

Library Leadership Faced Numerous Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Evidence Summary

Library Leadership Faced Numerous Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate the experiences, perceptions, and principles put into action by library leaders during the COVID-19 crisis.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – European organization of research libraries webinar series.

Subjects – Webinar attendees and viewers of recorded webinar series.

Methods – In November 2020, the authors conducted two webinars titled “How are Research Libraries leading through COVID-19?” and “New challenges and leading into the post-COVID Recovery for Research Libraries” for the fifth cohort of the LIBER Emerging Leaders’ Programme. The authors drew on their own experiences, addressing leadership in a time of crisis, the challenges of remote leadership, and how to create clarity, build resilience, and catalyze positive

change. The webinars were shared with previous cohorts of the LIBER Emerging Leaders' Programme. Following the webinars, a link to an online survey was emailed to attendees and previous Emerging Leaders, as well as shared on social media. The survey was anonymous, open for a total of 21 days, and included a cover letter that stated its purpose. There were nine survey questions, eight of which were open-ended. The survey questions were grouped into four webinar themes; communication, strategy, values, and changes made during the Covid-19 pandemic that library leaders would like to keep.

Main Results – The total number of respondents was 24; 84% were in leadership roles and 16% were employed as professional librarians. Respondents were asked if their library's strategic goals were still broadly relevant and asked to provide examples for how their existing strategies influenced their research library's responses to the coronavirus crisis. Of the respondents, 91% felt that their library's strategic goals remained relevant during the coronavirus crisis. This was mainly due to the transformation to digitization (30%) and user-centered services (28%) that had occurred prior to the pandemic: digital resources, virtual training, the promotion of open access materials, more electronic books, digital services, and scan and deliver. Respondents reported more user-centered strategies such as new reservation systems for study places, computer loans, click-and-collect, and postal loan. Library values that were challenged during the pandemic were reported in the following categories: user-based (32%), collaboration (21%), social responsibility (21%), openness (16%), and collections or access (10%). Within the theme of communication, 41% described it as negative which was defined as difficult, challenging, insufficient, overwhelming, chaotic, bad, or erratic. Challenges of using online tools to communicate were described in categories of quality (24%), informal exchange (19%), time (21%), skills (17%), technical issues (9%), and leadership and personal issues (10%). The main challenges in communication related to not being able to interpret body language and non-verbal communication, lack of informal conversations or spontaneous interactions, increased time invested working, being permanently connected, difficulty acquiring the skills needed to use various tools, and the technological problems that exist when the network is interrupted. Advantages noted with online communication tools were efficiency and accessibility. When asked for examples of techniques or methods used to communicate with staff, most reported communication as formal (70%) using tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams Planner, Jamboard, and whiteboards, while 22% of respondents reported informal communication strategies such as coffee via zoom, video lunches, informal mails, and a reading club.

Conclusion – The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many challenges for research libraries that included maintaining strategic goals and values, communication, hybrid working, and flexible work schedules.

Commentary

This research was appraised with Boynton and Greenhalgh's (2004) guide to questionnaire research appraisal. The major limitations of the published report are the omission of the total number of attendees or the total number of people who viewed the webinars, as well as incomplete or unclear reporting of results, with few examples of the original open responses. The survey questions were derived from the discussions that took place in the webinar but could be considered narrowly focused.

LIBER (The Association of European Research Libraries) (LIBER, n.d.) is a network of Europe's research libraries and includes approximately 440 national, university, and other libraries across 40 countries. LIBER has a vast membership, yet authors do not share how many members were part of the LIBER Emerging Leaders' Programme who were sent their webinars to view, nor how many members attended one or both webinars. A response of 24 is considered small, however the information gathered from these respondents confirms the many challenges of the pandemic that were previously published in the literature. Since the survey was anonymous and included no demographic markers, it is also unclear if the 24 responses came from members of 24 unique institutions.

The final three questions of the authors' survey relate to changes put in place that respondents felt they should keep post-COVID-19: "What two or three Covid-19 changes would you like to keep related to staff/human resources in the library?," "What two or three Covid-19 changes would you like to keep related to digital in the library?," and "What two or three Covid-19 changes would you like to keep related to physical spaces in the library?" The responses to these questions were not included or not differentiated in the results.

The overarching theme for this publication was based on building resilient libraries. Authors state that the "paper discusses leadership skills and practical techniques that can be applied to help build resilient libraries and deliver positive new change in the post-COVID-19 recovery period." This was not completely achieved. The details of these "practical techniques" are not clear or not provided. Much of the data collected reflect challenges of and the responses to a pandemic. It is unclear whether the decisions made by an institution during a pandemic reflect directly on any one individual member of the Emerging Leaders' Programme. The data does not illustrate whether these decisions were successful or efficient. Additionally, it is difficult to extrapolate if the decisions reflect leadership skills because many leadership skills are soft skills and difficult to measure. The authors presented two webinars aimed at "mid-level management teams at university libraries." Subsequently, they provided a descriptive report on the challenges that libraries faced during the COVID-19 pandemic through the experiences of 24 respondents, most of whom held leadership roles in their institutions. Many of these challenges faced by library leaders were not unique to libraries. Leaders in business, medicine, education, and more were faced with similar challenges navigating the remote work environment, adapting to new communication tools, and managing disruptions in network connections. As the world started to reopen, challenges faced by libraries were also similar to other establishments, such as the need for physical changes to maintain social distancing and maintaining hygiene in the workplace. The survey did not provide the opportunity for respondents to describe which techniques were successful or how libraries overcame the challenges faced during the pandemic. These details may be a measure of resilience and may help those readers who seek solutions. Even though these were research libraries, the authors did not gather information on the change in research inquiries during the pandemic or which techniques, if any, were successful in sustaining research.

The definition of resilience is the "ability of a system or organization to respond to or recover readily from a crisis" or the "ability to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened." (Dictionary.com, 2022, Cambridge University Press, 2022) Providing readers with a summary of the final three questions of the survey which reflected the changes respondents felt they should keep post-COVID-19, may reflect the changes that were successful, keeping within the theme of resilience.

The authors successfully described that most libraries were in a unique position at the start of the pandemic because of the digitization of resources and services that occurred prior to the pandemic. A digital response to the pandemic was necessary and accelerated for those libraries who were behind in this digital age.

The authors conducted a literature search and presented a broad discussion relating to topics of strategies and values, communication, resilience, hybrid working, and flexible work schedules, providing readers with useful resources on the topics. They present challenges that were faced in a time of crisis from the literature and in their own research. Although they may not have clearly described how to build resilience, the authors achieve the purpose of describing "experiences, perceptions, and principles put into action by library leaders during the COVID-19 crisis". Library leaders may benefit from reviewing the background and aggregate data presented in this paper to build on the changes that were successful and to propose solutions for remaining challenges.

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