Peer-Reviewed Article

The Academic Library as Workplace: Using the Knowledge Intensive Work Environment Survey Target to Explore Challenges Faced by Knowledge Workers

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the academic library as a workplace and understand indicators of successful performance and areas that indicate a need for improvement. A survey containing the Knowledge Intensive Work Environment Survey Target (KIWEST) was sent to academic library listservs and received 351 complete responses. Respondents were library workers employed in an academic library in the United States at the time of taking the survey. Academic libraries performed best in the areas of job autonomy, task completion clarity, competency demands, and meaning of work; respondents were less positive in the areas of perceived investment in employee development, engagement, support from supervisors, and role conflicts. Findings were consistent with previous studies about individual factors in the library workplace, and this study demonstrates consistency with academic library strengths and areas of growth.

KEYWORDS

Work environment, academic libraries, organizational culture, knowledge workers

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Increasingly, libraries are exploring workplaces in relation to function and dysfunction (Acadia, 2023; Heady et al., 2020; Henry et al., 2018), as they seek to define what elements can be altered about the library work environment to retain and positively impact employees. Low morale experiences are becoming increasingly common in academic libraries (Kendrick, 2017), and are causing concern in all tiers of library stakeholders, indicating a need for clarity and change. Approaching these issues through studying the work environment is an essential factor to understanding library worker experiences as the work environment is one of the primary reasons librarians are leaving toxic workplaces, in addition to compensation and benefits, job duties, and organizational culture (Heady et al., 2020). This study seeks to examine the work environment of academic libraries across the United States. In particular, the authors sought to understand: (1) in what areas are academic libraries performing well, and (2) where can academic libraries grow and improve to create a better work experience for their employees?

Literature Review

Work environment is a major component of organizational culture. In a 2018 survey, over half of librarians felt their organization's culture was dysfunctional (Henry et al., 2018). Organizational culture is composed of a wide array of factors that contribute to the experience and norms that automatically come with the institution, including leadership style, strategic visions, climate, rewards, and other values (Fralinger and Olsen, 2007). Library leaders have the ability to create or change a work environment; however, this is most successful when it happens organically and gradually, rather than through a forced attempt at shifting the experience (Bartlett, 2014). Unfortunately, many library managers and administrators receive no formal management training (Bartlett, 2014; Harris-Keith, 2015), which can make understanding, much less changing, work environments a challenge. This means in many organizations, the organizational structure can create an abusive, bullying, or toxic workplace environment (Bartlett, 2016), while leaders struggle to identify and rectify the cause. In many of these workplaces, bullying, conflict, and microaggressions go unseen by the majority (Alabi, 2015; Baillien et al., 2017; Bartlett, 2016; Freedman and Vreven, 2016), while victims struggle alone.

The quality of a workplace and its work environment has a direct impact on employee experience, including the ability to recruit and retain employees (Bartlett, 2014). A number of factors have been discussed as indicators of high or poor workplace quality in the past two decades alone. One of the most commonly cited indicators of an organization's function or dysfunction has been the quality of leadership. Support from leadership for various components of daily operation is pivotal in shaping a work environment. Attributes of successful contributions from library leadership towards a positive organizational climate relate to tangible employee outcomes (Henry et al., 2018; Hou, 2017). This support must go beyond verbal acknowledgement in order to be successful. Libraries where the administration provides professional development funding have higher employee morale than those without (Kennedy

and Garewal, 2020). In libraries where administration supports employee growth and interest, such as by supporting a Research Working Group or other community of practice, positive perception of employee culture and relationships within the library increases (Hall, 2015). Another factor that increases morale among library workers is the receipt of constructive feedback from their supervisors. This should not be confused with micromanaging, as the presence of autonomy across one's work also contributes to higher morale (Kennedy and Garewal, 2020).

When the work environment of a library is in disarray, it can lead to a number of effects on the individuals who work there. A lack of resources, staffing, and support can lead to "work overload," which increases stress (Ajala, 2011: 6). Work-related stress can exacerbate mental and physical illnesses (Burns and Green, 2019; Fic and Albro, 2022). Even in those without pre-existing mental or physical health conditions, stress can decrease the quality of life. People who feel exhausted before or after work, in relation to their work, are less likely to report a good quality of life. Burnout is becoming increasingly common in academia, regardless of discipline, possibly due to an increasing lack of personal agency among employees (Alves et al., 2019; Nardine, 2019). These increased negative emotions only feed a dysfunctional work environment, as counterproductive workplace behaviors, such as bullying and incivility, increase when work conflict and negative emotions increase (Bruk-Lee and Spector, 2006).

Methods

Knowledge Intensive Work Environment Survey Target (KIWEST)

Innstrand et al.'s Knowledge Intensive Work Environment Survey Target (KIWEST) protocol is a 30-construct measure developed to assess psychosocial factors among knowledge intensive workplaces (2015). The protocol has 123 items distributed across factors such as job resources related to interpersonal relations and leadership, job resources related to the organization and job content, job demands, and motivational and health-related outcomes associated with demands and resources. Participants rate each item on an ordinal scale from 1 to 5. Depending on the particular item, these numbers corresponded to different levels of agreement, extent to which something happens, or frequency of occurrence. For example, a 1 might correspond to "strongly disagree," "to a very small extent," or "very seldom/never," while a 5 might correspond to "strongly agree," "to a very large extent," or "very often/always." The results of the protocol can be used to assess strengths and weaknesses of a work environment while providing a snapshot of culture, resources, and relationships present within that environment.

Survey Distribution

The KIWEST protocol was distributed to academic librarians in the United States via professional association email listservs in February 2021. Librarians over the age of 18 employed

in an academic library in the United States were eligible to participate in the study. The same protocol was used for all library employees (e.g., faculty, staff, full-time, part-time), ultimately limiting the applicability of results to specific subgroups of employees. Participants self-selected to be included in the study. Participation was incentivized via random drawing for one of three $50 retailer gift cards. The protocol was distributed in addition to demographics questions via a Qualtrics survey. In total, the survey received 566 responses. Fourteen responses were discarded due to lack of participant consent. 199 responses were incomplete and therefore removed from the sample pool. Two responses came from librarians who were not employed in an academic library and were also removed from the sample pool. This left a total of 351 responses (62.0%) for analysis. One respondent indicated they were 73+ years old, so this category was combined with the 62-72 years old category to protect anonymity. Descriptive statistics, means, and standard deviations were calculated using Google Sheets.

Results

15.4% (54) respondents identified as male, 82.6% (290) as female, and 2.0% (7) as non-binary. Respondent ages varied, with 30 respondents between the ages of 18-28, 97 between 29-39, 109 between 40-50, 75 between 51-61, and 40 in the 62+ category. When asked how long they had been employed at their current library, the highest proportion of respondents fell within the 0-5 year range, with decreasing amounts of people in each consecutive time category (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Distribution of Respondents' Durations of Employment at Their Current Library
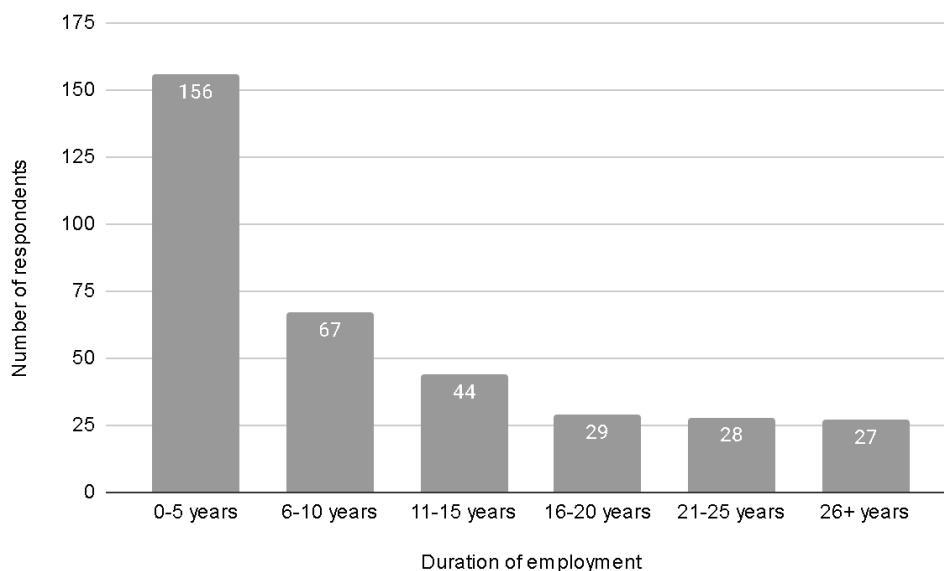
56.1% of respondents (197) indicated they have considered leaving their current library within the past 12 months. 40.2% (141) said they had not considered leaving, while 3.7% (13) said they preferred not to say whether or not they considered leaving.

Mean scores for the 30 factors in KIWEST ranged from 2.7 to 4.0 (see Table 1). The highest scores were in the areas of job autonomy (M = 4.0, SD = 1.0), task completion clarity (M = 4.0, SD = 1.0), competency demands (M = 3.7, SD = 1.0), and meaning of work (M = 3.7, SD = 1.0). The lowest scores were in the areas of perceived investment in employee development (M = 3.0, SD = 1.2), engagement (dedication) (M = 2.9, SD = 1.2), social support from supervisor (M = 2.7, SD = 1.2), and role conflicts (M = 2.7, SD = 1.1) (see Figure 2).

Table 1

Mean Factor Scores and Standard Deviations for KIWEST

Factor name	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inclusiveness	3.5	1.0
Mutual trust between employees	3.0	1.0
Social support co-workers	3.9	1.0
Social climate	3.1	1.2
Cohesion in work teams	3.6	1.0
Social community	3.6	1.0
Recognition	3.4	1.2
Empowering leadership	3.4	1.3
Fairness of the supervisor	3.1	1.3
Social support from supervisor	2.7	1.2
Trust regarding management	3.2	1.2
Job autonomy	4.0	1.0
Goal clarity	3.4	1.2
Task completion clarity	4.0	0.8
Innovation climate	3.4	1.08
Information	3.2	1.08
Justice	3.1	1.1
Procedural Justice	3.1	1.1
Perceived investment in employee development	3.0	1.2

Interpersonal conflict	3.1	1.3
Role overload, Quantitative	3.34	1.1
Lack of centralization	3.2	1.2
Competency demands	3.7	1.0
Role conflicts	2.7	1.1
Engagement (vigor)	3.5	1.1
Engagement (dedication)	2.9	1.2
Commitment to the workplace	3.2	1.3
Meaning of Work	3.7	1.0
Over commitment	3.2	1.2
Work-home conflict	3.2	1.1

Figure 2

Distribution of Factor Scores for KIWEST

1   Inclusiveness
2   Mutual trust between employees
3   Social support co-workers
4   Social climate
5   Cohesion in work teams
6   Social community
7   Recognition
8   Empowering leadership
9   Fairness of the supervisor
10 Social support from supervisor
11 Trust regarding management
12 Job autonomy
13 Goal clarity
14 Task completion clarity
15 Innovation climate
16 Information
17 Justice
18 Procedural justice
19 Perceived investment in employee development
20 Interpersonal conflict
21 Role overload, quantitative
22 Lack of centralization
23 Competency demands
24 Role conflicts
25 Engagement (vigor)
26 Engagement (dedication)
27 Commitment to the workplace
28 Meaning of work
29 Over commitment
30 Work-home conflict
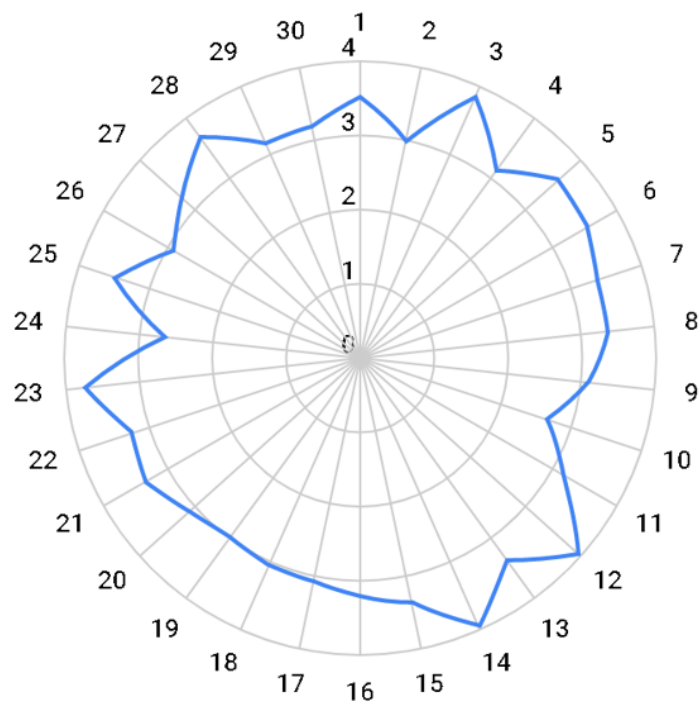
Note. The closer to the center of the circle a point is, the lower the score for a given factor.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrate concordance with the established LIS literature and present multiple novel areas of discovery. The sample population scored highly in the area of job autonomy, which is consistent with previous discussions of autonomy among academic librarians (Patillo et al., 2009). A strong sense of job autonomy contributes to positive perceptions of justice in the workplace (Matteson et al., 2021), which is reflected in these results by a moderate perceived justice score. Increased job autonomy has also been linked to an increased sense of job satisfaction (Karim, 2008), making these results highly relevant to library managers seeking to improve work environments.

Another area where the sample population scored highly was task completion clarity. This finding was unexpected, as a previous study has found the tasks of the job of academic librarian are constantly shifting as the profession evolves and librarians must adapt constantly throughout their career (Sare and Bales, 2014). The transitional nature of job tasks makes many early career academic librarians feel like they do not know what they are doing, or are expected to do. While this eventually shifts into comfort with the evolving nature of the job, it can be disconcerting for some (Sare and Bales, 2014). While our sample population included many early-career librarians, there was a large proportion of mid- to late-career librarians, which may explain the high task completion clarity scores. These librarians, who have had time to acclimate to their jobs, are likely more comfortable with job tasks and have more knowledge of what is necessary to complete them. Further research is needed to explore this potential difference between cohorts of library employees and the way these scores may shift over the duration of a career.

A third area with high scores from the sample population was competency demands. This is consistent with library and information science literature, which highlights how the skills required of an academic librarian shift as academia itself evolves (Sare and Bales, 2014). Major library professional associations, such as the American Library Association, keep lists of competencies for librarians and update them as the field grows (American Library Association, 2021; American Library Association, 2022; CARL Competencies Working Group, 2020; Leong and Woods, 2017). In particular, competencies relating to technology have to be revised regularly, as "librarianship has been experiencing rapid technological change with the development of information technologies" (Chan and Auster, 2003: 266). The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the needed shifts in competences as libraries have had to adjust to pandemic closures or adapted operations (Thorpe, 2021). Since this study took place during the pandemic, it is likely that COVID-19 workplace modifications impacted results, though further study is needed to determine exactly how these modifications impacted competences.

The final high-scoring area for the sample population was meaning of work. This was expected since many who enter the field of librarianship do so due to a sense of calling or a

positive experience they had with libraries in their formative years (Sare and Bales, 2014). Librarianship is a field high in vocational awe, so it stands to reason those who work in libraries find their work to be incredibly meaningful. This awe and sense of meaning can come with a downside, however, because this can create unhealthy boundaries with work and burnout (Ettarh, 2018). Conversely, though, those who find meaning in their work are more likely to be engaged and satisfied with their job (Martin, 2020).

In contrast with workplace attributes that scored highly, the sample population scored poorly in perceived investment in employee development. Two of the biggest barriers to participation in employee development are lack of time and lack of relevance (Chan and Auster, 2003). As job demands increase and skills become more specialized it can be challenging to find relevant training that fits in an employee's schedule. This can be exacerbated when managers serve as gatekeepers for who can attend what training opportunities (Chan and Auster, 2003). While online training opportunities can fill some of the gaps and remove some manager opposition to training, many librarians prefer having an option for in-person training activities (See and Teetor, 2014). In order to address issues of investment in employee development, it is important to understand that librarians tend to desire opportunities to practice the skills they learn through training opportunities in their day-to-day job. Creating internal opportunities for growth, such as cross-training or developing a local development program can reduce some of the obstacles librarians face when seeking out training and make it easier for managers to support employee development in a meaningful way (Crawley-Low, 2013). Transforming a library into an organization that prioritizes learning takes behavior change and support at all levels. Library leaders need to be transparent and barriers to learning must be removed in order for any development program to be successful (Thorpe, 2021).

Another area where the sample population scored poorly was social support from the supervisor. Librarians value leadership, positivity, encouragement, and respect from supervisors, and they often view supervisors as role models (Rubin, 1995). In contrast, when a supervisor fails to provide encouragement or feedback, employees tend to be less satisfied with their jobs (Karim, 2008). Many librarian leaders are not offered formal leadership training and instead are left to learn on the job how to lead and manage. By providing more support to new leaders, there is an opportunity to increase the support they are able to provide. Addressing other organizational attributes additionally supports leaders in providing direction and growth opportunities for their leadership skills.

A third area the sample population scored poorly in was engagement (dedication). Employee engagement can be influenced by factors such as recognition and job autonomy, as well as the culture of the organization itself (Singh, 2016). To increase support for these areas, regular informal feedback, consistent communication, and team-based work are studied ways to keep employees engaged (Cadmus, 2012). While job autonomy scored highly in this study, social support from the supervisor, including supervisor-to-employee recognition, communication,

and feedback, scored poorly. This, coupled with rising levels of burnout throughout the United States (Abramson, 2022), makes the academic library workplace environment ripe for employees to disengage.

The final low-scoring area was role conflicts. This was an unsurprising finding as role creep often becomes the norm in libraries, particularly at institutions trying to "do more with less" via insufficient staffing (Dixon, 2022). In many cases, those who do not take on extra duties are often seen as not pulling their weight or not committed to their work (Ettarh, 2018). This is particularly concerning for libraries as a workplace because previous research has shown the clearer a job role and the less role conflict present the happier the librarian will be (Karim, 2008). Role conflicts can be countered with self-advocacy and setting boundaries, but this requires ample amounts of both personal and institutional support (Dixon, 2022).

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the use of the KIWEST protocol due to the scope of the instrument. While the protocol provides a general picture of the work environment and creates an index, it does not allow for more than a surface-level understanding of the work environment. Further investigation will be needed to determine the unique details that caused a work environment to score well or poorly on the protocol.

Additional limitations include that the sample collected was a convenience sample, which reduces the generalizability of the findings (Henry, 2009). The demographic information collected did not include information about race, job role, or descriptors of the institution at which the participant works. This limits the ability to fully describe the sample population. It also restricts understanding of how these factors translate into work environment differences. Further study can elaborate on these conditions and more deeply explore their connections to how the work environment is perceived.

Conclusion

The work environments of academic libraries have a substantial impact on the success and satisfaction of library employees. This study demonstrates that the work environments indicators library employees rate most highly are: job autonomy, task completion clarity, competency demands, and meaning of work. The work environment indicators that library employees rate lowest are: perceived investment in employee development, social support from the supervisor, engagement (dedication), and role conflicts. These findings, in addition to previous research on this topic, can be utilized to address issues of needed institutional change and the growth of supportive work environments.

The impact of these ratings supports previous research on the workplace elements that directly impact librarian recruitment, retention, and overall satisfaction. Library leaders must prioritize the optimization of the work environment indicators regarded as least optimal in

order to create a more cohesive and supportive work environment, while continuing to support cultural indicators that library employees regard most highly. Future studies on this topic have the opportunity to explore these indicators in greater detail, including the nuances of these experiences among library employees from historically marginalized or underrepresented populations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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