in 1994 and provided a case study of their experience (Black & Hyslop, 1995). In the mid-1990s, Leysen and Pelzer (1996) looked at the development of cataloging technology, resources needed to catalog remotely, cataloging tasks that could be accomplished remotely, and potential concerns related to remote work; significant among the resources they consulted were first-hand accounts from catalogers on the AUTOCAT email list. The number of accounts from AUTOCAT indicates that remote cataloging work may have been more common at that time than the published library literature shows. Remote cataloging work was also under discussion at the national level during this time period, with the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS)

Creative Ideas in Technical Services Discussion Group addressing the topic "Flexible staffing through use of telecommuting" in one of its discussions at the 1997 American Library Association Midwinter Meeting (Johnson, 1998). While there have been significant technological advances and changes to the profession in the intervening years, many of the considerations identified in these early reports and articles are still valid today and will be included in the discussion below.

### Planning

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many libraries to make rapid changes that otherwise would likely have been given significant time and planning. The transition from in-person to remote work can be a major shift, with potential implications for remote workers, their supervisors, departmental and library colleagues, and other stakeholders that could include patrons, vendors, committees, collaborators, and others. While the pandemic prevented many libraries from engaging in extensive planning activities in advance of the shift to remote work, the library literature does offer some information that may still be of use to libraries and library personnel who may be continuing with remote work–either fully or partially–for the foreseeable future.

Remote work arrangements may be impacted by policies at the library or institutional level, with some institutions requiring the creation of agreements in advance of the implementation of remote work arrangements. Duncan (2008) noted that she put forward a proposal to her library's administration for consideration of a six-month remote work placement; she also described a university-administered grant that helped fund technology, including support for hardware, software, and related needs to support her working remotely. At Michigan State University Libraries, multiple library units were involved in the development of a proposal for cataloging via telecommuting, including the library's systems unit and the original catalogers Team; the proposal was also informed by discussions with participants in a telecommuting program at the National Agriculture Library. Black and Hyslop (1995) described the proposal as including "a program description, a memorandum of understanding outlining program guidelines and a library telecommuting policy, and defined responsibilities for the participant and the library in areas such as scheduling, time frame, library-supplied equipment use, liability, and performance evaluation" (p. 320). Jaskowski, Sobey, and Sutton (2002) provided a detailed description of the process and proposal associated with preparation for a short-term remote work placement for a cataloger at the University of Central Florida. They offered institution-specific details and documentation, as well as general proposal components, which included specific tasks that would be accomplished remotely, time frame for remote work, and methods for verification of work.

### Case studies on remote work in technical services

Library literature includes several examples of case studies that address technical services remote work situations affecting one person or one department; these case studies generally examine the planning, practice, and results of implementing new, small-scale remote work arrangements. Michigan State University Libraries investigated and tested remote work scheduling for an original cataloger in 1994, as part of an effort to provide flexibility and enhance employee satisfaction (Black & Hyslop, 1995). Bénaud, Steinhagen, and Moynahan (2000) provided a case study of the impact of flexible work schedules and remote work in library technical services at the University of New Mexico, where the catalog department was seeking innovative measures to improve efficiency. Jaskowski, Sobey, and Sutton (2002) reported on testing a remote work situation for a paraprofessional in the cataloging department at the University of Central Florida Library; the impetus for this change related to healthcare concerns in the individual's family and the need to undergo treatment at a specific medical institution on the other side of the country. Duncan (2008) wrote about her experience in working remotely as an electronic resources librarian at Utah State University; she pursued this remote work arrangement so that her family could remain together during her spouse's temporary research fellowship in another city.

Remote work arrangements have historically been implemented in technical services for a number of reasons, but heretofore a global pandemic has not been one of them. Because of the relative newness of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly-changing nature of national and global circumstances, the published literature does not yet reflect how libraries have handled the implementation of remote work in technical services. Also absent from the literature are perspectives on deploying and supporting remote work in technical services at scale, but with many personnel in the global library community working remotely due

to the pandemic, these accounts may still be developing.

## Technology, equity, and the ability to work remotely

Technology access, including hardware, software, and Internet connectivity, is critical for successful remote work. In institutional settings, there is generally the organizational provision of and control over access to technologies that support personnel in accomplishing their work. In remote work situations–especially those where personnel are working from their homes or other locations of their choice–the organization may have greatly reduced control over Internet connectivity, availability of other technology, and workspace conditions, which can create an equity issue. Bénaud, Steinhagen, and Moynahan (2000) addressed this two decades before the COVID-19 pandemic, in their case study on flexibility in managing cataloging workflows at the University of New Mexico. Cataloging personnel were offered remote work options, including working from home; but the authors noted that there was no institutional financial support available to provide hardware and Internet access to all personnel for home use, essentially reserving this opportunity for personnel who could provide these resources themselves (Bénaud, Steinhagen, & Moynahan, 2000). Institutional policies and resources for supporting remote work will vary; some organizations may offer financial support or directly provide some or all of the technology needed for employees working remotely, and some organizations may require employees to use institutionally-provided resources when conducting business activities. For these reasons, employers might face higher costs when putting telecommuting situations into place (Jaskowski, Sobey, & Sutton, 2002).

## Isolation, socialization, and work-life balance

Recurring challenges that appear in the literature relate to isolation, socialization, and work-life balance. Feelings of isolation on the part of the remote workers in library technical services are noted by authors across the last three decades and are discussed in the context of results of case studies as well as in articles that are more exploratory and theoretical (Bénaud, Steinhagen, & Moynahan, 2000; Black & Hyslop, 1995; Hickey & Tang, 2015; Jaskowski, Sobey, & Sutton, 2002; Leysen & Pelzer, 1996). A less common perspective on isolation comes from Johnson (1998),

who reported on a meeting of the ALCTS Creative Ideas in Technical Services Discussion Group, where the issue of remote workers being isolated from their patrons was discussed. It is worth noting that a major shift in the availability of online collections and delivery of online services has occurred since that time and that many library patrons were engaging with online library services long before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Duncan (2008), an electronic resources librarian reporting on her remote work experience, wrote that she felt that her ability to diagnose remote resource access problems and empathize with off-campus patrons who faced these problems was enhanced by the nature of her own remote work placement.

Remote workers may also experience changes in availability for or interest in workplace socialization. Bénaud, Steinhagen, and Moynahan (2000) noted a "striking" change in the socialization level of their department after personnel were given the option of working remotely and with flexible schedules. They wrote that departmental personnel became less likely to socialize in the department and less likely to attend library and campus events, such as their campus's "Diversity Day" (Bénaud, Steinhagen, & Moynahan, 2000). Duncan (2008), in writing about her own experience with remote work, reported that she missed out on the "daily ebb and flow of organizational conversation," and that as her remote placement continued she began to feel less like a part of the team (p. 218).

Feelings of isolation and changes in socialization may be further exacerbated by the pandemic and associated stay-at-home orders, social distancing requirements, quarantines, and closures and cancelations of events and environments where people would normally have opportunities for social interaction. The published literature does not yet reflect how libraries and departments have attempted to address these issues. Anecdotally, at the author's institution, the technical services department has experimented with providing opportunities for socialization by holding a regular, optional, online meeting for departmental personnel. This meeting is held via Zoom and occurs at the same time during every workday, in a thirty-minute time slot. There are no attendance requirements; those who wish to attend may drop in as they are able during the time allotted for the meeting. The meetings began after the department transitioned to remote work in mid-March 2020; and at the end of each subsequent month, the department has discussed and informally assessed interest in and need for continuing the sessions. All personnel who have provided

feedback have indicated that they find value in the opportunities to check in informally and have requested that the meetings continue as a daily opportunity. Work-related projects and issues are sometimes discussed, as well as more informal discussion of how team members and their families are doing and other topics unrelated to work. The department has also used these meetings to test different online meeting systems in order to allow personnel to gain facility with the available resources and to determine the system that works best for everyone. Google Hangouts, WebEx, and Zoom have all been tested in these meetings; Zoom has been the overwhelming favorite of attendees, leading to its selection as the regular system for holding the meetings. These meetings had the added benefit of helping personnel become comfortable and adept at using online meeting technology, which has been increasingly important as all meetings are now held virtually.

Another challenge that appears in the literature is difficulty with work-life balance when working remotely–especially when working from home (Black & Hyslop, 1995; Duncan, 2008). In their case study from Michigan State University, Black and Hyslop (1995) noted that as they prepared the proposal for a work-from-home placement for a cataloger, the challenge of maintaining separation between work and home life was a potential issue they identified. Duncan (2008) indicated that defining boundaries between work time and non-work time when working from home was "perhaps the greatest personal challenge" she faced during her remote work experience; she also noted that this issue was exacerbated by the difference in time zones between her institution and her temporary home (p. 218).

### Availability of tools and resources

One challenge noted in the early literature on remote work in technical services is the lack of availability of some resources to remote workers. Black and Hyslop (1995) discussed the limitations of remote cataloging work due to the lack of Internet access to certain cataloging resources. Bénaud, Steinhagen, and Moynahan (2000) echoed this problem, writing that some resources and tools needed for cataloging work were available only in the catalog department. The intervening years have brought significant technological developments and have seen increased creation and sharing of online documentation in the technical services community, which has helped to address this issue. Still, remote work situations–especially those that may

arise unexpectedly–underline the value of updated and accessible documentation on local workflows and practices. For departments and libraries seeking more information on local online documentation portals, the author provides examples in a previous column (Craft, 2019).

### Benefits

The implementation of remote work in library technical services is not without potential benefits. With their test of flexible schedules and remote work options in technical services, Bénaud, Steinhagen, and Moynahan (2000) saw increased efficiency within their department, a reduction in the amount of sick leave used by employees, and found that the department gained a better ability to predict staffing needs, among other positive outcomes. Remote work has also been implemented as a way to provide flexibility and improve employee morale (Black & Hyslop, 1995; Duncan, 2008; Johnson, 1998). In this vein, Germano (2010) wrote "workers who are denied flexibility are apt to display reduced productivity, reduced willingness to work longer hours, and reduced interest in taking on additional projects. These factors indicate that inflexible organizations are less productive organizations." Along with improving morale, remote work can also contribute to improved employee retention, leading to less turnover and potential time and financial savings on hiring and training new employees (Hickey & Tang, 2015).

Implementation of remote work may allow other opportunities for cost savings for employers. Hickey and Tang (2015) point out that remote work situations may allow employers to rethink physical workspaces and potentially use those spaces differently, while also potentially saving money on utility costs if institutional spaces are unoccupied or occupied less. The impact of remote work on existing physical library spaces is also supported by Black and Hyslop (1995), who note that remote work conditions can allow for less crowded physical workspaces within libraries. This benefit is a necessity in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, as employers must prevent crowding and increase the physical space between individuals due to health concerns and social distancing requirements.

### Future directions

The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing at the time of this writing, and its full impact on technical services, libraries, and life in general is not yet known. Also

unknown is the length of time libraries will continue to have staff work remotely due to pandemic conditions. Many questions remain unanswered regarding library technical services departments and the transition to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- How did library technical services departments handle this transition?
- What challenges were faced in this transition?
- What innovations were made, resources were created, or lessons were learned in supporting and managing this transition?
- How have departments and libraries handled the provision of technology, isolation of personnel, and other issues discussed above?
- How will the pandemic affect library technical services operations in the long-term?

Answers to, discussion of, and reflection on these and related topics has the potential to assist members of the technical services and library communities in learning from one another and implementing practices that may help support personnel, departments, libraries, and patrons as communities continue to manage their work and lives in the face of the pandemic.

## Conclusion

While many of the issues discussed above arose before the pandemic, COVID-19 has forced many libraries and library personnel to confront the realities of remote work in an unexpected and unprecedented manner. The typical expectations of careful planning and preparation that would precede a new work situation have been forced aside by the necessity of separating individuals to support public health. The literature offers both challenges and benefits associated with remote work, as well as information that can assist with planning for and managing these transitions. However, the literature does not yet reflect the large-scale transition to remote work in libraries and how departments, institutions, and individuals have handled this unprecedented situation. This column seeks to provide an informational baseline reflecting pre-pandemic lessons learned in order to help inform and further discussion on these topics as the situation unfolds.

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