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Leading Remote Teams

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LEADING REMOTE TEAMS

BY AUSTIN MARTIN WILLIAMS



Tips and best practices for providing a structure to address challenges, minimize failures, and create successes.

In the spring of 2020, many law libraries suddenly went from physical spaces with books and in-person services to digital and hybrid operations that met users' needs through a combination of electronic offerings, book pick-up programs, and virtual reference services. Libraries were forced to implement new workflows, technology, resources, and services in a matter of days and weeks versus months and years. Unlike inclement weather or other threats that have caused temporary closures or service alterations, the COVID-19 pandemic required leaders to adapt to prolonged periods of uncertainty without a clear end date in sight. Through it all, library leaders were asked to do something that many had little experience with prior to the pandemic—lead a large contingent of remote workers.

While some law firm and court librarians had prior experience leading remote teams, many local and academic law libraries experienced for the first time what it was like to operate when the majority of its staff were not coming together in a single location to meet, connect, and deliver services. No longer could leaders rely simply on visibility to maintain staff cohesion and ensure productivity. Instead, they had to develop new ways to connect with staff, chart a vision forward, and maintain essential services for library users. As libraries have begun transitioning back to the office, leaders should expect that some aspects of remote work will remain in place post-pandemic and should be prepared to adapt their methods for connecting with and leading staff.

This article does not focus on new initiatives, resources, or services developed over the past 22 months, such as new digital lending initiatives, the embrace of virtual user services, and the new ways to deliver print materials to library users. Instead, this article focuses on the challenges I found with leading a large remote team and the successes I experienced that may provide some best practices for others going forward.

The Challenges of Leading Remote Teams

There are many benefits to remote work, such as saving on commute times and expenses, fewer office distractions, and the ability to reduce office space needs. Like many libraries during portions of 2020 and 2021, Georgetown Law Library primarily utilized remote work as a way to keep office density low for health and safety reasons. Even with all of the inherent benefits of remote work, it does present some significant challenges for leaders. The three primary challenges and drawbacks that this section will focus on are communication, addressing issues that arise at remote locations, and the unanticipated burdens that can fall on on-site staff members.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Without a doubt, one of the most challenging aspects of leading a remote team is communication. It does not matter what video conference solution or team chat service you utilize, communicating with staff that are remote is more difficult than with staff that are in a single location. At Georgetown, we relied heavily on some of the tools we used prior to the pandemic to try to stay connected with each other, like Zoom, Slack, and Gmail. However, no matter how great your tools are, if not properly utilized, they will have little effect in creating an open, connected, and informed environment. Difficulties connecting with people and the shortcomings of text-based

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communication methods are two obstacles that made communication a challenge when leading remote teams.

Remote work eliminates the possibility of informal interactions, like seeing someone in the break room, and the ability to quickly connect with staff, such as stopping by their office for a quick chat. While remote work has the benefit of creating fewer interruptions, it makes it difficult to track someone down, especially if something is time-sensitive. There were a number of occasions over the past year where instant messages or phone calls were missed because notifications were turned off or phones were accidentally left on silent. Moreover, it was not uncommon to hear someone say that they had not spoken to or seen someone from another department the entire time that Georgetown was mostly remote. Sure, the same difficulties can happen when everyone is in the office, but they are magnified when most people are working remotely.

In addition, when teams are remote, you tend to fall back on using more text-based communication methods, such as email, chat, or SMS messaging, instead of face-to-face communication. Experts will tell you that it's easy to miscommunicate or misinterpret someone's communication when relying solely on text-based methods. Operating in this manner often leads to longer back and forth exchanges that could have been resolved in a quick face-to-face meeting, phone call, or video conference session.

ADDRESSING REMOTE ISSUES

Another challenge with leading remote teams over the past two years has been the difficulty of addressing issues when staff are spread out across multiple locations. While there was hesitation and anxiety about more fully returning to the office, a central office location can be a great equalizer for staff. Generally, when in the office, all staff have access to the same resources and conditions, meaning that it is easier to identify and troubleshoot issues.

When everyone or a significant number of staff are working remotely, leaders are faced with addressing issues across multiple environments. Take for example internet access. When everyone is in the office, you are only focused on addressing connectivity issues in that location. With remote teams, leaders face the possibility of intermittent internet outages happening across different locations. While outages might only affect a smaller number of staff, it does create an issue when an outage impacts a key individual or, due to the location, makes it harder for tech support to troubleshoot and resolve the underlying issue. Simply put, the more locations you add for your team, the more chances differing issues will arise, like inclement weather or technology failures.

BURDEN ON ON-SITE STAFF

An additional challenge is an inevitable reliance on those that are working on-site to take on tasks for remote staff. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most libraries instituted

a form of rotational staffing to lower office density and reduce potential exposure. Looking to the future, something that will have to be a consideration is how on-site tasks and responsibilities are covered when some staff are working remotely.

There were several instances at Georgetown throughout the past year where on-site staff had to cover tasks for a staff member working remotely, which placed an extra burden on these on-site staff members. While these arrangements are to be expected during a crisis, they should not become the norm if remote work remains a long-term fixture in libraries. Going forward, there will have to be a clear understanding among teams about how to cover for others if they are working remotely.

Successes Leading Remote Teams

While communication was one of the biggest challenges with leading a large remote team, there are mechanisms that we used to alleviate some of the drawbacks. Going forward, libraries must implement measures that will provide both remote and on-site staff with the information they need, create more opportunities for leaders to have face-to-face interactions with team members, and ensure that staff from across different departments are able to both connect with each other and work on shared projects and initiatives.

CENTRALIZED COMMUNICATION

Developing a structure to communicate and share updates and information is critical to the success of remote staff. Even under a hybrid model, where staff are in the office a few days a week, you have to make a concerted effort to provide everyone with updates in a uniform way and make sure that the information is readily available for reference when needed. At Georgetown, the library relied heavily on its internal wiki and a

“Library Updates” email that came out on a weekly basis.

While the library had utilized a Google Site for several years to post internal policies and procedures, the pandemic and remote operations made this resource a vital tool for capturing information related to changes in operations and how to respond to certain routine or anticipated requests. Having a resource in place that everyone can access that is regularly updated is an efficient way to ensure that all staff have access to relevant information.

In addition, I also sent out regular “newsletter” type emails to communicate operational updates and policy changes. This reduced the number of emails that came out because I could simply add non-urgent information with context about what it meant for the library to a running list of updates to be shared in the next email. When staff are remote, it becomes increasingly important for leaders to be able to keep them up to date on what is happening and how it might affect them.

CREATING FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS WITH LEADERS

While remote work tends to lend itself to text-based communication methods, sometimes you need face-to-face interactions, even if they happen virtually. I implemented a combination of methods to make sure that I was accessible for virtual face-to-face discussions.

Throughout the past year, I continued to prioritize standing one-on-one and team meetings with my direct reports, but instead of in-person, they happened via Zoom. These meetings minimized complicated back and forth email conversations or numerous single-topic meetings. In addition, I made a calendar link available for staff to use to schedule meetings with me at times that worked for both of our schedules. Having a calendar link or set “office hours,” as described by Cal Newport in his book *A World Without Email: Reimagining*

Work in an Age of Communication Overload, will not only convey that you are available but will also provide some structure to how meetings are scheduled.

KEEPING STAFF CONNECTED

Leaders should also ensure that mechanisms are in place for staff to stay connected with each other, especially with those outside of their departments. Staff lose the ability to have informal, unplanned conversations with staff outside of their department when more are working remotely. While these connections might not seem important, they go a long way toward building a shared community.

To keep staff from different departments connected, Georgetown Law Library created a weekly “Cyber Staff Lounge,” which was a weekly open Zoom session that staff could drop in on and catch up as they would if they were in the office break room. Sessions like this are invaluable because they bring staff together that might not see each other at all through more formal connections, like departmental or project meetings. Libraries that continue to have staff working remotely in some capacity should consider how to integrate informal sessions into their community and social activities.

Libraries also should consider continuing or developing cross-departmental library committees. Similar to virtual break rooms, library committees are a great way to bring staff together that might not otherwise see each other on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis. While there are formal objectives to accomplish, the most important aspect of these committees is that they bring together people from different departments. Going forward, library committees, especially those that meet via video conferencing or offer a hybrid format, will be a great way to ensure that staff from different departments are engaging with each other.

Best Practices When Leading Remote Teams

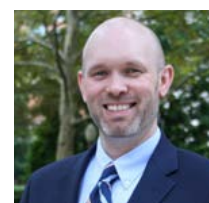
The following are just a few best practices to take away from the challenges and successes I experienced that should help leaders as they look to implement remote work in their libraries:

- Create a plan for how on-site work will be accomplished, either through minimum coverage for each department or through cross-training initiatives.
- Develop structured ways of providing updates to all staff and a centralized resource for capturing relevant documents, policies, procedures, and notes that everyone can refer to when needed.
- Establish the appropriate communication methods for contacting remote staff when something is time-sensitive.
- Provide opportunities for face-to-face conversations, be it in-person or virtual.
- Maintain cross-departmental connections through hybrid and virtual social activities and committees.

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