

A Good Jobs Strategy for Libraries

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Abstract

In the 2014 book *The Good Jobs Strategy* management and organizational theory scholar Zeynep Ton identifies a set of key issues in job design, operational models, and staffing that enable organizations to both create good jobs and, as a result, deliver better products and services. Written primarily about retail, the key concepts in the framework relating to building teams, defining services, and supporting and empowering staff are also relevant to library organizations. Ton's framework focuses on four principles; offer less, standardize and empower, cross-train, and operate with slack, each of which are relevant to varying degrees to library and archives organization contexts. This essay brings together points from the framework and connects them to issues in library management and organizational theory literature to explore the extent to which issues in the framework connect with issues facing libraries. The paper ends with recommendations for how libraries can similarly benefit from implementing a good jobs strategy that both supports library workers and enables better functions for our organizations.

Introduction

In *The Good Jobs Strategy: How the Smartest Companies Invest in Employees to Lower Costs and Boost Profits* management and organizational theory scholar Zeynep Ton provides an in-depth review and exploration of how a range of companies like Costco, Trader Joes, and QuikTrip demonstrate the business sense that comes from creating good jobs. Somewhat counterintuitively, each of these companies and other companies like them, pay their workers more than their competitors, give them more control of managing their schedules, and also schedule more staff to work at any given time. Central to the good jobs strategy, is both a set of beliefs about workers and four key operational design concepts; offer less, standardize & empower, cross-train, and operate with slack. The success of the framework has resulted in the launch of The Good Jobs Institute, a non-profit that supports implementation of the strategy articulated in the framework.

To demonstrate the value of this framework, Ton explicitly focuses on how a good jobs strategy can and does work in low-cost retail. Her intention in that focus is to underscore that even in the sectors where it is assumed that a "bad jobs strategy" of low pay, minimal benefits,

precarious staffing, and volatile schedules is the norm that designing better jobs that provide stability and flexibility to workers is better for those businesses. With that noted, the intention of this framework is to offer a general approach to thinking about how organizations of all kinds and in all sectors can be deliberate about job design. In Ton's words "If the good jobs strategy is possible in low-cost retail, then it is possible pretty much anywhere" (2014, p.15).

This essay takes the central concepts from the book and explores how they fit with and apply to situations for job design, operational models, and staffing for libraries. While a very different context than the retail examples, there are clear lessons to learn from this approach for improving the way that administrators approach work in libraries.

Ton argues for four key operational decisions about how to organize and structure work. The companies she studies that have successfully implemented a good jobs strategy; offer less in terms of products and services, mix standardization and empowerment in all roles in their organizations, focus on cross-training staff, and consistently operate with slack, having more staff on hand at a given moment in time than they know they need. In her words, companies that are serious about a good jobs strategy "design and manage their operations in a way that makes their employees more productive, reduces the costs of doing business, and puts employees at the center of the company's success." Most succinctly, in Ton's words, an organization committed to a good jobs strategy "puts itself in its employees hands, then does its best to make sure that those hands are strong, skilled, and caring" (p. 16).

It might seem strange to explore the extent to which this framework relates to work in libraries. Indeed, librarianship and library work in general seems to be quintessentially "good job" kind of work. With that noted, it's increasingly clear that there are major problems with library jobs. Burnout is a major problem for librarians (Geary & Hickey, 2019; Kendrick, 2017; Wood et al., 2020). Indeed, the very things that make librarianship such a compelling career have also been credited with the way that the profession asks too much of library workers (Ettarh, 2018). Indeed, librarianship makes it on the short list of jobs that journalist and cultural theorist Anne Hellen Peterson identifies as "cool jobs" or "lovable jobs" in her book *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*. From Peterson's perspective, jobs like librarianship and journalism present persistent problems because "so many people are competing for so few positions that compensation standards can be continuously lowered with little effect. There's *always* someone just as passionate to take your place" (2020, p. 70). While library jobs may be dream jobs it's not clear that they are good jobs. In fact, the fact that they are dream jobs may ultimately end up being part of why so many library jobs end up being bad jobs.

In short, while there is a lot to love about library work it does indeed seem that there are significant opportunities to become better and more explicit about how we approach staffing, job design, and operational functions. To that end, in what follows I lay out the central ideas in each of the four areas Ton identifies as central to a good jobs strategy; offer less, standardize and empower, cross-train, and operate with slack. After presenting Ton's key points in each area, I then explore the extent to which they are relevant and related to the different context of libraries. I then conclude by offering a set of general recommendations for how libraries can become more conscious about ensuring that they follow a good jobs strategy going forward.

Offer Less

The organizations that operate from a good jobs strategy categorically offer less. They offer fewer products and services. They are open fewer hours. They run fewer promotions. In Ton's words, "What retailers do not realize is how much each additional product, each additional promotion, and each additional holiday they choose to stay open increases the complexity of their business... More product variety and promotions also increase the likelihood of errors and operational problems" (p. 77). At the core, the organizational design principle here is that offering less allows a highly trained staff to deliver more value for the organization.

Ton underscores that there are a series of cascading valuable effects that come from the operational decision to offer less. "Offering less makes operations more efficient and accurate, which in turn improves customer service and hence sales. Since improving operations helps employees do a better job – sometimes in ways that customers can see with their own eyes – employees feel greater pride and joy in their work" (p. 96). In the retail context, offering less allows an organization and its workers to focus on optimizing resources and generating the most value from the time and energy their higher paid workforce bring to the work than other retailers. Significantly, in the retail context, decisions about how many offerings to provide relate directly to sales and to revenue, but it's worth underscoring that the effects of offerings in contexts where these don't relate to additional revenue present different kinds of problems. That is, when library organizations offer more it's not generally the case that they can generate more resources. In general, library organizations operate from a spend plan on a fixed base budget provided by a city, municipality, or non-profit organization which the library operates. So when a library decides to offer more it doesn't even generally have a possibility to gain more resources to operate on by doing so.

If one were to describe the offerings of public and research libraries in the last several decades, it would likely be best characterized as the opposite of "offer less." I think it's fair to

say that it appears that across different kinds of library sectors the operating theory is currently “offer more.” Research libraries are providing growing lists of services like digital scholarship (Roemer & Kern, 2019), research data management (Tenopir et al., 2014), open access publishing services (Skinner et al., 2014), digitization (Tharani, 2013), and digital repository functions (Salo, 2008). Public libraries offer a wide range of varied digital content and services to their users. They provide access to new kinds of services like makerspaces (Halverson et al., 2017), and are increasingly being called upon to play key roles as social service providers for the unhoused (Terrile, 2016), as first responders with Narcan for drug overdoses (Ford, 2017), and as providers of a wide array of social work services (Lloyd, 2020). Every new offering or service a Library provides creates more operational complexity to manage. This is particularly problematic given that, for the most part, the growth in these kinds of services has come in a period in which budgets have been either stagnant or shrinking, when costs of things like e-journal subscriptions have and continue to skyrocket (McGuigan, 2004), and in which, by and large, all the existing functions and services of libraries around management of print collections and longstanding services all persist. In practice, this has resulted in a situation where “the number of support staff is in fairly inexorable decline” (Sweeney & Schonfeld, 2017).

The takeaway from this is clear. If libraries want to be serious about enacting a good jobs strategy, it’s going to be essential for library organizations to begin to track and account for the range of services that they offer and start to be far more deliberate about the very real costs that come from spreading their teams thinner and thinner to support more and more services. Every new concept for a service or offering should entail a discussion of what other service or offering likely needs to be rethought or reprioritized. In this context, it makes a lot of sense why the “offer more” strategy that seems to largely be present in the library field is burning out library workers of all kinds.

Standardize and Empower

The second operational decision that Ton identifies as being key to implementation of a good jobs strategy is ensuring that jobs across an organization are all designed to include a mixture of standardization and routinization of many tasks and empowerment of staff to use their judgment to directly contribute to the organization’s success. In her words, “While most of the debate in work design seems to be about whether employees should follow standardized processes or be empowered, operationally excellent companies in a wide range of industries tend to choose the best of both” (p. 100).

In many organizations jobs are designed largely in an either-or fashion. That is, workers in senior roles may be empowered to make a wide range of decisions about how to approach their work but workers in lower paid roles are often closely managed and watched as to how well they can perform a fixed and rote set of tasks.

Significantly, Ton stresses that even in assembly line manufacturing processes with highly routinized and standardized activities for workers successful companies leveraging Toyota style total quality management focus on identifying ways to bring all line workers into the process to identify defects or issues in the production process. In this context, when staff in roles that include significant routinized tasks are empowered to identify problems in the process and supported to develop and propose methods to improve quality in those processes the organizations both produce better results and design jobs that are more engaging.

Job design in libraries often falls into the problems that Ton has identified. Specifically, different kinds of library work are thought to be things that should be highly standardized versus involving significant empowerment. It's worth noting that empowerment is itself a vexed term, in that asking workers to do this kind of more empowered and autonomous work requires both compensating them for that work and providing them with the capacity to do that work. From Ton's perspective, this kind of division of roles is a mistake. Across all kinds of jobs both empowerment and standardization in activities offers benefits. Libraries want to make sure that they have consistency in reference services, in programming, etc. Libraries also need to support staff in highly routinized roles to create bandwidth and opportunities for workers at all levels to support continuous improvement.

The workers closest to any given operational function or activity are the ones best positioned to see how that could be improved. Further, ensuring that workers have the time and resources to improve their work processes is an essential contributor to worker morale. Few things are as disempowering as being forced to routinely do something in a way you can tell could work better but for which you aren't allowed to improve. Significantly, deliberate approaches to create time and space for staff to participate in reviews of what activities are most valuable to start, stop, or continue offer meaningful ways for any library worker to be directly involved in shaping and improving the nature of library work (Bednar & Robbins, 2019). It's only possible for that to happen though if those roles are explicitly designed to both support workers in identifying and proposing improvements and if those roles are staffed at the right level to provide the time necessary to be trained and supported to be able to identify those kinds of improvements. All of this gets into a space where everyone working in an organization is thinking about how they can improve the work.

Significantly, Ton directly draws attention to how companies like QuikTrip avoid hiring external consultants to map out processes and propose improvements and strategies and instead bring together teams of staff from within the organization to engage in those activities. This had the effect of both helping staff develop skills to do this kind of work and in helping them take ownership of those processes. Given the widespread use of consultants to do this kind of work design and planning for libraries, and then known issues with distrust that their involvement provokes (Dymarz & Harrington, 2019), it seems that this lesson could provide significant benefit to library organizations. The more that workers at all levels of the organization can have their jobs explicitly designed to support workers in playing an active role in improving processes, developing strategies, and implementing them the more engaging the work can be and the more that workers at all levels can understand the why of any given set of practices and approaches.

Cross-Train

The third component of the good jobs strategy is a focus on cross-training staff. Ton underscores that each of the companies she studied focused on making sure that staff could perform a variety of roles. On the most basic level, supporting that kind of cross-training means that if there is a point in time where there is a huge need for staff to shift to work through a backlog of work in one area that the organization is able to rapidly shift what kinds of work any given staff member is doing to meet that need. There are real costs to doing this kind of cross-training, but the flexibility gained from it to support successful operations provides a huge value to an organization.

Beyond flexibility, cross-training provides an additional series of key values. For example, in Ton's words "Being able to perform different jobs helps Toyota employees understand how their work fits into the big picture. Switching from task to another task also keeps boredom at bay and leaves employees less vulnerable to fatigue and even injury from repetitive actions." (p. 148). Beyond this, Ton notes that when done well "Cross-training also gives employees a greater sense of making a difference because it emphasizes the importance of each job and removes some of the barriers between employees and their managers." As Ton reports, QuikTrip's vice president of operating systems, explained that "The number one reason people stay with QuikTrip is not the money. It's because their managers do the same jobs they do. They have never worked anywhere else where the management will do the worst parts of the job such as clean the bathroom, empty the trash, work in the freezers, and clean the gas

islands" (p. 149). When workers and managers trade off on all the tasks required to operate the organization it helps to make clear that it really is in fact the case that everyone's time and energy is just as valuable in terms of completing the work that needs to be done and that indeed all the activities that are identified to be done actually do need to be done. In Ton's words, "Cross-training works... because it reflects the overall mind-set that employees are at the center of a company's success" (p. 152).

Because libraries provide such a wide and varied set of services and involve a range of complex processes and workflows to provide those services library organizations are notoriously challenged with issues of siloed functions between different units and departments (Kowalski, 2017). In this context, there is considerable value to bring to the work of library organizations to explicitly focus on cross-training workers across a wide range of levels to learn the practices and functions of different roles throughout the organization. As Ton notes, a key finding in research on job satisfaction in a range of fields is that understanding how one's individual work directly contributes to the success of the mission of the organization is critical. The more that libraries can think about centering cross-training, and in particular, on working to ensure that workers and managers at a wide range of levels are able and do in fact take on the varied tasks required to have a library meet its mission, the better. With that noted, many workers in libraries will spend entire careers working in individual departments on specific roles in which they aren't given the opportunity to come to understand how their work connects with and complements the work of their colleagues in providing services.

Operate with Slack

Ton's last principle for a good jobs strategy is that each of the companies she studied designed their approach to staffing with an explicit focus on creating slack. In her words, "Model retailers cut waste everywhere they can find it except when it comes to labor. There, they like to err on the side of too much labor —or over staffing— which would be seen as a fatal mistake anywhere else. It's not even a matter of "erring"; model retailers deliberately build slack into their staffing" (p. 154). She stresses that this is the most critical of the four parts of the framework.

Ton explains that this provides two essential benefits, first by "preventing the operational problems that come from understaffing. Second by allowing employees to be involved in continuous improvement in the form of waste reduction, efficiency, and safety improvement, and product and process innovation (p. 155). Central to this concept is that workers who are pushed to the limit of what they can do have no capacity to be able to think about how to do the work better. Further, workers who are pushed to the limit are going to get burned out, stressed,

fatigued, and will be less and less effective in their ability to do the work. It's worth noting that Ton identifies this need to operate with slack as the single most important of the operational choices in that it is the "ultimate expression of putting employees at the center of a company's success." Limiting the workload of employees to create time and space for them to think about how to do the work better is a key component of the overall good jobs strategy.

This principle seems to be the one that is the most at odds with the lived experience of library workers across all kinds of libraries. It's worth underscoring that understaffing has been directly identified as a key factor creating low morale in libraries (Kendrick, 2017). This is particularly problematic when paired with the fact that instead of offering less they continue to attempt to offer more and more services with fewer workers and resources. If in fact libraries want to follow a good jobs strategy it is essential for library leaders to step back and reflect on what they are offering to begin to identify what things don't need to be done. Given that we likely aren't in situations where large amounts of additional core funding can be generated, the central issue for libraries is to identify what services they can offer with the staff they have and then to think even harder on how to offer even fewer services so that they can provide staff with the bandwidth to operate with the slack necessary to have space to think about how to improve processes and work.

Toward a Good Jobs Strategy for Libraries

If you ask a manager in a library or archives if they provide good jobs, I imagine most would say yes. I think this review suggests that while library jobs may be "dream jobs" it is the case that many of those jobs are not "good jobs." Significantly, Ton's book offers an opportunity to make that concept more concrete. My sense is that the issues raised in mapping the framework to the way that libraries are organized and set up offers a series of challenges for libraries to reflect on in how work is organized and structured in library organizations. In this last section, I offer the key set of questions I see Ton's work opening up for evaluating if a library is indeed manifesting a good jobs strategy or not.

Are your organization's service offerings in line with your staffing?

A key concept in the good jobs strategy is to offer less in terms of both services and hours and then use that to create slack in staffing so that workers can engage in self-directed continuous improvement activities. If an organization is continually adding on new services and offerings without focusing time and attention on either securing more permanent funding that can support those offerings or identifying services that the organization will stop providing that

organization is setting its workers up for burn out, frustration, and exhaustion. My sense is this is largely the case in many library organizations.

Ton argues that organizations can improve both the experience for their users and the experience for their staff by becoming more deliberate about identifying fewer services to offer. I realize that in many cases, the push to offer more comes from a fear of both librarians and library administrators about what might be lost if their organizations don't continue to evolve and develop new services. Libraries face very real concerns about being left behind or becoming irrelevant to their communities and organizations. That pushes workers and administrators to spread themselves thinner to try and do more and more. But it's worth underscoring that, in keeping with Ton's framework, the thinner workers are spread the less bandwidth they will have to do a good job at delivering on those services. This produces a vicious cycle that will result in the organizations standing up unsustainable services that are likely doomed to failure from the start because they don't have the recourses necessary to be successful.

Do all jobs involve a mixture of standardization and empowerment?

Organizations are stronger and workers find work more satisfying when all workers are authentically empowered and supported to have time and space to improve the way that organizations provide services and organize their operations. With that noted, it's worth underscoring that in many library organizations different worker roles come with both implicit and explicit statuses that differentiate roles where some workers function in highly standardized roles and others in highly empowered roles.

To be sure, there are major distinctions and characterizations between different levels of work and different roles. However, it's essential that library organizations work to make sure that staff in any role end up with a mixture of standardization and empowerment in their work. Importantly, this means avoiding the kind of caste-like systems that emerge in a range of different organizations where some staff are empowered to develop innovative ideas while others are saddled with the burdens of maintaining and operating those organizations (Vinsel & Russel, 2020). If we do genuinely want to create innovative and sustainable solutions to problems, we need to figure out how to create time and space for the folks closest to the operational work to be able to devote time and thought to how to improve organizational functions.

How central is cross training to your operating model?

Related to the last point, a key part of enabling workers to engage in a mix of standardized and empowered tasks involves supporting workers to be cross-trained in a range of activities. Significantly, a key problem with distrust in organizations is tied to “us” and “them” mentalities that result from a lack of understanding of the nature of the roles and tasks of other staff.

This isn't to suggest that there isn't a place for specialization in various library work roles. There are major differences in kinds of work and different workers enjoy and appreciate the ability to specialize in various areas of library work. Still, library organizations that can create opportunities for workers to be cross-trained and supported in doing rotations in other parts of the library organization benefit by developing a more flexible workforce and a workforce that better understands the full range of work that comes together to make the organization capable of delivering its services. Significantly, that kind of broader organizational understanding is important for workers to be able to understand how the parts of the work they focus on support the organization in achieving its mission and enable workers to better conceptualize how they can improve functions and operations across various units in the organization.

How much staffing is precarious and how much stability do workers have in employment?

Central to the good jobs strategy is an understanding that it's essential to provide stability and consistency to workers both in terms of ongoing employment and in terms of scheduling and hours. In this capacity, organizations need to be very deliberate about how and when they create term-based positions. Notably, many library organizations have attempted to grow their services and offerings by creating precarious term-based jobs that place considerable responsibilities and stress on temporary workers funded with external grant funds or short-term project funds. People in these roles are often in their dream jobs, but find themselves deeply stressed by both their ability to plan for their own future and the likelihood that because of the temporary nature of their employment and funding that their work is also likely going to be unsustainable in the long run for their organizations (Dean et al., 2018). Further, “insecure employment affects both the diversity of the profession and the cadre of early career professionals who often fill term roles” (Weber, 2017). This is all to further underscore that all the issues drawn out here compound efforts to center diversity, equity, and inclusion in the future of library work.

The stress that comes from precarious funding and staffing in support of what should be developed into core ongoing programs has been identified as a major source of job dissatisfaction for early and mid-career librarians (Blumenthal et al., 2020). In this context, library organizations would do well to both develop clear plans for how term-based funding fits into the development of core services and to be sure that when it is necessary to create term-based positions that they review and engage with best practices for this kind of work as identified in resources like the Guidelines for Developing and Supporting Grant-Funded Positions in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums (Arnold et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Library work is sought after. Indeed, many organizations will have hundreds of applicants for individual positions. Many of those applicants come eager and equipped with advanced degrees sought out with the explicit goal of being able to do library work and support the missions of libraries and archives. In that context, it seems that libraries must be providing jobs consistent with a good jobs strategy. But as this review suggests, that appears to largely not be the case.

In fact, the desirability of library jobs is itself one of the inherent challenges in supporting a good jobs strategy in the field. As people have been increasingly charged to seek out and follow their passions and follow a calling ends up pushing people in careers like journalism and librarianship to engage in substantial amounts of overwork which leads directly to professional burnout (Petersen, 2020). Indeed, approaching librarianship as a calling which comes with a kind of vocational awe has been directly attributed to a wide range of problems and abuses librarians are willing to put up with while they become increasingly burned out in their work. Indeed, many view librarianship itself as a calling and vocation in a way that work in retail isn't often thought of. In Fobazi Ettarah's argument, which has rung true for many in the library profession, the problem of vocational awe, a concept she coined, means that a love of the work in libraries "is easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate enough to serve without complaint" (Ettarah, 2018). On this point, scholar and researcher Kathleen Fitzpatrick has further noted that "Feeling called to a way of life, and particularly to a way of life in service to public good, one relinquishes one's claim to fair treatment." (Fitzpatrick, 2019).

Despite any number of forms of mismanagement and pushing staff harder and harder to provide more and more services with fewer resources, libraries will continue to find large numbers of people lining up for opportunities to work for these organizations. The paradox in

this is that the fact that library jobs are imagined to be such good jobs is a key element that impedes many institutions in delivering on a good jobs strategy.

With that noted, Ton's framework for a good jobs strategy does indeed offer considerable potential value to improve both the quality of library jobs and the ability of libraries to deliver results in their work. We can do better. Library leaders and managers can commit to enacting a good jobs strategy. If they do, they have the chance to not only provide more humane work lives to their teams but they also have the chance to deeply and genuinely improve the function and operation of their organizations. Ton's suggestions that organizations should offer less, mix standardization and empowerment in work, cross-train workers, and most significantly find ways to operate with slack in staffing are all relevant to library leaders looking to improve the quality of the jobs they offer and as a result the services and operations of their organizations.

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