

Dear Library Friends,

A year ago we were at the edge of a precipice. We were learning alarming things about a deadly new virus as it made its way across the globe and then to our shores. On March 7, 2020, Vermont had its first confirmed SARS-COVID-19 case. From then on it has been history-in-the-making, a once in a century pandemic. Lives have been lost and society deeply shaken. The world of work has been upended. Libraries, as places for community learning and gathering, were particularly affected.

Organizations across the landscape have gone through enormous shifts as the virus hit us hard, ebbed, flowed, and flowed again. We shut our libraries tight, and then opened to curbside and window service. Then, poised to open the stacks to our neighbors, a renewed winter viral onslaught lapped against our foundations, forcing us back into our buildings and homes.

As we look into the immediate future, there's a lot to be hopeful about. We may be okay by fall of this year, if not earlier. Many libraries will likely return to "normal." However, the pandemic has given trustees and directors a unique opportunity to look carefully at what has been successful. For instance, has online programming, curbside service, and "concierge services," like pulling books for people, something that really resonates with customers due to enhanced flexibility and accessibility? What else can we learn? How do we do our jobs in ways that bring new benefits to both employees and those whom we serve?

The future of work has never been so in flux. All signs point to pandemic mandates translating to lasting changes in how we work. According to a February 2021 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) article on where work is headed¹ by Roy Maurer, hybrid work models, where one works from both the office and from a remote

[Take the survey!](#) Are there changes you've instituted or processes you've modified due to the pandemic that will be continued at your library? [CLICK HERE.](#)

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A [Gartner, Inc.](#) survey on June 5 (2020) of 127 company leaders, ... revealed "82% of respondents intend to permit remote working some of the time as employees return to the workplace." Gartner reports that "nearly half (47%) said they intend to allow employees to work remotely full time going forward. For some organizations, flex time will be the new norm as 43% of survey respondents reported they will grant employees flex days, while 42% will provide flex hours."

location, is on the minds of many. According to a study cited by Maurer, "80 percent of remote workers said they enjoy working from home, and 69 percent are just as or more productive at home than in the office."

But opinions differ on what work will actually look like, depending on your seat at the employment table. Author², Kathy Gurchiek, writing in the January 27, 2021 issue of SHRM HR News, says that "there is a disconnect between U.S. executives and employees over how many days workers will be in the office when they do return, most likely during the second quarter of 2021." More than half of workers surveyed said they prefer working *remotely at least three days a week*. Bosses want employees *in the office at least three days a week*.

Admittedly, Vermont public libraries are, with a few exceptions, small organizations. And there are plenty of tasks that have to be completed on-site and in-person such as serving customers, managing the stacks, and offering computer access for patrons. However, the pandemic offers many lessons for the savvy leader. Were there certain tasks that were ably accomplished away from the library building? Are there responsibilities that can be attended to that don't need a library office? Have you discovered a process, such as processing invoices and revenues, that doesn't require a physical component? If so, does this offer an opportunity for innovation, cost savings, or enhanced efficacy and efficiency?

As you go about pondering the future and applying what you've learned through these hard times, here are a few things that you may consider about employees as you consider remote work, according to Gurchiek:

¹ [What to Consider When Moving to a Hybrid Work Model](#) By Roy Maurer February 8, 2021

² [Hybrid Work Model Likely to Be New Norm in 2021](#) By Kathy Gurchiek January 27, 2021

- *“Personality-* some people derive great happiness from the relationships they have with their coworkers and clients. They crave being back in an office.” The isolation of working remotely has been very difficult, and they want *back*. Others are quite content to see others on video occasionally, or to split their time between working in the office and remotely. Know your employees; make decisions around their desires as a valued employee as well as what your library needs.
- *“Tenure-* an employee with a time within the organization knows her way around the workplace and has relationships already built.” However, newer employees may be better served by being present for a solid sense of belonging and teamwork.
- *“Age-* Generation Z, the oldest of which are 24 years old, report being happiest in the office according to several surveys. This generation is the most likely to report that their productivity has slipped while working from home.”

The *nature* of an employee’s work makes a *great deal* of difference. Remember that the institution takes precedence over the individual employee. Some employees simply need to be present in the library to do their work. A reception desk needs reception. Books need to be loaned, sorted, collected, and cleaned. However, using good judgement and empathetic leadership will help you make the best decisions for both your library *and* your employees.

Maurer takes many of the considerations listed by Gurchiek and adds aspects related to the work itself, posing the following questions.

- *“Why does a specific employee need to perform his or her work in the office?”* As you consider what an employee does on an individual basis, think all the details through. Consider their job description, and consider how it may be different as a result of the things you’ve discovered over the pandemic. What opportunities arose that were successfully met? What didn’t work so well? How do these job responsibilities interact with personality traits? What is best for the library?
- *“To what extent does an employee need to collaborate with others?”* While some

employees may function well remotely, there may be times when collaboration and team work are important. There are many library examples, like the summer reading program where employees may be working as a team. However, we’ve shown over the last year that well-functioning teams with good leaders can do amazing things together in a virtual space.

- *“To what extent are specific employees innovating rather than performing more-transactional activities?”* This is a good question to ask. Some employees create. They are paid to think. A library director, for instance, uses at least some time to imagine and transform. A program director drives the educational and other programs with a library. Creative innovation may not need to be site-specific. Are there tasks that need doing *for* (not *at*) your library that can be done from *anywhere*? This may include podcasts, programs, newsletter editing, a bookkeeper, and website management. The pandemic has shown that we have a clear path to access virtual workers for innovation and creativity. And we need not think “far away” – we have neighbors that are skilled within our own communities that may be at the ready!

Whatever you decide to do, remember to keep to the “HR basics” – be consistent with employees, document decisions related to why and under what conditions an employee’s work model is changed, and follow any labor rules as dictated in your library’s personnel policy about changes.

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