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## **The Future of Flexible Work and Hybrid Work Culture Beyond Covid-19: Challenges, Opportunities and Lessons Learned at UVA Library**

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# THE FUTURE OF FLEXIBLE WORK AND HYBRID WORK CULTURE BEYOND COVID-19: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED AT UVA Library

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to some significant changes in how many of us work and live. It also exposed deep infrastructure problems and systemic equity issues around income, race, and employment and redefined the meaning of front-line essential worker. The pandemic's acceleration of the move to remote and hybrid work in many areas, coupled with the redefining of essential work, will result in many libraries having to adapt operations and culture around a hybrid work environment.

While libraries prior to the pandemic did allow for some flexible work arrangements, telework was not an expected benefit nor was it universal enough to be a pervasive part of library culture. During the pandemic many libraries provided staff with more opportunities to work from home but are now wrestling with how the situation will evolve post pandemic. This paper will describe the University of Virginia Library's journey from the shift to an all-remote workforce in the early days of the pandemic to its current and projected future hybrid work environment and provide a framework for other libraries to consider. Throughout the paper, challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned will be highlighted and issues around equity, recruitment and retention, culture and teambuilding, and management will be explored.

## Keywords

Workplace and organizational culture, tele-work, flexible work, hybrid work, flexwork, equity, recruitment and retention, teambuilding, management

## Introduction

As we progress through the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a wide range of responses in staffing strategy as different institutions have dealt with different public health guidelines, student profiles, and leadership at a state and institutional level. The adoption of ongoing flexwork will likely be similarly varied. We all begin from unique positions and under a wide variety of circumstances. Through sharing our experience implementing flexwork, we hope this case study will contribute to a growing body of literature that will help shape best practice.

## Case Study – UVA Library

The University of Virginia (UVA) is a Doctoral University at the Very High Research Activity level. Founded in 1819, by Thomas Jefferson, the central section of grounds, "The Lawn," is designated as a US National Historic landmark and is part of a UNESCO World Heritage site <sup>[1]</sup>. The main campus in Charlottesville VA consists of twelve schools including a medical school, law school and business school. The University works on a distributed governance model, each school operating fairly independently. While there are university policies and some central services, such as the library, many functions are decentralized, with each school making its own decisions and devising independent procedures.

The University did have a telecommuting policy prior to the pandemic. It was unwieldy, requiring diagrams of remote office space, and four different forms with agreements and legalistic policy statements. The paperwork was also designed in a way that better fit a 100% remote work model, not adapting to flexible schedules or multiple workplaces. At the Library, we had a few, scattered remote workers, mostly in information technology, and a more casual approach to flexible

work. Most people were expected in a physical space five days a week and work from home was generally reserved for snow days and illness. These stints of flexwork were usually arranged between supervisor and employee and lightly documented through email.

In 2019, the Library faced a major disruption. We were closing our main library for three years to renovate and build an extension. As we planned where approximately 180 employees would work for that period, the idea of working from home was suggested, but many, staff and supervisors alike, felt it would be isolating and all units preferred to stay as close to campus as possible. We built a temporary structure near our high-density shelving facility for those who would be handling physical materials on a regular basis, and those who did not have daily need to be on grounds moved to an office park 25 minutes north of campus.

Preparing for this move meant that we had a head start on preparing for unit wide flexwork. First, we had to address workflows and processes were dependent on the movement of physical items. Acquisition processes for example, depended on the books and associated slips and the transfer of paper invoices to our finance department. In many cases, the change was not hugely technical or revolutionary, but required a thoughtful change of practice. Other needs required more technological support. In the spring of 2019, we begin staff training in the use of Zoom, Slack and Confluence. For those whose workday involved a lot of meeting we expected to use Zoom to minimize the need to travel between locations for face-to-face meetings. Confluence was used to create repositories of documentation and increase transparency between units. Slack was adopted to facilitate team conversation and more casual interactions throughout the library, standing in for water cooler conversations or dropping by a colleague's office for a quick question. In January of 2020 we moved to our new locations and began this more digital way of working. In March 2020, when the university shifted to virtual only stance, we were prepared not just to move much of our work virtually, but to support faculty as they quickly pivoted to a new instructional mode.

On March 17, 2020, the University of Virginia moved to shift all teaching and research online, cancelled all in person events (including graduation final exercises), and mandated telecommuting for all staff except those needed in person for the essential operations of a unit, school, or UVA Health by Friday March 20, 2022. From that moment on, the Library had to constantly adapt its operational stance in response to the rapidly evolving conditions of the unfolding COVID-19 global pandemic. Based upon the University's operational status, library spaces were closed to the public and building access was limited to essential staff performing critical functions. Early on, we had to remind nonessential staff that they were not allowed on campus or in the buildings and needed to work from home. Despite the shift to remote work for most staff, updating the University telecommuting policy was not an immediate priority. There were many more pressing policies related to public health to deal with, including masking requirements and gathering size limitations. The focus was on making a safe environment for those employees who needed to be on campus to support remote research and learning, provision of medical care and maintenance of the physical environment. Over the next several months, as the pandemic continued, critical service needs around teaching and learning increased and additional staff volunteered to come in and help as needed. The Library also had to balance job responsibilities with health concerns such as pre-existing conditions. These early months saw a lot of on-the-fly responses due to rapidly changing conditions.

After UVA sent almost everyone home, the University created a Future of Work (FOW) group designed to research and recommend practices to support the needs of UVA and its workforce post-pandemic, with an eye towards defining the future of work in the Academic Division at UVA. The FOW findings supported the need for telework, while still emphasizing the importance of supporting a residential learning community. As the University was preparing for the Fall 2021 Semester, findings from the FOW and the previous telecommuting policy were developed into a more comprehensive University policy <sup>[2]</sup> around flexible work arrangements, which comes in two primary forms: place (where work happens) and time (when work happens). Those forms can be separate or combined.

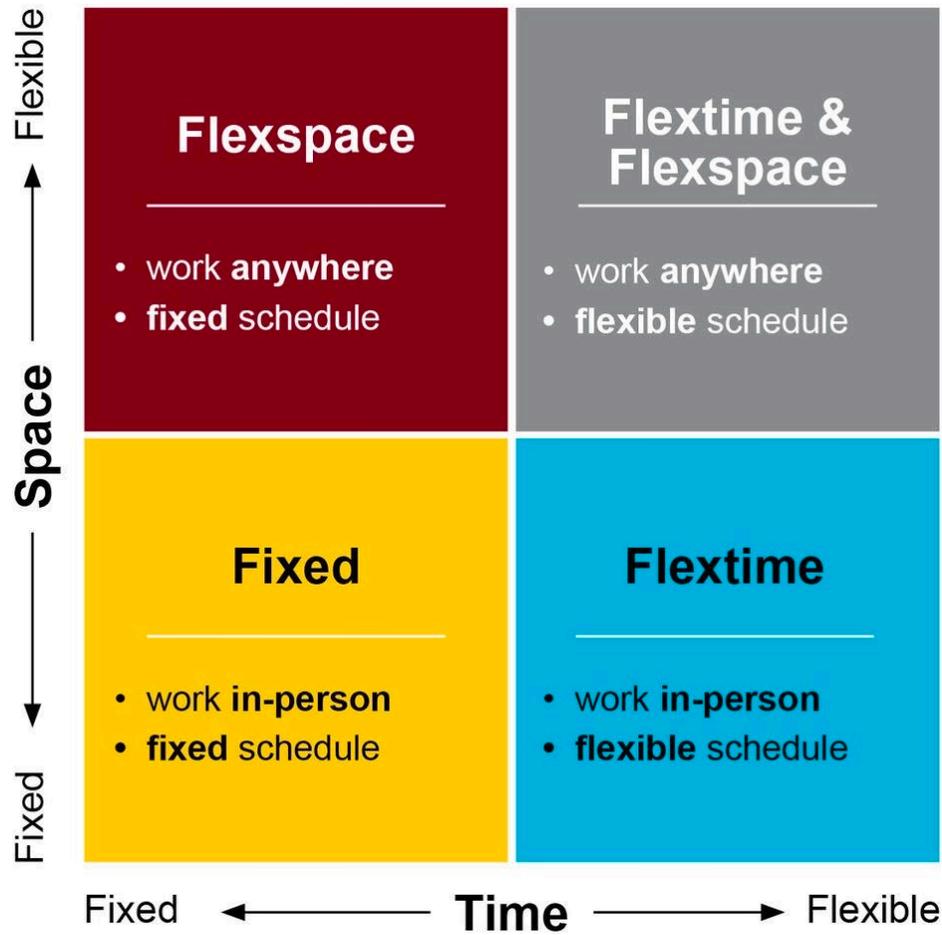


Figure 1 – flexible work options [3]

This policy required documentation of flexwork agreements but left to each school or unit the decision of how to use this flexibility. This included what options to offer, to whom, and how to assess the ongoing results. The documentation of flexwork consisted of two straightforward forms [4,5] that include the agreed upon schedule, inventory of what technology would be provided by the unit and what would be the responsibility of the employee, and signatures indicating understanding of the policy, the requirement to comply with all University policies, and the agreement that either the employee or manager may terminate the flexwork agreement at any time, unless it was a condition of employment at time of hire.

The Library developed its own “return to work” plan within the framework outlined by the University’s FOW findings and the University policy [2] around flexible work arrangements, with an added an additional component further breaking down the hybrid work arrangement option into less than 50% remote and 50% or more in-person. We then set out on a review of all position descriptions to determine flexwork eligibility. Each position was placed in one of four categories: remote work eligible; 100% remote work eligible; seasonally eligible for remote work; or remote work ineligible. The decision of which category to place a position in was made by the supervisor, in concert with their senior leadership team member and was based solely on the business need of the unit. Once that designation was complete, employees in positions with eligibility could then request a flexwork agreement [4] and work with their supervisor to complete the necessary documentation, with no further administrative review required. The Library established a quarterly review process to assess the success of the overall flexwork plan. And we set August 17, 2021, as the official return to campus date for staff. In reality, we were still tweaking work arrangements past

August 16th, and we continued to provide flexibility regarding work arrangements as conditions fluctuated.

Although the Library moved to a hybrid work arrangement for many staff in August, we were all increasingly supporting a largely residential (if masked and socially distanced) experience, with students mostly back on campus. At the start of the Fall 2021 semester most teaching was still remote, with UVA moving towards a more hybrid teaching environment in the Spring semester. However, local and state conditions and ongoing shifts in COVID-19 information still played a significant role in the University's operational stance. When we had rising COVID-19 cases coupled with hospitalizations, we would fall back to a brief period of fully remote teaching, reassess the situation, and come back to hybrid as conditions improved. Throughout this period, the Library expanded and contracted in-person services and open spaces based upon local COVID-19 conditions and the operational stance and service needs of UVA.

While we realized early on, we would be faced with constant change, most – if not all – of us did not expect so much constant change for so long. And while UVA made the decision early on to tie policies, procedures, and operational shifts to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), local, state, and federal procedures, guidelines and recommendations, the unprecedented nature of this pandemic and the rapid deployment of information based on new and developing research meant that health and safety recommendations around transmission, symptoms, masking efficacy, etc...., were in continuous flux. Coupled with the continuously shifting situation around infection rates, hospitalizations, deaths, and vaccines, rather than a clear, linear progression, we found ourselves taking several steps forward only to have to reverse course as conditions around us required; we were making both large- and small-scale changes on almost a semester-by-semester basis.

## Framework

Early in the pandemic, UVA President Jim Ryan shared the principles that would guide how the University would respond to the challenges of the pandemic. The guiding principles included the following:

**Maintain excellence in our core mission.** We must strive to maintain excellence in our teaching, research, and clinical care. This requires focusing on the essential and deferring non-essential programs or projects. **Support the most vulnerable.** We remain committed to the safety and well-being of our staff and patrons and to access and affordability for our students. **Be creative.** We must look for new and creative ways to work together efficiently and effectively, and to conserve our resources. <sup>[6]</sup>

Under the umbrella of these guiding principles, this framework that we are sharing is based upon the work we did in the Library to establish guidelines and policies for return to work after the early days of the pandemic for our Library within the overarching guidelines set by our University in the Workplace Flexibility policy. <sup>[2]</sup> Our framework includes the following principles and considerations: balancing mission and safety, equity across many dimensions, clear roles and responsibilities, flexibility and adaptability, and the importance of teambuilding, management, recruitment, and retention.

From the first days of the pandemic the Library's operating principles included the balancing of mission and safety for both our workers and our patrons. First, we had to establish what safety entailed. Particularly in the early days of the pandemic, there were a lot of opinions as to what constituted a safe environment. Initially, the guidelines could be sweeping and general, but with the rapid research cycle, the guidelines could also change rapidly. Early on the Library established that we needed to follow the University guidelines, which were closely tied to those of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the CDC. We shared these sources with our staff and made sure that they were as familiar as possible with them. Understanding the guidelines and being comfortable with them are two different things, however, and as each surge or relaxation of guidelines came, we would need to reassure staff and reassert the need to support the mission. In the Fall of 2020, students were back on grounds, but vaccinations were not yet available. The University emphasized that everyone was to be masked and social distancing in all situations

outside of dorm rooms. We decided to start by opening one library, but it was still an uncomfortable situation for the staff. To balance mission and safety guidelines we implemented a masking compliance rule. If the percentage of patrons wearing masks fell below 95%, the Library staff would make an announcement warning that compliance was too low and warning of an imminent closure. If a recount fifteen minutes later still saw low compliance, the library would be cleared and closed for two hours. This policy was short-lived as it was dropped when the University enacted its required vaccination policy. In fact, each semester brought new requirements, as safety recommendations changed, as we learned more about COVID, as vaccination became prevalent and as each variant wave came to the region.

The Library, like many units and schools across UVA has positions with responsibilities that require in-person work to provide essential services. This means some individuals will always be unable to have remote or even hybrid work options. However, equity is an important value for the Library, and we knew equity across many dimensions would be a key principle we needed to build into our framework around the future of work. And while we did our best to establish this important principle, we acknowledge it has been an iterative and humbling process and we still have a lot of work to do in this area.

Our efforts around equity and work options were further complicated by the differences already inherent, including existing flexibility in work arrangements across position classifications such as faculty or staff and exempt or nonexempt. Even within a set of classifications there are differences, for example tenured faculty or general faculty. Given the importance of equity across dimensions to the Library's future of work framework, we have been and continue to explore and integrate concrete ways to incorporate this principle. Some ways that we are currently doing this are to extend flexibility, when possible, for extenuating circumstances and during off peak time periods such as term breaks and the summer; asking those who are not in in-person essential roles (including senior administrators and managers) to assist in helping with responsibilities such as scanning and public service desk shifts; considering how to measure performance; and looking for ways to provide flexibility beyond telework. One specific area that we have explored more in depth in working towards ensuring benefits are fair across work arrangements is reexamining how offices are allocated with a key consideration being whether someone is working more than 50% in-person.

Interconnected with the principle of equity across dimensions is another building block of our framework, the principle of clearly defining roles and responsibilities associated with positions and basing work arrangements on positions not individuals. Focusing on job responsibilities rather than the person is a more equitable way of approaching work options. By being transparent and upfront about the duties of each position in the Library and clearly indicating what roles are eligible for flexible work arrangements based on those duties, we can show the objective reasons behind eligibility for flexible work options. This does not mean there is no additional flexibility, as mentioned above, when we can, to the extent we can, we extend flexibility to mitigate circumstances. Additionally, as part of this principle, managers are given the authority to determine team and position needs. Just as the University guidelines trusted units, schools, and departments to know their areas, the Library trusts managers to know the operational needs of their teams and departments.

Over the course of the last two years, many things about our operations changed, often on very short notice. From changing public health guidelines to dealing with supply chain issues, most aspects of our work have experienced some level of friction. For example, we needed to be prepared to change operating stance on short notice, as increased infection rates lead us back to remote-only policy for a couple of weeks in the fall of 2020. From semester-to-semester, we had to adjust our service to match a different blend of remote and on-campus students. The need to be flexible continues. In late spring of 2022, the new governor of Virginia announced that in six weeks, all state employees must stop remote work and return full time to an office location. An exception process was put in place, with all requests for more than one day per week remote work requiring approval of a state cabinet member or the governor's chief of staff. While many of these requests from Library employees were granted, the announcement led to much staff unease and another rethinking of how to distribute office space. As we continue to deal with variants, changing faculty and student expectations and increasing costs on limited budget, we will need to continue to adapt, focusing on core mission to guide us through each new challenge.

One of the major considerations in implementing flexwork has been how to address team building and culture in a hybrid environment. In the initial stages managers needed support in how to monitor and assess remote work. Some of the training was on how to keep people on track in terms of productivity, but much of what was needed was team building and staff support. It was a highly stressful time and the University and the Library prioritized staff mental health. In our all-managers meetings for the summer of 2020, we developed a theme of mindfulness and helping the manager and their employees cope with stress. This attention at a unit level has tended to lead to high level of cohesion at the smaller-unit level, but with less opportunity to mingle outside of immediate co-workers, cohesion at the Library level is lessened. Town Hall meetings, held via zoom, newsletters, and slack channels are all methods that we are using to improve cross-unit communication, but this area will need continued and enhanced effort in a long-term flexwork environment.

The University adapted other management processes in this period. The performance review process was changed. In the first year, the process was moved to a narrative structure and removed numeric ratings. It was a move to lighten the process and reduce the level of stress in a year where many had worked at levels of effort and flexibility beyond the normal call of duty. This narrative structure has remained in place, although numeric ratings have been reinstated. The focus on management has been shifted from evaluating attendance to outcomes and competency-based evaluation. As was often the case, this change was already being gradually implemented, but was accelerated with the shift to widespread flexwork.

As we have moved to a more long-term hybrid stance managers and their employees are working to find the right balance of remote and on campus work. This undoubtedly varies by unit, with some needing to provide coverage of a service, to make sure at least one person is on campus any given day. Other units are less tied to a location and are evaluating when the team needs to be co-located. Many feel the loss of the serendipitous meeting with a co-worker, from both a culture and an information sharing point of view. The question now being considered is how many days a week does an employee need to be in the office to afford them that chance. Each unit will likely continue to optimize that balance to suit their own culture and business need.

Prior to the pandemic, there was an expectation that a wave of retirements was coming in libraries, leaving a deficit that graduating Library Science students would not be able to fill <sup>[7]</sup>. While this has yet to happen, the pandemic has accelerated shifts in what the workforce values and prioritizes, with work/life balance topping the list for many. Much more of the workforce has experienced fully remote and/or hybrid work arrangements than in the past, and the ability to schedule work around childcare and home responsibilities, has been one of the few bright spots for workers during this time. At the same time, the need to split attention and not be able to fully focus on work or childcare has been a challenge for some.<sup>[8]</sup>

The pandemic has also accelerated retirements, resignations and job changes, leading to an increased competition for talented staff <sup>[9]</sup>. And as skilled and accomplished individuals find themselves recruited or resign, it becomes harder to retain other staff and to fill the positions left open when talented staff leave <sup>[10]</sup>. While an individual's ideal work environment cannot always match up to actual work conditions and options, flexible work options are increasingly seen as a key benefit. But what happens when a position's responsibilities do not line up with the option to work from home or to change work hours as needed for child, elder, or home care needs. And is it equitable to not provide the same flexible work options for all staff? As mentioned earlier, questions about how we approach equity around work arrangements abound and are not easily answered. However, we are taking steps and working on tangible ways to bring equity across many dimensions to the framework of how we are approaching the future of work and flexible and hybrid work environments.

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 has affected how we work, where we work, and even when we work. While libraries are still wrestling with how the hybrid work situation will evolve post pandemic, many will likely need to adapt operations to continue including virtual arrangements, whether in terms of staff work options, patron service needs, or both. And rather than a one and done policy, the future of work arrangements will be an iterative process that benefits from and is shaped by shared

knowledge and experiences across libraries, institutions, and industries. For example, while flexwork is currently an accepted norm in our library organization, we are also in an unusual state as we await the completion of our main library's building renovation. Prior to the pandemic, staff placed a lot of importance in having office space in the main library versus space in other UVA libraries and buildings. As we plan the move back in, there is much discussion of who will need an office space in the main library and who will continue to flexwork three or more days a week. While adoption and approaches to ongoing flex work may vary, creating a work environment that enables team building and trust post COVID-19 will be challenging no matter what becomes the new normal. Our approach to the future of work and staffing strategy at UVA Library was developed as a direct response to the circumstances we faced, the lessons we learned, and our local context, however we believe this case study and our framework for approaching flexible, hybrid work will be of benefit to others.

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