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Caring for our colleagues

Wellness and support strategies for remote library teams

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for academic and research libraries and those working within them. Nearly everything that we do has been questioned and re-envisioned, and our days are filled with new work, uncertainty, and isolation. Because of this, one of the areas that library leaders must invest in re-envisioning is how we can best support the well-being and morale of our library colleagues. This article identifies and discusses simple, informal, practical, and easy strategies that library leaders can use to support the physical, emotional, spiritual, professional, social, and mental well-being of their teams in remote and hybrid working environment.

Work during the pandemic

In early spring 2020 academic libraries took the unprecedented measure of shifting significant portions of their operations to remote or virtual environments. Six months later, many library teams and operations are still functioning in this environment. Anecdotally, we've seen and heard from colleagues about the struggles to separate work life from home life, some working many additional hours, others having to shift schedules earlier or later in the day to care for children or elderly relatives during the normal business hours. For those employees who live alone, the continuing quarantine and lack of social interaction has created strains on mental and emotional wellness. While most gyms have reopened or home gym equipment has been obtained, many individuals are still missing out on regular physical activity typically gained through climbing office stairs, walking the halls of the library, or walking across campus for a meeting. Additionally, the uncertainty of the pandemic, the fall semester, and the upcoming cold season, continues to generate anxiety among many, as does the transition back into physical work environments for some in our library communities. Needless to say, all of this has had a significant impact on the overall well-being of colleagues. Consequently, the ongoing public health considerations have led managers and leaders to think creatively to develop a supportive work environment for remote personnel.

Although this discussion focuses on teams in the remote working environment, our ideas and tips can be adapted for teams in physical and hybrid work environments. For the reasons mentioned above, wellness is critical for individuals and teams, regardless of the environment or model of work. Although the current pandemic has highlighted certain aspects of wellness in the workplace, wherever that is, it is our hope that we can carry these considerations forward as we continue to grow our capacity for empathy, support, and wellness at work.

Literature review

Remote workers and virtual teams are not new to the work landscape, and a significant body of research and literature has been written for managers on building and enhancing team

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cohesion, creating productive work environments, and identifying the common challenges and solutions unique to remote teams.

Communication is one area in which remote teams face a specific challenge. In-person non-verbal cues, eye contact, and subtle voice tone differences are lost in the virtual environment. According to research by Tugrul Daim et al.,[1] remote teams will benefit from trust building that includes communication that is social in nature and predictable in timing and frequency. This recommendation was further supported by Ayoung Suh and Kyung-shik Shin,[2] who found that team building and trust were best established through virtual teams by 1) designing and developing communal communication systems that can support online social networking, 2) facilitating frequent socio-emotional contacts of group members, and 3) increasing the generalized norms of reciprocity that mediate trust and knowledge sharing. While communication is a key component of developing virtual teams, it is not the only driver of supporting the well-being of colleagues.

Additionally, research by Leo Lo and Bethany Herman[3] found that numerous factors may influence the self-reported well-being of library employees, including the number of hours worked, organizational staff size, and more. How this is impacted by the current pandemic is only beginning to be explored and understood. Specifically for the remote environment, research by Gallup[4] indicates that managers need to be especially attuned to the physical wellness needs of employees who are working remotely due to the coronavirus. Additionally, mental health has been found to be of considerable importance for many newly remote teams.[5] While these strategies are key for developing or supporting connections among virtual team members and can aid in supporting a dimension of well-being of library personnel, they don't specifically address all of the well-being needs of an individual.

Specific strategies for supporting remote teams

Library leaders can build a portfolio of support strategies and morale boosters for remote teams by considering the different dimensions of their team members' well-being: physical, emotional, spiritual, professional, social, and mental.[6] Here, we offer some examples of ideas, activities, and strategies for each of these six categories in order to help you get started with this portfolio. Some of these strategies require nothing more than a bit of planning and execution time, while others may need a bit more investment from you. The examples of wellness and support strategies described below are all ones that the authors either have used themselves or have been suggested by team members or peers. Many thanks to our team members, colleagues, and peers who have brainstormed these ideas and strategies with us when we asked, "How can we support and engage our newly remote teams?"

Physical
Strategies that focus on the physical dimension help individuals stay fit, healthy, and energized. Movement, nutrition, and rest are all important components to overall health, and the strategies below can help encourage habits that support physical wellness.

• Scheduling virtual group fitness sessions, like yoga, that require little or no special equipment.

• Coordinating group wellness challenges, such as a walking challenge that will encourage team members to walk a certain number of steps or walk certain distances on a regular basis.

• Encouraging team members to continue to use sick time and step away from work when they're not feeling well and checking in on team members to offer help and support during these times.

• Coordinating recipe swaps in which team members can share their favorite healthy (and nonhealthy) recipes with each other.

Emotional
Strategies that focus on the emotional dimension help individuals connect with, experience, and reflect on emotions. Listening to music, crafting, and journaling are all activities that can encourage emotional well-being. The

following strategies can help team members engage in these activities.

- Building a shared playlist by asking team members to share two or three favorite songs. For an added element of fun, keep the song submissions a secret and have team members guess which of their colleagues submitted which songs.
- Scheduling simple virtual crafting sessions, such as coloring. Consider sending craft kits or coloring books to team members so that everyone can join in the session with the supplies that they need.
- Building quiet journaling time into team meetings so that team members will have protected time to journal or reflect in another way that may be comfortable to them.

Spiritual

Strategies that focus on the spiritual dimension inspire us to spend time caring for the human spirit and remembering to connect with each other and with something bigger than ourselves. Spiritual does not necessarily equal religious, but it can, so keep in mind team members' diverse approaches to spirituality when encouraging spiritual support strategies like the examples described below.

- Coordinating group mindfulness sessions, such as group meditation or breathing exercises.
- Encouraging team members to spend time outdoors and with nature, and have them share photos of what they saw or were inspired by.

Professional

Strategies that focus on the professional dimension support healthy and engaging workplace practices. These strategies can be particularly important for managers and supervisors who want to create workplace environments that promote boundaries and well-being for their team members.

- Limiting virtual meetings to 45 minutes (or less) so that team members get a small break between virtual meetings.
- Committing to and enforcing a shared meeting-free day (Fridays are a popular choice for this) so that team members have time to focus on project-based work or engage in the other wellness activities on this list.

- Actively listening to team members about what might make their work schedules more flexible and helping them achieve that flexibility.

Social

Strategies that focus on the social dimension encourages individuals to connect with others and sustain and enhance these relationships. Social wellness strategies can promote social interaction among team members and encourage team members to strengthen their personal relationships, as well.

- Scheduling virtual coffee breaks, lunches, or happy hours and keeping the conversation light and nonwork related, as much as possible.
- Using your virtual communication space (such as email, Microsoft Teams, or Slack) to engage team members in informal conversations. Asking team members to share photos of their co-workers (pets, children, spouses, or houseplants), to share a meme that illustrates their day so far, or to respond to a silly conversation starter can all be ways to virtually engage team members throughout the week.
- Mailing a care package to team members to remind them that you care about them and to encourage them to spend time with close friends and family. Ideas can include a movie-night care package with popcorn and hot chocolate; a game night care package with silly, inexpensive games; or cozy self-care items such as socks and candles.

Mental

Strategies that focus on the mental dimension excite and stimulate the mind. Although our minds may be challenged and stimulated by work activities throughout the day, it can be important to encourage team members to engage their minds in other topics, as well.

- Coordinate a virtual book or journal discussion, where team members select readings that are interesting and may not be something they would otherwise read.
- Encourage discussions in your virtual communication spaces about movies, podcasts,

television shows, and books that team members find compelling.

- Collaborate with your team to identify a new skill or area of knowledge that you all would like to learn together, and make it happen.

Considerations and discussion

As you consider options that may work for your team, keep in mind the unique backgrounds, experiences, contexts, and personalities of your team members. For example, your team members may recoil in horror at the thought of a group yoga session, but be super energized by a virtual walking competition or recipe swap. Similarly, make sure to keep these additional activities and support options manageable and flexible. The goal is to support and care for our colleagues, rather than to add additional work or activities onto plates that are already overflowing with commitments and responsibilities. Spend time thinking about what will be most useful, most supportive, and most relevant for your particular team and their needs.

We recognize that these wellness and support strategies are supplemental to the well-established best practices that leaders can and should use for supporting virtual teams. These best practices include establishing effective communication methods, setting clear expectations, individualizing coaching and management efforts, and proactively managing workloads, among others. Many resources discussing these best practices exist, and we recommend reviewing some of these, like the examples we include in the notes.[7]

Much of the literature and guidance on wellness in the workplace places the responsibility for health and wellness squarely on the shoulders of the individual employees. We believe it is the responsibility of the leaders and of the organization to create environments and build new supportive infrastructures that care for people—especially during remote work, but during "normal" times, as well. Again, the list of examples we have shared here is certainly not comprehensive, and we would like to invite readers to continue growing this list by sharing your own examples or reporting on how some of these ideas may have worked for your team. Share your examples and experiences by using #libraryremoteteams. We look forward to continuing this conversation and to enhancing our strategies for supporting, engaging, and caring for our colleagues.

Notes

1. Tugrul Daim, A. Ha, S. Reutiman, B. Hughes, U. Pathak, W. Bynum, and A. Bhatla, "Exploring the communication breakdown in global virtual teams," *International Journal of Project Management* 30 no. 2 (2012): 199–212, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2011.06.004.

2. Ayoung Suh and K. Shin, "Exploring the effects of online social ties on knowledge sharing: A comparative analysis of collocated vs. dispersed teams," *Journal of Information Science* 36 (2010) (4), 443–463, https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551510369632.

3. Leo Lo and Bethany Herman, "An Investigation of Factors Impacting the Wellness of Academic Library Employees," *College & Research Libraries* [S.l.], 78 no. 6 (2017): 789, ISSN 2150-6701. Available at https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/16736/18248, accessed: October 7, 2020, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.6.789.

4. Bridgette M. Brawner, "# SendHelpNow: Mental wellness and virtual connection in the age of coronavirus," *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* (2020).

5. "The Six Dimension of Wellness," National Wellness Institute, accessed September 30, 2020, https://nationalwellness.org/resources/six-dimensions-of-wellness/.

6. Carli Spina, "Can you hear me now? Library managers on the challenges of leading from a distance," *American Libraries,* September 1, 2020, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/09/01/can-you-hear-me-now-remote-management/; Barbara Z. Larson, Susan R. Vroman, and Erin E. Makarius, "A guide to managing your (newly) remote workers," *Harvard Business Review,* March 18, 2020, https://hbr.org/2020/03/a-guide-to-managing-your-newly-remote-workers; Jennifer Robison, "COVID-19 has my teams working remotely: A guide for leaders," Gallup, accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.gallup.com/workplace/288956/covid-teams-working-remotely-guide-leaders.aspx.