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Editorial

Mary Beth Weber



This past week marked the one-year anniversary of my staff and me working from home. When we packed up our cubicles and offices in March 2020, no one expected to be working remotely from home for long. We honestly expected to return in a few weeks or at least by the end of April. In the meantime, the university kept extending our work-from-home agreements. During the past year, we have acquired new skills and ways of working. For example, we have mastered how to use WebEx and Zoom for meetings and have realized that this technology can make our meetings more effective. Although some people complain of Zoom fatigue, we have found that our meetings are shorter, and no one lingers afterward. We may start meetings with small talk, but when we are done, people are ready to sign off. Participants who may have difficulty speaking up can choose to use the chat box, and entering terms like “stack” in the chat box helps to ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak and in a predetermined order. It avoids having everyone try to speak at once and ensures all have a chance to speak.

The lack of a commute for many of us has meant an earlier starting time or starting a day without rushing out the door and navigating traffic jams or construction. It has enabled some of my employees (as well as myself) time to exercise before work. It can also mean time to eat a more substantial breakfast or lunch that is not rushed. Time spent with families, loved ones, and pets is also more easily managed.

There are challenges in working from home that include sharing a workspace with children, spouses, and pets. Parents may have the additional challenge of having children at home who are learning remotely while they are working. There might also be disruptions that one may not get when working at the office, such as garbage pick up or landscapers outside the window shouting and using leaf blowers. People frequently have had to make do with what spaces and equipment they have at home. Most libraries lack the funding to provide equipment to employees working remotely, and others permitted employees to bring home chairs and desktops. Despite these challenges, we as a profession have persevered.

Several of my colleagues from other libraries have returned to work on-site. Some work hybrid schedules, and others have returned to work 100 percent on-site. In my case, my staff returned to work in August and September 2020, while the librarians continue to work remotely. It has not been determined who will return to work and when, or how our library system will reopen. It is the hope that we will return to work in the fall of 2021, and it will be a gradual return.

Going forward, there is no doubt that this experience will change how we work and provide services. We have proven that technical services functions can be provided remotely or in a hybrid environment. Vendors who provide outsourced services have successfully done so for years. In addition to ensuring uninterrupted and efficient services to users, the ability to work remotely or on a hybrid schedule can enhance job performance (and job satisfaction) for some employees. I suspect there will be an increase in libraries that provide flexible schedules or

reconfigured workspaces to ensure a safe and hygienic environment. Some of my colleagues from other academic libraries have reported that their university administrators have seen this as an opportunity to reconsider library real estate. There have been many references to “returning to normal,” but that raises the question of how “normal” is defined. We cannot return to how we worked previously for several reasons. The pandemic has led us to examine how we work, staffing levels, and priorities. We have seen a gradual shift in the materials we handle and associated processes due to a greater emphasis on acquiring and making available electronic resources. Some libraries no longer have serials librarians or departments and that work has been subsumed under electronic resources management. Archives and special collections, which deal with realia and rare materials, also have taken a major focus on digitized collections and finding aids, for example. Cataloging departments have focused more on original materials as vendor supplied cataloging in the form of record sets has become common as staffing has decreased. We are already shifting as a profession, and the shift in how and where we work, plus how we deliver those services, is a logical next step.

Not surprisingly, there has been a proliferation of presentations and papers on how COVID-19 has impacted our lives and work. There are numerous calls for chapter and paper proposals on the topic. This issue includes the first paper I have received related to remote operations due to COVID. On a personal note, I am also working on a publication related to the topic. This leads to my usual overview of the contents of this issue:

- In their paper “Exploring the Impact of Digitization on Print Usage,” Teper and Kuipers explore the

belief held by librarians and administrators that digitization and access of items through the HathiTrust Digital Library may reduce or eliminate demand for the corresponding print content. They provide a data-driven examination of the use of their institution’s print items that correspond to the digital materials deposited into HathiTrust, and detail the results and process by which data was gathered, managed, and digested to yield the results.

- “On the State of Genre/Form Vocabulary: A Quantitative Analysis of LCGFT Data in WorldCat,” Bitter and Tosaka report on a quantitative analysis of the LCGFT vocabulary within a large set of MARC bibliographic data retrieved from the OCLC WorldCat database. Their intent was to provide a detailed analysis of the outcomes of the LCGFT project that launched by the Library of Congress in 2007. The findings point to a moderate increase in LCGFT use over time, yet the vocabulary has not been applied to the fullest extent possible in WorldCat.
- Gentry’s paper “Digital Collections at a Distance: Telework during the COVID-19 Pandemic” details how a team at her library that was tasked with the creation of digital collections succeeded at telework and executed essential functions despite not being able to digitize new content from March to July 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is her hope that managers of similar types of units will gain strategies to create similar telework projects at their institution and she shares the lessons learned while working and supervising employees remotely.
- Book reviews, courtesy of *LRTS* Book Review Editor Elyssa Gould.