

**Dear Library Friends,**

As we consider opening our doors to our communities in the weeks and months ahead, we face a multitude of COVID-related people-management questions. What do I do if I have an employee who is afraid of returning to work? What if one of my key volunteers is well into her 80's? What accommodations should I make for volunteers and staff in high-risk (to COVID-19) categories?

**Majority of workers eager to get back on-site.**

Clear communication, courage, and robust policy and procedures are the keys to smooth supervisor-to-supervisee relationships. This will be especially true now as you create a plan to re-open.

According to Roy Maurer writing for the Society of Human Resource Management, <sup>1</sup> “a majority of homebound workers are keen to get back to their workplace” in a recent survey by *Glassdoor*. Socializing and collaboration were the main two reasons given for the desire to return. Additionally, the great majority – 83% -- said they trust their leaders “to make an informed decision about when to open”.

This is an opportunity for you as a leader. Communication about how things will look different and listening to employees and volunteers as the re-opening materializes is essential. Encourage them to contribute to the re-opening plan. The more they know, the fewer surprises they (and you) have. The more you listen, the more likely you will learn new perspectives that help improve your plan. And the better your relationships with employees and volunteers, the more probable you will learn about the anxieties and fears that they may have. This knowledge will enable you to manage their concerns about COVID-19, their health status, and the ability for them to contribute to the library's needs during the re-opening.

Find strengths of every employee and be creative in getting their shoulders to the collective wheel. As a colleague at VTLIB just wrote to me, “This running a library thing is not for the faint of heart!”<sup>2</sup>

**Keep relying on key resources.**

The Vermont Department of Libraries ([VTLIB](#)) has a great resource page, and drilling down into the links will provide you with many examples of re-opening plans, local and across the country, and advice from experts, including the ALA.

Even if you are not a municipal library, The Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) may provide valuable information for your library. The VLCT [COVID-19 resources](#) page and their PDF compilation is worth a look. The VLCT's PDF on [HR and COVID-19](#) has a question on the bottom of page two that is notable. The question asks if we may ask older individuals or those with an underlying health condition to stay home. VLCT answers:

“You must not single out employees who belong to legally protected categories and treat them differently than other employees. There are numerous state and federal non-discrimination laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA,) that prohibit disparate treatment. Protected categories include disability, age, national origin, place of birth, ancestry, pregnancy, HIV status, health insurance status, and more.”<sup>3</sup>

VLCT also has published a [staying healthy](#) while working guide, and [volunteer risk management](#) recommendations from VLCT's Risk Management Services Department. Both are good guides to have in your binder.

**Afraid to return to work; what is “valid”?**

In a recent article by Allen Smith, J.D.<sup>4</sup>, when confronted with fear as an obstacle to returning to work an important distinction is “a generalized fear versus a specific, protected reason”.

- A *generalized* fear is a heightened level of anxiety about the situation itself. Taking precautions as required by [ACCD](#) such as health screening at every shift change, using social-distancing techniques, offering protective equipment, reviewing and codifying cleaning and sanitizing techniques, and adopting flexible schedules,

---

<sup>1</sup> Maurer, Roy. May 29, 2020. Nearly 75 Percent of Remote Workers Eager to Return to the Office. Society for Human Resource Management.

<sup>2</sup> Worland, Joy. State Library Consultant, Continuing Education and Small and Rural Libraries, Vermont Department of Libraries. May 26, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> VLCT, March 27, 2020. Human Resources FAQs Regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic from the Vermont League of Cities and Towns.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Allen. May 26, 2020. When Is Fear a Protected Reason for Not Coming to Work? Society for Human Resource Management.

## The human side of returning to work

VT Public Library HR minute – MAY 2020

staggered shifts, remote work, et cetera, will reduce your library's workplace hazards and may alleviate generalized fear. If you can substantively demonstrate that you have taken all required steps to protect workers, and if you have followed all policies as related to your personnel policies or union contracts, you *may* consider termination after seeking appropriate legal advice. I cannot stress enough, however, that empathy and flexibility are all vitally important in managing employees, and you have to use all your human-to-human skills in this extraordinary time. Nevertheless, Smith writes, with some exceptions, "employers usually are not required to allow employees to continue to work remotely if the employer can demonstrate that it has complied with all appropriate measures to reduce the risk of exposure in the workplace".

- If the individual's level of fear rises to be medically debilitating, then the anxiety may be protected under ADA.
- A *specific fear* relates to something quite explicit. For instance, the fear of contracting COVID-19 on the part of a *diabetic* – knowing that diabetes increases the probability of negative COVID-19 outcomes -- is specific. And a specific co-morbidity is *likely* protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act. If that is the case, the director or trustee chair should discuss possible accommodations with the employee to address their concerns. Work-from-home and extra social-distancing are examples.
- If an employee lives with a higher-risk individual, this in itself is not a reason to *require* an accommodation. However, a good manager will do what it takes to make every reasonable attempt to protect their employees and those they care for. Again, discussion about accommodations is important.

### Think of volunteers as unpaid staff.

Every non-profit and municipal organization that I can think of relies on volunteers to get things done, and libraries are the rule, not the exception. We have volunteers at the desk, re-shelving books, running programs, and offering a hand with a myriad of tasks and projects.

My advice is to think of them as a subset of staff. They are obviously not paid, and they have freedom of "work" very unlike paid staff, but volunteers can

contribute a great deal to library operations and goals. As such, remember that the rules that apply to staff also apply to volunteers.

As always, I recommend that libraries start with a written policy describing volunteer tasks and duties. Then take it a step further with COVID, just as you have with staff. You must monitor their health at change of shift, you must provide PPE, you must train them in sanitizing and social-distancing, et cetera. Make sure that they are well trained. Again VLCT's [volunteer risk management](#) is an excellent guide.

The Stowe Free Library's [published volunteer policy](#) states that "...it is important that volunteers be thoroughly trained in their designated duties at the library and be allowed to serve in any reasonable capacity, as the Director sees fit." We will be re-opening in a cautious manner. Therefore, in keeping with the "as the Director sees fit" (I *do* like that quote) it is entirely reasonable to roll out the re-open without volunteers, and I believe that I have read that to be the case in at least one draft re-opening plan. This makes sense.

As you plan your re-open you'll want to take it by small steps. You will learn as you go – "It took *how* long to sanitize the computer between shifts?" Inviting volunteers back to the library will multiply your responsibilities. This may not be in your best short-term interest from a management perspective. However, use your judgment; engaging volunteers remotely to enhance programming and fund-raising, for instance, may be a solid "winner" for your library.

I have learned that library directors and staff are amazingly adaptive and eager to share tricks and tips. I look forward to seeing the plans for re-opening roll out. Good luck as you put together *your* plan. And if you have a people-management question, please drop me an email or leave me a telephone message!

**Gary is not an attorney and this does not constitute legal advice.**

Gary Deziel, MBA, SHRM-CP | Extension Assistant Professor  
University of Vermont Extension | 278 South Main Street, Suite 2 | Saint Albans, Vermont 05478-1866 | 802 524-6501 ext. 444 | [gdeziel@uvm.edu](mailto:gdeziel@uvm.edu)

*UVM Extension helps individuals and communities put research-based knowledge to work.*

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. University of Vermont Extension, Burlington, Vermont. University of Vermont Extension, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating, offer education and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status.