



IJIDI: Book Review

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Fostering Wellness in the Workplace: A Handbook for Libraries, by Bobbi L. Newman (2022), is a slim, five-chapter volume featuring a chapter from 2022 American Library Association (ALA) Spectrum Doctoral Fellow Twanna Hodge about cultural humility and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and their essential role in workplace wellness. Overall, the recommendations in this book do not put all the responsibility for workplace wellness on the individual library worker but rather, explores the accountability of the library managers, directors, and the institutions themselves. Newman (2022) suggests a holistic institutional approach to advocating and implementing workplace wellness since “changes at an institutional level have a more significant effect on morale, burnout, and staff wellness than individual efforts” (p. xiii). Several suggestions throughout the book acknowledge that adherence to static guidelines may take extra time, care, budget, and planning for employees and library directors but promise that “the extra time and care will prove well worth the effort” (p. 76). Both Newman and Hodge’s respective chapters on DEI reference Fobazi Ettarh’s (2018; 2022) critique of libraries as sites of “vocational awe.” Ettarh (2018) states that “‘Vocational awe’ refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that results in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (p. xiv). Ettarh dismantles the idea that librarianship is a sacred calling requiring absolute obedience without any care to the effect such compliance could have on the health and wellness of the librarian. Newman (2022) posits that “employees should not be expected to rely on vocational awe to find satisfaction in working at the library but on management to put a premium on their health and wellness—which benefits everyone involved” (p. 76). The five chapters define health and wellness in the workplace, physical spaces, workplace practices and policies, Hodge’s work with cultural humility and DEI, and how library administration can create a healthy work environment.

Chapter One, entitled “What is Health and Wellness in the Workplace,” lists absenteeism and presenteeism as two effects of an unhealthy work environment. Many might be familiar with the downside of chronic absenteeism of overworked and under-supported library staff but may not be as familiar with presenteeism. Presenteeism could be a staff member who is at work but may be too sick to be effective at their job and may be infecting others, which is often a symptom of

an understaffed library. Newman (2022) states that “it is the responsibility of the library to ensure that desk shifts are covered and to hire enough employees to allow employees to take sick time and vacation time as needed” (p. 10). This seems like an oversimplified solution at a time when budgets have been cut for libraries in many regions of the world. Still, toward the end of the book, Newman (2022) suggests that “a culture of caring can be created where management will handle this responsibility” and “you may need to reduce hours of service either at the desk or at the library” (p. 67). Chapter One also lists compassion, fatigue, and burnout as significant effects of ignoring the health and wellness of librarians and library staff.

“Physical Space in the Library” is the topic for Chapter Two, which discusses ergonomics, temperature, air quality, light, noise, and space allotted to all library workers. Experts can come in and assess each one of these qualities, but Newman (2022) does dedicate space within the chapter for each subtopic. For instance, since most library workers will spend eight hours a day at their desk, care should be taken to ensure their desk is the correct height to encourage good posture and reduce work-related musculoskeletal disorders. Newman (2022) discusses current recommendations to spend a certain amount of time each day standing versus sitting, to avoid wearing strong scents in the library that could adversely affect others, to allow for private space for library workers to decompress even if cubicles are the best solution, and to ensure that all staff have access to as much natural light as possible.

Tackling the topic of “Workplace Practices and Policies” in Chapter Three might sound a bit dull at first glance. Still, many readers would agree that being offered a living wage above the poverty level and being afforded separate vacation and sick time is anything but mundane. Newman (2022) asserts that “a healthy workplace provides separate pools of ample vacation and sick time and a culture where using both are expected” (p. 35) and cites the WorkLife4You program from the US General Services Administration as an excellent example of resources available to employees that should become established sites of information, referral, and support. These resources include telecommuting, flexible work schedules, and whole life care, which “may sound completely out of the realm of many libraries,” Newman concedes, but is nevertheless an example of an organizational initiative that “acknowledges the challenges many of us face that prevent us from being present at work or fully present when we are there. There is no penalty or shame associated with these” (p. 39). This perhaps gets to the heart of what prevents many library workers from feeling as though their institution supports their proper health and wellness, and that is, denying workers might have children or aging parents to care for or that they might better succeed in more flexible work settings and schedules, which Newman (2022) argues is more possible than we may think as long as the goals of the job are still met.

ALA Spectrum Doctoral Fellow (2022) Twanna Hodge was brought in as the author of Chapter Four, which covers “How Cultural Humility, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Are Essential to Workplace Wellness.” This chapter discusses embracing DEI to mitigate the effects of processing emotional labor. Newman (2022) connected the two concepts of DEI and emotional labor in Chapter Three but did not say how or why embracing DEI explicitly mitigates the effects of emotional labor on library staff. Hodge answers the question beautifully by discussing cultural humility, the next stage beyond cultural competency. Hodge states,

Consider whose viewpoints, proposals, and objectives are usually at the center of decision-making processes, and rethink who are typically selected to host/organize wellness events. Are there cross-department/unit/library/are partnerships? Having a partnership/collaboration that benefits everyone involved that does not limit anyone’s

capacity or autonomy in their chosen work or activities is key to cultural humility. (pp. 56-57)

Noticeably, what is emphasized more than once in Hodge's chapter is that there is no such thing as a simple DEI checklist or one-size-fits-all approach to cultural humility, but rather, it is a process that involves careful and continual consideration and discussion to ensure the health and wellness of all library workers who may benefit most from a library that embraces DEI and cultural humility.

Chapter Five, "How Library Administration Can Create a Healthy Work Environment," almost serves as a bit of a review of some of the topics already covered in the previous four chapters, but from the perspective of how library administrators can best put the themes of the book into actual practice. Newman (2022) reminds library administrators that "while it may appear to save money upfront by excluding the factors we have covered, it is more costly in the long run not to include them" (p. 62).

After reviewing the main topics covered in the book, Newman (2022) closes with some critical additional recommendations for library administration, such as an adequately developed new employee orientation, having clear and measurable goals for library staff, fostering a culture of continual learning, and providing opportunities for all staff to take part in the decision-making process. The concept of not only recognizing who carries the weight of emotional labor but also invisible labor was an important point in this chapter.

The conclusion re-emphasized the overall theme of why the topic of health and wellness of library employees is worthy of a book. The time it takes to read it and the library administration's time and effort to implement the prescribed actions are well worth the investment. Newman (2022) advises that "by following the practices in this book, you help ensure that your employees—and your institution as a whole—will flourish not just today but well into the future" (p. 77). It's a worthwhile investment indeed.

References

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