New Beginnings: Starting a Career as a Medical Librarian during a Global Pandemic

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Objective

This poster aims to discuss experiential reflections of starting a new career as a medical library professional during the global pandemic and the respective supervisorial perspective. The reflections convey some of the challenges faced while beginning a career where traditional on-the-job experience was unavailable and the issues of providing training and mentoring remotely to subordinates.

Methods

- Written narratives from two library professionals who received their degrees during the global pandemic and their supervisors
- Presents subjective pros and cons in a 'new normal' workplace from the reflections written by medical library professionals
- Lists methods they utilized to combat burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic

Background

The Quillen College of Medicine Medical Library closed its doors to patrons in March of 2020 and began phased reopening with mandated masks in July 2020. Library staff began rotating schedules to limit the number of people coming in contact. In June 2021, we reopened additional areas and the following month offered extended hours. The library continues limited in-person staffing as the new variants spread, and the uncertainty of the pandemic remains.

Discussion

The exercise of writing out reflections provided an opportunity to collect and organize some of the thoughts expressed during interactions with colleagues over the past several months. There were many parallels between those experiences.

There's no question that the pandemic has been terrifying to most and a tremendous burden to all. However, the paradigm shift to how we approach the workplace may be one positive. Several changes would be considered quality-of-life improvements outside of a pandemic.

In our reflections, we shared lessons learned, mistakes made, and how we might move forward as we attempt to return to normal. There wasn't a rulebook on how to react to a pandemic. When implementing a plan, we had to be okay with tossing it out and trying a new idea.

When the pandemic began, opportunities for professional development were limited to what was available online. Some took the opportunity to learn a new software skill or online certification training. Webinars became more common, and conferences pivoted online. As other departments at the University adapted to virtual settings, we were able to resume instruction and orientations. Several University events were canceled while others shifted to online formats.

Staffing issues required us to take on other responsibilities due to early budget concerns. As we hire more support staff, we can offer regular operation hours and more in-person services going forward.

Advantages

- Afforded opportunities to attend several conferences where funding and time would have prohibited
- More time allocated for professional development
- More flexible work schedule
- Fewer interruptions while working
- More comfortable and customizable accommodations at home
- Saved time and costs for commuting
- Reconsider how we approach utilizing office space and rotating work schedules

Disadvantages

- Limited access to office equipment, print holdings, and building resources
- Cost of home office
- Fewer interactions with patrons
- More challenging to build new professional connections
- Professional Development was limited to what was available online
- Limited to zoom calls for collaborations
- Zoom meeting and webinar fatigue
- Stress of adopting remote instruction and knowing it would change again
- Harder to separate personal time from work hours
- Hiring freezes & short staffing due to budget concerns
- All the daily stress that comes with living during a pandemic

Stress Management

- Maintain a regular work schedule and stick to those hours only
- Find time for a physical activity you enjoy to be part of your routine
- Adequate rest is essential as well
- Listen to music or podcasts during routine tasks
- Look for learning opportunities online
- Try a new hobby or revisit an old one
- Be realistic and flexible with goals
- Check in with Coworkers, friends, and family virtually
- Tune out the news and social media when you're feeling stressed

Conclusion

Some of the traditional aspects of learning through on-the-job experiences were, unfortunately, limited. Alternatives for professional development were implemented online, and some provided great opportunities. There have been obvious challenges to everyone's personal and professional life since the start of the pandemic. Library professionals, traditionally, have had to adapt and evolve their job as patron needs shift which may make them more resilient. Some have found ways to thrive, and others find ways to get through the bumps.