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Into the Unknown: Onboarding Early Career Professionals in a Remote Work Environment
Vers l'inconnu : l'intégration des professionnels en début de carrière dans un environnement de travail à distance

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Article abstract

This paper explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of three individuals, all of whom are early-career professionals: Julia, a term librarian for an academic library who began her role as the pandemic was causing widespread change; Christine, a recent graduate who started her job search during the pandemic; and Kevin, a current Master of Library and Information Science student who started and completed his co-op in an entirely remote setting. This paper explores their perspectives on job precarity in a remote work environment and provides reflections on working in a library setting during the pandemic. To bring together the key themes experienced throughout this period, several recommendations are offered to managers and early-career librarians as they navigate this new landscape. For employers, advertising new employees, organizing their onboarding, and ensuring concerted efforts for introductions are recommended. For new librarians, forming communities of practice and building relationships in the remote work environment to battle feelings of isolation and not belonging are recommended. The precarious roles most early-career librarians find themselves in is unlikely to improve during the pandemic. The perspectives and reflections shared in this paper are intended to provide a transparent view into the experiences of three early career librarians, what they have learned, and how they are maximizing their time in the remote work environment.

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Abstract / Résumé

This paper explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of three individuals, all of whom are early-career professionals: Julia, a term librarian for an academic library who began her role as the pandemic was causing widespread change; Christine, a recent graduate who started her job search during the pandemic; and Kevin, a current Master of Library and Information Science student who started and completed his co-op in an entirely remote setting. This paper explores their perspectives on job precarity in a remote work environment and provides reflections on working in a library setting during the pandemic. To bring together the key themes experienced throughout this period, several recommendations are offered to managers and early-career librarians as they navigate this new landscape. For employers, advertising new

employees, organizing their onboarding, and ensuring concerted efforts for introductions are recommended. For new librarians, forming communities of practice and building relationships in the remote work environment to battle feelings of isolation and not belonging are recommended. The precarious roles most early-career librarians find themselves in is unlikely to improve during the pandemic. The perspectives and reflections shared in this paper are intended to provide a transparent view into the experiences of three early career librarians, what they have learned, and how they are maximizing their time in the remote work environment.

Cet article explore l'impact de la pandémie de la COVID-19 du point de vue de trois personnes, toutes des professionnels en début de carrière: Julia, une bibliothécaire universitaire à durée déterminée, qui a commencé son poste alors que la pandémie entraînait des changements importants; Christine, une diplômée récente, qui a entamé sa recherche d'emploi pendant la pandémie; et Kevin, un étudiant à la maîtrise en bibliothéconomie et en sciences de l'information, qui a commencé et complété un stage co-op entièrement réalisé à distance. Cet article explore leurs perspectives sur la précarité d'emploi dans un environnement de travail à distance et fournit des réflexions sur le travail en bibliothèque pendant la pandémie. Afin de rassembler les thèmes importants ressortant de cette période, plusieurs recommandations sont présentées aux gestionnaires et aux bibliothécaires en début de carrière alors qu'ils apprennent à manœuvrer dans ce nouvel environnement. Pour les employeurs, il est recommandé d'annoncer l'arrivée des nouveaux employés, d'organiser leur intégration et d'assurer des efforts concertés pour les présenter. Pour les nouveaux bibliothécaires, il s'agit de former des communautés de pratique et d'établir des relations dans un environnement de travail à distance afin de contrer les sentiments d'isolation et de non-appartenance. Les rôles précaires dans lesquels se trouvent la plupart des bibliothécaires en début de carrière ne s'amélioreront probablement pas pendant la pandémie. Les perspectives et réflexions partagées dans cet article ont pour but de fournir une vue transparente des expériences de trois bibliothécaires en début de carrière, ce qu'ils ont appris et comment ils maximisent leur temps dans un environnement de travail à distance.

Keywords / Mots-clés

early-career librarianship, remote work, COVID-19, Canada, academic libraries, onboarding practices, community of practice

bibliothécaires en début de carrière, travail à distance, COVID-19, Canada, bibliothèques universitaires, pratiques d'intégration, communauté de pratique

Introduction

In library and information science (LIS) programs across Canada, students graduate with an understanding that their early careers will include multiple contract positions and involve competition among high-achieving colleagues. New job openings in the coming decade (2019–2028) were projected to total 5,400 as a result of expansion and replacement demand, yet 5,600 new job seekers were expected to enter the market to fill those jobs, leaving at least 200 LIS job seekers with no work in their field (Canada,

Job Bank, 2020). Despite the odds, the authors of this article found themselves at three distinct points in their careers at the start of 2020: One was set to graduate from library school, one would enter an eight-month co-op placement in the middle of their studies, and one would start a new contract as a librarian.

In mid-March 2020, the world stopped. Following a global pandemic declaration by the World Health Organization on March 11, the Canadian government implemented travel restrictions, business closures, and physical distancing measures in response to the increasing spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19 (Statistics Canada, 2020b). These public-health measures led to the intentional shutdown of the economy (Statistics Canada, 2020a). LIS professionals with stable, continuing positions found themselves suddenly working full-time in a remote environment, while early-career professionals faced unexpected levels of job precarity exacerbated by dwindling employment opportunities and the online experience.

This article will centre the experiences of three early-career professionals navigating the LIS job market and the remote work environment during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors will also share their advice for onboarding practices to help precarious employees make meaningful connections with their geographically distanced co-workers.

Perspectives on Precarity

Christine, Graduating Class of 2020:

In April 2020, I graduated into a widespread lockdown that was both necessary and devastating. I joined more than three million Canadians who lost their jobs in the spring of 2020, and my partner and I joined over 845,000 Canadian couples that saw both partners unemployed in the same period (Statistics Canada, 2020a, 2020b). In one week, I was notified that five of my job competitions for a librarian role had been suspended and three conferences I applied to were cancelled with no plans to reschedule.

While in library school, I learned that the contracts I would take in my first years after graduation would be precarious roles marked by a lack of stability, a lack of financial security, and a great deal of professional uncertainty (Henninger, Brons, Riley, & Yin, 2019; Lacey, 2019). But what would I do if there were no jobs at all?

What followed was a long spring and summer of library-adjacent remote volunteer work and part-time work with a former employer who welcomed me back. I leveraged my first career across a new run of job applications, which paid off when I was hired into a one-year contract as a library assistant at an academic library at the end of August.

I knew I could not waste this opportunity; I had to make an impression with the team and look for professional-development opportunities to keep me competitive in an ever-shrinking job market. What I hadn't anticipated were the unique challenges of starting a precarious job in a remote environment.

Kevin, Current LIS Student and Recent Co-op:

In March 2020, as I was preparing to embark on a co-op at my university library, COVID-19 changed everything. As March progressed and many fellow students saw their co-op placements cancelled or delayed, I felt fortunate that the university kept my position. As a Teaching and Learning co-op student, I was primarily going to be doing project work over the summer and would not be teaching until September. I thought, "Everything will be back to normal by then, right?" I believed that I would be able to showcase myself once everyone was back in the workplace. When my co-op began in May 2020, it was evident I would be working remotely the entire time. At once, I had to deal with the challenges associated with navigating the health concerns of the ongoing pandemic and the toll on my mental health related to quarantine and remote work, all while capitalizing on the opportunity ahead of me as a co-op student. My goals and aspirations did not change, but I needed to reassess how I was going to accomplish them.

I am incredibly excited about becoming an academic librarian yet also apprehensive about the precarious work environment. Agostino and Cassidy (2019), reflecting on their experiences as early-career librarians, described the challenge: "It has become difficult to obtain stable employment as a librarian. Instead, finding a job as an early career professional means accepting that you will likely be working on a series of contract or on-call positions for a few years, possibly in part-time positions" (p. 5). I am concerned that COVID-19 has accelerated precarity in the workplace, and job availability will be extremely minimal and overly competitive as I graduate. I have participated in the librarian hiring process and witnessed the quality of candidates. Many of them are second career, have an academic specialty in addition to their MLIS, and a wealth of academic activity to draw on. Do I take a library assistant role? How do I build on my current experience upon graduation? I am nervous, apprehensive, and experiencing imposter syndrome as I approach graduation.

Julia, Early-Career Librarian:

Beginning any job, especially at the start of your career, is daunting. Having to navigate a new work environment, new co-workers, and new expectations is stressful at the best of times, and adding the COVID-19 reality into the mix seems to have amplified every little worry inside my mind. I had graduated with my MI in 2018 and had worked various contract positions in both academic and public libraries. While I had interviewed for my current position at the beginning of 2020, once the lockdown began I saw job postings disappear and did not believe anything would come of my application. Fortunately, I was the successful candidate and began my position two months into the lockdown.

This experience has made me realize all the things I took for granted when I actually was able to work from work: how vital everyday interactions with colleagues, students, and faculty are in creating feelings of belonging, purpose, and value; how much easier it was to make meaningful and long-lasting connections with colleagues and peers; how working in an office surrounded by colleagues leads to organic collaboration on

projects through seemingly insignificant conversations when walking to a meeting, grabbing coffee, or sitting down for lunch. All of us are experiencing this intangible loss in our work life, and this is heightened for those of us starting new positions—especially those in limited-term positions with only a finite amount of time to make a lasting impression.

Remote Work and Enhanced Job Precarity

Remote work is not a new concept, yet the pandemic created an overnight shift into unknown territory for many employees: the establishment of a professional workspace and the adoption of a worker mindset in the home (Hernandez & Abigail, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, most Canadian employees (82%) "worked primarily from an external workplace" that included in-person networks of colleagues. Now, at least 59% of employees are working in a remote environment, most for the first time (PwC Canada, n.d.). This transition to the digital office was marked by heightened levels of anxiety over personal health and the safety of loved ones, fears over a looming economic recession, stress caused by increased social isolation, and a lost sense of belonging to an organization when working from home (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021). For full-time, continuing employees, this environment was a challenging new reality; for job seekers and contract workers, it became a new barrier to overcome.

In the pre-pandemic world, workers in precarious roles were already living in "a state of material and psychological vulnerability" marked by uncertain employment duration and "a lack of access to the social protections and benefits" available to full-time employees (Henninger, Brons, Riley, & Yin, 2019, p. 2). In Canadian libraries, employees in contract and auxiliary roles have described the negative outcomes of these employment practices, including a lack of work-life balance, increased isolation, a lack of integration with their organization, and growing pressure to neglect personal health in exchange for more work and the chance for continued employment (Henninger, Brons, Riley, & Yin, 2019). During the last three recessions (1981–1982, 1990–1992, and 2008–2009), "young workers, less educated workers, and recently hired workers were more likely to be laid off—temporarily or permanently—than other employees", and this is still the case in our new pandemic era (Chan, Morissette, & Qiu, 2020, p. 1). The uncertainties of life in a global pandemic have enhanced that base level of vulnerability for precarious workers, and these new challenges need to be addressed in the onboarding process for new hires.

Reflections on Our Experiences in Librarianship During COVID-19

Christine's Perspective:

On one hand, a shift to an online environment led to unexpected opportunities: I was able to attend more conferences and webinars than ever before, especially given the rise of free admission; I had time for professional development in the evenings thanks to my non-existent commute; and I was able to network with librarians across Canada and around the world with a simple Zoom invitation.

On the other hand, connecting with colleagues in my own library system required unanticipated levels of coordination, which led to a slower onboarding process. I realized I was missing out on the informal connections that naturally arise in face-to-face interactions and in casual conversations in the office (Golden & Gajendran, 2019). In-person interactions also allow new employees to observe their peers in action, and to help them understand how the team works together. Sajni Lacey (2019), in her article on job precarity and contract work in Canadian academic libraries, noted the personal strain involved in making connections while working on a limited term, and how the onus for on-the-job success often falls to the employee; in a pandemic-induced remote environment, precarious workers are now contending with the realities of an "out of sight, out of mind attitude" (Oz & Crooks, 2020, p. 7), which could have harmful effects on their long-term career development overall.

Kevin's Perspective:

I wanted to maximize my time at the library by leaving a positive and lasting impression on my peers, the leadership team, and across the library itself. As a mature student with years of workplace experience, I understand the importance of relationship building and cultivating a positive brand. In the remote work environment, I found the process of forming relationships, showcasing my work, and finding opportunities outside of my day-to-day accountabilities particularly difficult early on. I attribute much of this to the lack of social interaction and water-cooler conversation. I did not know what others were working on, nor did they know what I was working on. I had to consciously find ways to showcase my work and prove to others that I can produce high-quality outputs without constant supervision. That said, while this may have been easier accomplished in a physical workplace, it was not impossible to build relationships and make an impact remotely. Through an eagerness to accept new challenges and be the first to raise my hand, regular touchpoints with my manager, active involvement in team meetings including providing personal updates on my projects, and significant committee work I have been able to forge new relationships, take on new projects, and make an impact. The major theme throughout was forging a conscious and constant stream of communication that showcased my work, opening more opportunities as I proved myself across the library.

When working remotely, particularly as a new employee on a short-term contract, it takes time to establish belonging. The library executed admirably on professional development opportunities for all co-op students. However, the success of my co-op is predicated on two specific communities of practice that were formed. The first community of practice was created for the co-op students at the university library. Moffatt (2020) perfectly described the community of practice from her co-op as: "a supportive, non-competitive environment for us to learn from one another and to reflect on our placements" (p. 226). This was needed more than ever in the remote work environment. Our challenges were new but not unique, and we had each other to turn to for encouragement. Lacey and Parlette-Stewart (2017) described early-career academic librarianship as being rife with imposter syndrome as librarians forge their path through contract work and temporary placements, often feeling demoralized and isolated. It was

important that us co-op students lift each other up, encourage each other, and succeed as a group.

The second community of practice I formed was with two new hires to the university library and recent MLIS graduates. This community of practice has been focused on sharing conference opportunities, partnering on research projects, and building a bond that will last as we all move on to our next opportunities. The librarianship world is small, and there is high likelihood that this community of practice will see its members working at different libraries within six months (or in my case, working on finishing my degree). The communities of practice have been incredibly influential in navigating the remote work environment during the pandemic. They have helped to create social outlets where opinions can be shared freely, advice can be sought, and success is defined at the group level.

Julia's Perspective:

Early-career librarians will not know of everything that is required or expected of them, especially when pursuing positions within academic libraries. Establishing relationships and communities of practice with peers in similar positions, or who had recently gone through these processes, is invaluable. My first position after graduation was across the country at the University of Alberta, and while the onboarding and orientation process was necessary, the community of practice that was established was more instrumental to my success. These colleagues had been in my position not that long ago and knew the answers to questions I hadn't even thought to ask. They acted as a network of support, encouragement, and shared experience. With this experience at the forefront of my mind, I knew that I had to make meaningful connections with colleagues when I started my position and knew the value in creating a community of practice. Connecting with two colleagues who are also new hires, who are also early career librarians, and who also began during the pandemic, allowed for the creation of a space where we could collaborate, share our experiences, advocate and support one another, and provide advice. Without such relationship building, working remotely during such uncertain times could very well threaten one's wellbeing and work performance.

Recommendations

Cultivating a sense of belonging for new hires is a critical aspect of the onboarding process, one that has been addressed in the literature on remote work environments. Hafermalz and Reimer (2021) argued that the issue of belonging is two-fold: Remote workers need to build a sense of professional belonging among their colleagues while also maintaining a distinction from their clients or users, and remote workers need to build a sense of themselves as members of the same team even though their teammates are geographically and physically distant.

Managers and supervisors of new hires, as well as new hires themselves, need to understand that beginning a position during Covid-19's remote work environment requires more of them—including continuous effort and determination—to succeed in the position. Translating previous onboarding activities into a virtual space does not

meet the needs of new hires, and as such managers and supervisors need to encourage colleagues and team members to connect with new hires. In this section, we will highlight key strategies managers can use to ease the onboarding transition for new employees in an online space, and we will also point to strategies that early-career professionals can use to cultivate a sense of belonging in a remote environment.

For Managers

Advertise the New Hire Before Their First Day

Traditional methods of onboarding focus on socializing new hires within the pre-existing frame of the organization. For example, managers will often focus on communicating local norms, sharing insights on work culture, and providing other instruction on how team members interact with one another (Keisling & Laning, 2016). One major issue with this approach is the fact that work cultures have had to change dramatically within our current remote work environment, and these cultural norms no longer map in a clean or clear way to actual working conditions. Instead, managers could flip that framework and advertise a new hire's strengths and experiences before their first day on the job (Keisling & Laning, 2016). As a result, team members have more time to consider how new hires could be integrated into projects and workflows, and new hires could benefit from spending less time advertising their own skills and having more time to get involved.

Go Beyond Standard Introductions

In the pre-pandemic world, one-on-one introductions with team members were a helpful addition to the onboarding process. Meeting with key people such as supervisors, library administrators, and peers in other departments was considerably more helpful than following training checklists, namely due to the informal, relaxed nature of these interactions (Keisling & Laning, 2016).

In an online environment, introductions and one-on-one meetings with colleagues are not enough. Opportunities for new hires to observe how their colleagues interact with each other and inhabit their roles as librarians are missing in a remote work environment, which translates to missed chances to build a sense of solidarity between team members (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021). Instead, new hires should have the chance to attend team members' committee and working-group meetings, to shadow and collaborate on ongoing projects, to experience examples of synchronous and asynchronous library-led sessions, and to connect with colleagues in meaningful ways. Without such opportunities for connection, disconnect from colleagues and a sense of isolation is especially exacerbated for new hires. It is important to note that the phenomenon known as Zoom fatigue, where "tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from overusing virtual video-conferencing platforms," (Wiederhold, 2020) is real, but it needs to be balanced with the remote worker's experience of isolation (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021; Wang et al., 2020).

For New Hires

Join (or Build) a Community of Practice

Building communities of practice has come up repeatedly in the reflection of our experiences. Connecting online, especially under the circumstances brought on by the pandemic, requires more energy and effort than felt in traditional workplaces. These relationships and support networks are vital in creating a sense of belonging. Remote work is isolating, and depending on the nature of work, may contain little interaction with peers and co-workers on a regular basis. Relationship building is important from a professional sense, but the personal benefits should not be dismissed. Getting acquainted personally with coworkers helps to bring out the commonalities of experience. It's likely that feelings of inadequacy and stress related to the pandemic may be felt by many co-workers and peers, but this is all unknown without conscious, planned, and well-executed discussion that is not work related. We urge you to take time in as many interactions with your peers as possible to engage in personal conversation, see how everyone is coping, talk about what entertainment is helping create a clearer mind. We also urge you to form professional alliances, share opportunities, engage in group projects, and ultimately work with your communities of practice just as you would in a physical setting. The opportunities are still there, it just takes a more conscious approach to meeting and discussing the opportunities in a remote environment.

Conclusion

Throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, new and emerging librarians have faced enhanced levels of job precarity as a result of our remote work environment. In this article, three early-career librarians used their own experiences throughout the pandemic as a launch point to discuss the increasing barriers new professionals face in our field. New hires—especially those in contract and auxiliary roles—need increased support from managers and supervisors in order to ensure a smooth transition to a socially distanced team, and new hires need to look for opportunities to build communities on their own terms.

At the time this article was written, the first round of COVID-19 vaccines was administered in Canada (Aiello & Forani, 2020), and Canadians had reason to hope for a fresh start in 2021. As a result, concerted efforts to develop and support early-career librarians need to be a top priority moving forward to ensure our field continues to grow and evolve to meet our users' needs.

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