

More than Remotely Possible: Flexible Work Arrangements for Inclusive Recruitment and Retention

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Abstract

This research provides a rationale and conceptual framework for enacting flexible work arrangements (FWAs) in academic libraries within larger discussions of equity, inclusion, and diversity (EID). Flexible work arrangements have been used in libraries for more than three decades. This approach to human resource management is mutually beneficial; as employer and employee needs change over time, work tasks and where they are completed vary. During the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in FWAs increased exponentially. However in libraries, implementation was largely utilized to maintain public services, instruction, and access to library resources, and not deployed as an inclusive workplace practice.

The authors make a case for recalibrating and normalizing FWAs as a strategy for inclusiveness. Inclusion accounts for a spectrum of diverse life experiences and feelings of professional belonging. In the workplace, inclusivity is grounded in relationships; it is "two-way accountability; each person must grant and accept inclusion from others." The research provides an overview of multidisciplinary literature about the benefits and challenges of implementing FWAs in library contexts, and delves into the intersections of academic librarianship, FWAs, and EID. In the sections that follow, the authors describe how libraries can make FWAs the norm and not the exception. Practical steps offered include engaging in ideation activities and conducting workplace culture-mapping exercises to identify elements of inclusivity that resonate at the local level. By embracing FWAs, organizations can authentically embody inclusiveness.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened collective consciousness about FWAs. Examples of FWAs are flextime, remote work, compressed work weeks, job sharing, and phased retirements. The idea of FWAs in academic libraries is not a new concept, although historical touchstones concerning FWAs are forgotten in library professional memory. For more than three decades, alternative schedules and locations have been a human resource strategy in libraries for temporary, short-term, or piloted special arrangements to perform work.

Inclusivity in equity, inclusion, and diversity (EID) best practices is an outcome that evinces a sense of belonging by employees in the workplace. Experiencing engagement and agency over work boosts morale and contributes to an inclusive workplace culture. However, diversity initiatives are not going to be effective if people of diverse identities do not feel included.

Flexible work arrangements are a responsive approach to address existing deep-seated EID issues and to remedy conditions that cause groups to feel excluded. Further, studies have shown that FWAs increase productivity, and are a desired work benefit and experience among younger professionals and underrepresented groups. Investment in FWAs demonstrates trust and commitment to creating work conditions that mutually benefit the employer and the employee.

By integrating FWAs, institutions can build and cultivate a culturally-diverse workforce, one with greater potential to be productive and successful. Without adapting and changing the status quo, libraries risk being unable to recruit and retain talent. Implications include recruitment failures, systemic low morale, and voluntary attrition of early career and experienced librarians.

Discussion

INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE ELEMENTS

To change this narrative, academic libraries can re-evaluate the employment lifecycle through an EID lens. A framework for sustainable hiring and retention should be guided by the organization's articulated strategic priorities, mission, and values. The practical stages of this cycle include attracting and recruiting, onboarding, development, retention and engagement, offboarding and separation, and advocacy.

Elements of inclusiveness can be embedded in each phase. An initial, actionable step in organizational planning is to collectively select terms that represent inclusiveness in local library contexts. Figure 1 depicts a sample word cloud yielded from an ideation activity to compile terms. The word cloud visualizes connections between the aspirational ideals for inclusive workplace elements (Figure 1). The interconnected library organizational values, traits, and practicalities named in this exercise are listed here: authenticity, belonging, communication, fairness, identity, meaningful work, opportunities, policy, relationships, and transparency.

Figure 1: Word cloud of Inclusive workplace elements in hiring



SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTIONS IN HIRING AND RETENTION

Subjectivity is ingrained in hiring and retention practices. Diverse attitudes, emotions and feelings in the workplace can affect the employment lifecycle. Understanding how to leverage these differences and why they occur is key to building inclusive workplaces. Mapping workplace elements to their manifestations is a way to conceptualize connections between inclusiveness and flexible work. Table 1 represents an exercise in crosswalking aspirational inclusive elements to subjective perceptions in the employment lifecycle. This ideation activity is a technique to bridge personal and interpersonal dynamics. The interpersonal terms reflect the convergence of encounters and communications between librarian and administrator personas.

INCLUSIVE FWA FRAMEWORK DESIGN

Thirty years of library reports and literature document the desire among librarians for flexible work and the ways this type of work arrangement positively contributes to inclusive workplace cultures. It is important to take several factors into consideration when designing an inclusive FWA framework.

INCLUSIVE FWA FRAMEWORK DESIGN (continued)

Long-term sustainment of FWAs is predicated on administrators, middle-managers, and staff having mutual understandings of the benefits accrued from transforming the workplace through flexibility.

- At the institutional level, inclusivity commitments should be articulated in formal mission and value statements.
- Administrators need to be transparent and equitable in their policies for granting FWAs. Note that managers may be reluctant to grant flexible work, as it can place undue pressures in understaffed and under resourced departments. Therefore, library administrators have to be accountable for finding solutions to endemic problems, and expand access to flexibility across ranks and departments.

Hiring managers in academic libraries should codify and market a spectrum of FWAs focused on the employee lifecycle to demonstrate the prioritization of EID. These options might include: compressed work weeks, flextime, hybrid work, job sharing, part-time work, remote work, research leaves, staggered schedules, and telecommuting.

- Libraries will be more equipped to make strides toward inclusive cultures through organizational-level tactics such as devising a values statement within an EID framework, implementing EID assessment through stay and exit surveys, and publishing public policy detailing FWA options.
- During the recruitment phase, a FWA statement can be appended to job postings, search committees could receive training in EID and FWAs, and interview formats could have both in-person and virtual options.
- Decentering physical requirements within academic librarian job searches, which traditionally include an all-day in-person interview, would be especially inclusive for persons with disabilities.
- Finally, retention strategies should target accountability, such as by creating benchmarks to measure inclusiveness. Career growth can be prioritized by offering FWA as a means to support tenure activities, promotions, reskilling, and training. FWAs can also garner more inclusive livelihoods by defraying cost of living expenses and supporting a work-life balance.

This framework demonstrates potential of FWAs to enhance inclusivity; however, the authors want to emphasize that EID initiatives are not a checklist. Shared understandings of FWAs between librarians, administrators, and the organization serve to improve interpersonal dynamics between the employer and employee. Reluctance to use FWAs or unfamiliarity can be addressed through training. Concerns about productivity can be ameliorated by annual reviews that assess job performances. For organizations, FWAs convey willingness to adapt to individual schedules, increase efficiencies, and incentivize retention. For staff, work-life balance is more attainable. Through FWAs, libraries can prove their receptiveness to change and responsiveness to diversifying the workplace. These practical measures affirm commitment to EID while boosting the recruitment and retention of highly qualified and diverse library workers.

Table 1. Map of inclusive workplace elements to subjective perceptions in hiring and retention.

Inclusive Workplace Element	Librarian→	Interpersonal	←Administrator
Authenticity	True	Trustworthy	Credible
Belonging	Accepted	Respectful	Valued
Communication	Open	Collegial	Transparent
Fairness	Honesty	Principled	Equitable
Identity	Character	Virtuous	Integrity
Meaningful	Worthwhile	Purposeful	Impactful
Opportunities	Possibilities	Aspirational	Actions
Policy	Guidance	Directional	Leadership
Relationships	Rapport	Connected	Facilitator
Transparency	Candid	Understood	Clear

Overview: FWAs in Academic Libraries

An early survey of FWAs in academic libraries was conducted by the Association of Research Libraries in 1992; member libraries completed questionnaires about alternative work arrangements, workplace climate, and the factors impacting their implementation. Examples of FWAs cited were:

- hybrid work
- telecommuting
- remote work
- condensed workweeks
- leave
- part-time work
- phased retirements
- and flextime.

Since the issuance of this report, few research writings have addressed embedding FWAs in academic library work. Importantly, Reiter and Zabel's chapter called out the lack of transparency surrounding discussions of flexibility in academic libraries and encouraged more research attention to it. In a 2021 survey of academic library employees on post-pandemic futures, respondents reported that they expect to work remotely at least some of the time during the next three to four years.

Despite the historical presence of FWAs, some have argued that options such as flextime and flexplace pose disadvantages for institutions. Germano contended that FWAs in libraries "represent loss of control as well as a reduction in accountability that could result in rampant abuse" of those FWAs.

Conclusion

- FWAs align library human resources with core values of librarianship. They extend inclusiveness in organizational climate and culture by expanding the spectrum of workplace diversity.
- FWAs are a proven tool to increase EID in librarian recruitment and retention, and should be appended to professional guidance and benchmarking tools.
- Meaningful progress toward sustainable inclusivity practices demands accountability, investment, and a culture of continuous assessment.

Poster Source

Association of Research Libraries, Office of Management Services. *Flexible Work Arrangements in ARL Libraries, SPEC Kit #180*. Washington DC: Association of Research Libraries, 1992.

Chapter Citation

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