

Redistributing work during COVID-19

Penn State University Libraries' job bank

March 2020 became a pivoting moment for higher education in the United States, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities to switch to remote delivery of instruction within weeks. The impact of this event is deep and far-reaching. There is already a deluge of articles about how most faculty and students have had to adjust to a new way of teaching and learning—or how administrators have had to brace for financial losses. However, little has been written about the situations librarians and library staff are facing.

When Pennsylvania State University announced that all nonessential employees, which included librarians and library staff, had to work remotely, it created a strange scenario. Some librarians and staff, especially those who normally operate in the digital realm, were overwhelmed with work. On the other hand, there were employees whose job responsibilities were directly tied to the physical buildings, such as those who deal with physical collections, who literally could not do their work from home. Additionally, there was a pause in hiring, which caused some units to have staffing shortages or more work than they could handle.

At the very beginning, in order to follow human resources guidelines, supervisors worked with those who could not do their work from home and assigned them professional development or training, such as watching webinars or videos from LinkedIn Training, while at home. However, as the pandemic wore on, it became clear that this

was not a viable long-term strategy. Although our university seems to be in a relatively fortunate financial situation, there are still understandable concerns about layoffs and furloughs among employees who may not be able to do their usual jobs from home. To help ease the anxiety, we, as administrators, wanted to make sure that library employees who wanted to work were able to do so, regardless of their normal job responsibilities. Therefore, we developed a classified ads style “job bank” that allows individuals, units, or departments to post “jobs” or projects that do not require steep learning curves for others to pick up. So far, the project has been well received. We have also discovered some additional benefits of the initiative, which could positively impact our future organizational work distribution.

Development and implementation of the project

We put out a call to libraries' faculty and staff for those interested in helping shape what an internal job bank might look like and how it might be implemented. Receiving a great response, we held two brain-

Leo S. Lo is associate dean for learning, undergraduate services, and commonwealth campus libraries, email: ls15158@psu.edu, Binky Lush is manager of discovery, access, and web services, email: ful105@psu.edu, and Dace Freivaidis is interim associate dean for strategic technologies, email: dif1@psu.edu, at Penn State University Libraries

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storming sessions with our volunteers to talk through all of the implications of a job bank system.

Our first step was to define the goal of the job bank, which was effectively to match up employees who have capacity to take on additional tasks while we are all working remotely with work that needs to be done. Our subsequent discussions raised some important questions we needed to consider:

- Employees looking for work have a varied degree of technical savviness. Would the jobs entail some sort of training?
- Could the projects be ongoing, or is there a definitive timeline? This was difficult to determine as the libraries reopening and bringing employees back on site remains an unknown.
- Would the job bank be for both full- and part-time employees? And if we included part-time employees, how many hours would they be allowed to work?
- Does the project supervisor take the first person who applies for the job or wait for the most qualified?
- What is the approval path for job bank applicants? We determined that the employee's immediate supervisor had to be aware of and supportive of an employee's application and would be part of the initial conversation with the project supervisor.

Once we talked through some of the issues and concerns, we came up with a very straightforward workflow. Units/departments that have projects for which they need additional help would submit information about projects. These projects could be big or small, with varying degrees of complexity and skill needed and for which the resources or time to complete them has not been available. This information would become job bank postings and would appear on the staff site, where the libraries' employees could review and apply for projects/work for which their skillsets, timeline, and availability lined

up. The project supervisor would review the submissions and contact the successful applicant and their supervisor, and then work could begin. Job postings would be removed once they were filled.

Because we had an immediate timeline for getting the job bank up and running, we wanted to use a system that was already in place. The job postings were internal, so the libraries' Intranet was the logical platform. We use Drupal to power our staff site and have a blog functionality that we call "Staff Posts." These are posts that every employee has permissions to create in categories, such as upcoming events, updates, training opportunities, or travel reports. We added a new category of postings called Job Bank. All job bank postings were tagged with this category, enabling employees to click on the Job Bank category tag to see a listing of all job bank postings. So that our employees would be notified in multiple online settings, every job bank posting appeared on the staff site homepage, on the full list of postings, and appeared as a notification on our libraries' Slack channel and Microsoft Teams channel.

To ensure that all postings contained consistent and required information, we asked project supervisors to complete a job posting form that requested the following:

- project/task name,
- department/library,
- description of work,
- skills needed,
- possible shared position?
- training needed?
- project/task timeline,
- estimated number of hours per week, and
- name/email of project supervisor.

Upon receipt of the form submission, our Web content editor added the posts in the name of the project supervisor and tagged them with the Job Bank category.

For employee applicants, we created another form with the following fields:

- I am submitting an application for (drop down of available jobs),
- name/email of applicant,
- status (full-time/part-time),
- description of skills matching project/task,
- additional information,
- your supervisor's name/e-mail, and
- my supervisor is aware of my application (y/n).

Applicants could submit separate applications for as many projects as they liked. Once a project had been posted, had received applicants and an employee had been “hired”, the project supervisor would contact the web team and we removed the position from the application form.

Participant feedback

To assess the job bank efforts, we developed a form to be sent to managers and employees upon completion of a project. In addition to the number of hours worked, it asks for feedback and commentary on the entire job bank process. To date, all but one of the projects are ongoing, but feedback has been very positive.

Supervisors who posted projects or tasks were grateful for the opportunity to help co-workers during this difficult time, considered it to be an ideal opportunity to have our own employees complete the work rather than hiring part-time workers, and enabled completion of projects that required focused attention over a period of time. One supervisor commented that she was happy that her center “could help supplement work to keep employees productive during stay-at-home. Also, having employees throughout the Commonwealth assist with collection work is very exciting.” A job applicant noted that she applied because it was a way to help out and she “was happy to see such a thing as the job bank because it allowed me to participate in additional work that I normally wouldn't get to do in my position in the library.”

When asked to reflect on what they gained from the program, supervisors noted that they benefited from more than the completion of the projects/tasks. One supervisor commented that “in addition to well-transcribed documents, I gained camaraderie and new insights,” while another noted that in addition to interacting with employees that she did not previously know, she appreciated having “someone from outside our department work on these tasks with a fresh set of eyes, new perspective, and creative approach that we might not have otherwise taken.” Another manager commented that not only was he able to propose a project (Ask a Librarian FAQ database enhancement) that would benefit both library patrons and employees, but he was also able to “match one of my employees to a project at another library location/department that was well suited to their interests and skills.”

Similarly, applicants hired for the job bank projects enjoyed working on tasks they wouldn't normally get to do, and meeting and working with individuals with whom they would typically not interact. One individual noted that the work she was exposed to via the job bank gave her “some insight into the type of work that various library employees do. Just recently, I was thinking about how there are so many departments in the library and so many tasks that need to be done. The amount of work it takes to keep a university library running was unbeknownst to me before I started working at one.”

While both supervisors and applicants agree that the program was well-designed, straightforward, and working well, they also noted a few minor glitches. In one case, an applicant had not received approval to participate in the job bank, while in another the project had to be put on hold because the individual who applied could not get the needed resources to work on the project. One supervisor suggested that there should be a better way to track hours, while another stated that she could have

done a better job guiding the project. It was also noted that there may be a reluctance on the part of some employees to ask their supervisors for permission to apply for the job bank postings. While not confirmed, some of the reluctance may stem from the overall concern around security of positions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the job bank matures, these issues can be addressed and resolved.

Conclusions and future implications

All supervisors who posted projects and tasks, as well as applicants hired for the work, agree that the job bank is an excellent way to support one another, further the work of the libraries, leverage and expand skillsets, network and build relationships, and provide mentorship and leadership opportunities. While the original intent of the job bank was to match up employees who have capacity while working remotely with work that needed to be done, there is consensus that it should be considered a

wonderful job enrichment opportunity that should be continued even when we return to work on-site. Or, as one project supervisor stated, "I'm very excited to see where the program goes in the future. I think it has the potential to be a permanent fixture as we move forward with working and interacting with colleagues in a new way."

Although the current pandemic is an unprecedented disruption to higher education and academic libraries, it is also an opportunity for innovation. This pilot project has demonstrated that our current work distribution, such as fixed job responsibilities according to positions and departments, could be disrupted. With our new normal likely to be much more flexible in terms of locations (e.g., working from home versus working in office buildings), we can also see the new normal of work assignments becoming much more fluid. By deconstructing certain work responsibilities based on interests and skills, an organization could potentially improve productivity, efficiency, and employee morale. *zz*

The banner features a dark blue header with the text "NEW FROM ACRL PRESS!". Below this, on the left, is a book cover for "Sharing Spaces and Students: Employing Students in Collaborative Partnerships" by Holly A. Jackson, which has a white background with green and blue wavy lines. To the right of the cover is the title "Sharing Spaces and Students: Employing Students in Collaborative Partnerships" in green, followed by the author's name "by Holly A. Jackson" in black. Below the cover and title is a red bar with the text "Available in the ALA Store at www.alastore.ala.org". At the bottom left is a blue bar with the title "Get the Job: Academic Library Hiring for the New Librarian" in black, followed by the author's name "by Meggan Press" in white. To the right of this bar is another book cover for "Get the Job: Academic Library Hiring for the New Librarian" by Meggan Press, which has a black top half with the title in pink and a light blue bottom half with the author's name in white.