Lessons Learned about Working from Home during a Pandemic

Renee Gould, Audrey Koke, and Marissa Smith

Abstract

A survey of 23 questions was sent out to various library-related listservs during the fall of 2020 to investigate the unique impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, library technical services departments conducted most, if not all, work in the office. This was mainly because all the necessary equipment, supplies and access to records would prove cumbersome and costly to establish at home. The investigators thus felt technical services would experience numerous challenges transitioning to working from home during the pandemic.

The results of the survey were mixed. Many, but not all, elements of technical services tasks were successfully completed at home. Aspects such as lack of necessary equipment, administrative support and even Wi-Fi made it difficult to conduct all tasks. In short, the investigators found that short-term technical services operations can occur from home. Long term, however, is questionable and dependent upon an individual institution's ability to financially support technical services.

This article hopes to illuminate systematic flaws that create obstacles for technical services employees to work from home. Hopefully, it will also expose critical issues that can be researched in the future.

Introduction

The lead investigator serves as a collection development librarian. Prior to COVID-19, she had never considered work from home as being a viable option even though she commuted an average of two hours each workday. In March 2020, when the pandemic had its widespread impact in the United States, this librarian's workplace encouraged work from home. She scaled down from five days to two in the office and, surprisingly, did not encounter hardships beyond

physically transporting boxes of books for cataloging. This ease of transition made the librarian wonder how other technical services personnel experienced work from home. Who found it easy? Were there any obstacles? Would they wish to work from home more often even after the pandemic?

Literature Review

The concept of working from home is not new. Companies in many sectors have trialed and embraced this workstyle for several years now. Edward E. Potter commented that social and technological transformations have opened the door to telework since the 1980s. Potter believed that remote work would inevitably expand just as transportation innovations in the past have reshaped access to work.[1]

In the library world, technical services librarians and staff began testing remote work initiatives in the mid-1990s, mostly within cataloging positions.[2] Michigan State University library catalogers ran a six-month pilot program that experimented with allowing remote work for up to two days per week.[3] During this time, the Internet was in its infancy and was not the major resource to rely upon as it is today. Cataloguers needed to save work performed at home on a disk drive and upload it to the local system and OCLC (Online Computer Library Center). There were major expenses incurred due to necessary peripherals such as dial-up modem access.[4] With the financial support of Michigan State University, the pilot program found success during the six months. However, the conclusion was "expansion and improvement in technological access are necessary for telecommuting to be considered a strong alternative to a traditional cataloging setting at Michigan State University."[5] In 1996, an article by Leysen and Pelzer discussed Black and Hyslop's study and compiled responses from the listserv AUTOCAT to question what is necessary for successful "telecataloging."[6] The replies centered around the importance of being computer proficient and being able to concentrate fully at home. Access to a modem, personal computer, software, and printers were important. There also was the need for an array of printed materials, especially for original cataloging. At the time, many cataloging resources were not available online and if they could be brought home, it proved burdensome. Some institutions, like Iowa State University, could not initiate cataloging from home; there simply was no "off-campus access" to required tools. Leysen and Pelzer concluded that, "as electronic resources proliferate, the prospects for telecataloging become enhanced."[7] The new millennium seemed the time where this prediction became increasingly correct.

In 2007, technical services librarian Jennifer Duncan discussed working remotely for six months. Duncan's Associate Technical Services Director believed that flexible work schedules led to favorable work-life balance and "was essential to the retention of and morale among staff."[8] A grant supplied funds for the needed hardware/software and peripherals. It should be noted that it was strongly encouraged that Duncan return to her main work location at least two times during the six months. Since the mid-1990s, technology had advanced, but not to the point where remote work was feasible for a half-year. Duncan concluded that, "long-term, day-to-day telecommuting probably is not in the best interest of most library employees…I think that six months is probably the outside limit of what might be desirable."[9]

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 forced a multitude of employees to move to remote work in the United States. Although researchers have found that "37 percent of U.S. jobs can plausibly be performed at home," many industries authorized strict work from home rules to quell the reach of the disease.[10] Anna Craft mused about the full impact on technical services, saying, "Covid-19 has forced many libraries and library personnel to confront the realities of remote work in an unexpected and unprecedented manner."[11] Craft suggested research should continue and reveal new truths about how the pandemic overall has impacted technical services.[12] The hope is that the research and survey conducted herein will add to an ever-growing examination.

Method

The investigators created and posted a survey to multiple listservs in September and October of 2020. Three different state organizations (Florida Library Association, Alabama Library Association and Georgia Library Association) were focal points for participants. Listservs for the American Library Association, and one major Integrated Library System provider, OCLC, were also queried.

The survey contained 23 mixed-method questions (see appendix A). Altogether, the 421 library employees who fully completed the study met the criteria of working at least 1 hour at home from March 1, 2020 through June 1, 2020, a period the researchers would like to refer to as lockdown. The respondents reside in 46 states and the District of Columbia. It was pointed out that not all respondents may work in the same state in which they reside, so any details concerning specific laws that may have influenced the policies or procedures of libraries during that period concerning work during lockdown will not be included in this article. A more detailed study will be needed as many states reacted differently. Studying the consequences of governmental mandates may be beneficial in creating future policies. It would be interesting to

learn how local government response to the pandemic influenced the array of employee responses.

This survey focused on people who identified as librarians and staff of technical services, which is not a complete representation of all roles. One key demographic that was unintentionally excluded was administrative roles. For this study, the investigators looked at 300 (71%) people who identified as librarians and 121 (29%) who identified as staff members. Future studies of all employees would be beneficial.

The Fair Labor Standards Act does not define a full or part-time employee as this is determined by the employer.[13] For the purpose of this survey, it was indeterminable which respondents would be considered to be full-time or part-time in their organization. Most respondents, 388, worked 30 hours or more prior to March 1, 2020, at their physical library. Only 22 were identified as having worked less than 29 hours at their physical library. The purpose of collecting this data was to learn how many respondents worked from home prior to the pandemic versus the population that transitioned after. As it turns out, the majority needed to work from home to some degree after lockdown initiatives were enforced. Prior to March 1, 2020, most respondents averaged 37.15 hours at their designated work location and 1.19 hours were work from home. After the onset of the lockdown, the respondents spent an average of 3.90 hours at their place of employment while 36.93 hours were at home. The sum of the averages worked pre and during lockdown did differ. Prior to lockdown respondents average 38.34 hours and during lockdown had 40.83 hours. Due to limitations of the survey it is hard to pin point precisely as to why there is a difference in quantity of hours' worked. It should be noted that the investigators defined "home" as a location other than the address of employment and does not necessarily mean place of residence.

Limitations of the Survey

The focus of questions 10 and 11 of the survey was to learn how much outside influence may have impacted our survey-takers' responses. Question 10 allowed the investigators to learn how many respondents were mandated to work from home. Unfortunately, the question produced vague responses. The question was: "were you mandated to work from home on a full or part-time basis during lockdown?" Respondents were given three options, "yes," "no," or "other," with the ability to provide additional feedback. Of the 421 responses, 85.51% said that "yes" they were mandated. While 5.23% said "no," and the remaining 9.26% responded as "other" or left the question blank. Based on the additional feedback, the limited choice selections led to respondents

relying on individual interpretation of the term "mandated" related to work from home orders, resulting in confusion of how to properly answer. The investigators are curious if a direct correlation could have been found if a more specific answer field had been originally presented with question 10.

This confusion showed up within the listed "other" category as well. The investigators, upon analysis, felt that some of the responses could have easily been placed within one of the listed categories. Without any additional follow-up the investigators did not feel comfortable adjusting the data. This flaw is important to acknowledge because knowing that employees either were required or had a say in how they had to work may have had a direct correlation with positive or negative responses to the open-ended questions.

Question 11 asked, "how accessible was the library to you from March 1st - June 1st, 2020?" Respondents had four choices within the category and answered: completely closed off to employees (24%), fully open to employees (12%), fully open to employees but on a limited basis (30%), and other (34%).

Statistically, this is not an accurate representation of what these respondents went through, as the question to the survey-takers was not straightforward and often left to the respondents' interpretation of how to best respond. Not all respondents were working from home from March 1 through June 1. In addition, they may have encountered various levels of accessibility within that same date range. To get a more accurate account of how accessible the library was to the respondents, there needed to be additional options within the question such as "partially open to employees and on a limited basis" and "…approval with time limits" along with a timeframe for each respondent.

In addition, some respondents did not fully understand the initial survey question as some "other" comments may have easily lumped in within one of the provided categories. For example, some respondents opted to answer the question as the library "whole" with comments like "closed to all employees except for myself, 1 staff member and Director" and "fully open to employees, but only Monday through Friday 8am-5pm, and only to retrieve needed work, not to actually spend all day in the office." The investigators were only interested in learning how the individual respondent was treated. Going forward a rewording of Question 11 would be beneficial to learn the full extent of accessibility of the physical workspace to employees and to make decisions that would be beneficial to both the company and their employees.

Results

The investigators used a combination of a Likert scale and an open-ended question for questions number 12 and 13 to get a better understanding of the work from home environment and whether the respondents felt as if they had the support of their employer. The intention of these questions was to see if there was an obvious correlation between feelings of positivity/negativity and what their concerns were. However, there was no obvious correlation of issues with either positive or negative support. An overwhelming majority, 90% (379) of the respondents, had agreed in some manner that they had the support of their employer even with issues listed within their statement. While the remaining 10% of respondents selected "neutral" (5) or disagree in some manner (29), and two left the answer blank (8). However, there were some prominent themes presented within the comments that are worth more investigation. These themes, discussed in more detail below, include technology, job alteration, supervisors, communication, and financial support.

Support - Technology

The technical needs varied greatly. Depending on the situation, some employers provided resources faster than others, while some did not provide any at all. One comment included, "my employer, before we went into quarantine, allowed us to grab whatever tech we needed in order to work from home. This meant we could also take our computers home which helped transition to work from home." In contrast, one employee had to threaten to sue to be provided specific ADA-required accommodations. Then there were a few comments about "if I hadn't had my own personal computer and printer, I would not have been able to work from home. My employer did not inquire as to whether or not I had all the necessary equipment and internet access to work from home." Additional follow-up questions would have given more insight into why the employee had to provide the resources needed to work from home. This calls into question if the employer assumed all their employees had the resources they needed to do their jobs or was it because the employer did not have the financial means to support employees working from home? Did this disadvantage only affect specific types of libraries, or many? One comment stood out as it touched upon multiple issues:

> We were told to work from home and were supported in the sense that we kept getting paid fully, but we had no lead time to prepare and many of my staff members did not have computers at home or internet. We are not given laptops or any other computer equipment by the library I work for. They found laptops for people who had nothing, but there was

very little technical support in that sense... Most of us don't have office space or chairs or anything like that, so working from home logistically was very difficult. We asked the library to help provide more equipment and beyond a few laptops they didn't. Of course, we did keep getting paid, so...

Support – Job Alteration

Certain employers could not, for unspecified reasons, provide access to technological resources, so they opted to alter the respondent's job to accommodate the work from home structure. One comment included, "if staff didn't have Internet access, they allowed for off-line assignments." There were comments about being told not to do any library work during their time at home even if there was work to be done. One respondent expressed their frustration and stated that "my employer did not want me to do any library work during this time. It was frustrating." Due to shifting job focus, their main job duties were halted. One respondent felt "overwhelmed with work. Some of this could have been eased if I had been allowed to work in the library by myself."

Support – Supervisors

How supervisors treated their employees was another theme within the level of support needed by technical service employees. The investigators found that there were multiple layers where support may or may not come from depending on the structure of a particular organization. According to one respondent, "it depends on who is your supervisor. In one department everyone is working from home but in my department only two of us were, begrudgingly, allowed to work from home." Another respondent said that their "immediate supervisor was extremely supportive, though the library's administration dept. was less in tune with employee needs." Another comment included that, "Our Dean made the transition as smooth as possible. We started having library meetings every two weeks and she checked in on us weekly. We had motivation Mondays with cute emails and Trivia Tuesdays to keep morale up. We had TS department meetings weekly and I have weekly one on one meetings with my supervisor."

Support – Communication

Communication was another strong theme with 28 comments. Some positive comments included being pleased that their "employer quickly put together a website with resources for

tools needed to work from home." Another commented on being pleased with the variety of "new communication channels" such as Zoom or Teams. One respondent stated that "it felt almost normal due to constant communication with administration and staff either via email or Zoom or Teams." The negative comments focused on inconsistent messaging or simply no messaging at all. One stated, "I felt that we were doing the best we could on short notice, but communication was not consistent across managers and the director." Additional research focusing on communication or interviews with respondents might be beneficial.

Support - Financial

Another prevalent theme involved financial support. Depending on how much support the respondent received, there was a slight correlation between having a more positive or a more negative review. Two examples of respondents who had "strongly agree" with the statement included one's director "explicitly said that she would support staff members being able to work and earn their salaries from home until she was told otherwise. While not hands on, she made sure that employees had some work to do from home." While another comment showed that "…The administration worked very hard to keep as many of us employed whether we could work form [sic] home as they could. When we did go to part-time they enrolled us in a program at the state level that allowed us to draw on unemployment benefits for partially furloughed staff." For those who had reported a "strongly disagree," comments included, "my employer did not want me to do any library work during this time. It was frustrating" and "I had to attend many unnecessary Zoom meetings every week, which was more distracting/time-consuming than productive…"

There were other themes that were not as prevalent throughout the list of responses but might be worth exploring in the future. One such theme was how much fear employees and/or employers had regarding the pandemic, which had a direct influence on the participants' reactions. If the employee and employer had the same level of concern about the virus, then their answers seemed positive. Inversely, if there was a difference of opinion, responses were skewed negative. For example, one responder who had disagreed with question 12 followed up stating that their "employer believes that having desks 6 feet apart is safe for employees to work fully time at the library. I do not agree." Another responded "strongly agree" to question 12 and their follow up statement said that "it made me feel good that my employer cared enough about my health."

An interesting avenue to explore in the future would be a deeper focus on the management of employees. In this survey, those who had a more managerial role had more all-encompassing statements and often included team orientated words. One example:

> I manage a team of tech services folks, I personally am better able to telework because of my role, but my team has not been allowed to get the things they need to telework. Most of my team now have work laptops and VPN, but several didn't until recently. We still have new books that were received in March that haven't been processed at all and we aren't allowed in to get them.

Altering Their Job and Feeling Productive – Was Working from Home Successful?

The investigators wanted to learn about the overall success of working from home, which was addressed with questions 14, 16 and 17. Question 14 asked if respondents felt that they could work from home prior to the pandemic. The answers were 125 (30%) "definitely yes," 100 (24%) "probably yes," 75 (18%) "might or might not," 84 (20%) "probably not" and only 37 (9%) answered as "definitely not." In retrospect, a different question may have queried their work from home experience post lockdown.

Question 16 asked if the respondents felt they were productive working from home. Out of 421 responses, 163 (39%) "strongly agree," 74 (18%) "somewhat agree," and 142 (34%) "agree" with the statement. Only 5 (1%) stayed neutral. The remaining 37 responses, (9%), either "somewhat disagree," "strongly disagree," or simply left no answer. In hindsight this area of the survey might have been more successful if it had included a follow-up open-ended question but, unfortunately, this was a missed opportunity.

Question number 17 asked how much respondents had to alter their job to make their work from home possible. Nearly one-third (147) of respondents said that they had to do "a little" modification to make their work from home possible and 32% claimed that they had to alter their job "a moderate amount" (134). Another 10% (42) said "a great deal" and 12% (12) said "a lot." The remainder, 2% (9), left their response blank. One reason for this was possibly because the listed options did not specifically fit their experience.

Future of Working from Home

The last Likert scale question, number 21, on the survey asked the respondents, "given the opportunity would you want to be able to work from home on a more permanent basis?" To the investigators' surprise, responses were mixed. Of the 421 respondents, 36% of respondents

"strongly agree" with the question and 39% either "somewhat agree" or "agree." Only 9% remained neutral and the remaining 16% had some level of disagreement or left a blank answer. The division of the respondents was fascinating to the investigators. Their answers were a lot more spread out than expected.

The final question did help explain why the results were so mixed. For instance, some respondents cited that their job duties were not easy to conduct from home. Other respondents found that being physically around colleagues was far more distracting than working from home, while others were not able to concentrate while working from home. Some respondents preferred a clear separation of their work and personal lives. Many commented about loving the flexible schedule, and not needing to commute. Others relayed how they missed many in-office experiences such as water cooler talks. Some listed health-related issues with the work from home experience, citing they were more sedentary working from home, while others found the opposite.

Many of the comments touched upon the list of terms provided by ClickTime in their article "Top 10 Advantages and Disadvantages of Working from Home." Inspired by the article, the investigators used many of the listed terms for questions 19 and 20 in the survey. The investigators found that the top four perks related to working from home include: "zero commuting" (25%), "flexible schedule" (18%), "cozy clothes" (13%), and no office distractions (12%). While the four disadvantages related to working from home are being "sedentary" (17%), having "connection issues" (15%), having "no second monitor" (12%), and the option of "other" (12%).[14]

Overall, flexibility seemed to be the common theme in various areas studied for the lockdown period in this survey. The versatility and resilience of the library employees of the technical services departments surveyed show that working from home is a possibility, however, over the longer-term, the viability is questionable. Overwhelmingly it seems a hybrid schedule, if possible, would be preferred by most respondents. There were multiple comments for question number 22 requesting a hybrid schedule. Comments include "I would like to have a hybrid work schedule where I could work from home some days and be in the library some days. Working from home is great but some of the resources and tasks that are accessible in the library I don't feel comfortable using or doing from home" and "there are components of my job - working with physical materials - that are much more effectively done in [the] office. That said, a hybrid situation where I worked several days a week from home and several on-site would be a good permanent situation." Going forward, more research would be needed on a hybrid or simply a more flexible work schedule for those who work in technical services.

Renee Gould (renee.gould@saintleo.edu) is Collection Development Librarian at Saint Leo University **Audrey Koke** (Audrey.Koke@saintleo.edu) is Serials, Resources & Instructional Services Librarian at Saint Leo University **Marissa Smith** (Marissa.Smith@saintleo.edu) is Library Technology Specialist at Saint Leo University

References

[1] Edward E. Potter, "Telecommuting: The Future of Work Corporate Culture, and American Society," *Journal of Labor Research* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 73-84.

[2] Anna R. Craft, "Remote Work in Library Technical Services: Connecting Historical Perspectives to Realities of the Developing COVID-19 Pandemic," *Serials Review* 43, no. 3 (2020): 228.

[3] Leah Black and Colleen Hyslop, "Telecommuting for Original Cataloging at the Michigan State University Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 56, n. 4 (July 1995): 319-20.

[4] Black and Hyslop, 321.

[5] Black and Hyslop, 322.

[6] Joan M. Leysen and Nancy L. Pelzer, "Telecataloging: A Consideration of Present and Future Practices," *LIBRES* 6, no.1/2 (June 1996): 4.

[7] Leysen and Pelzer, 5-8.

[8] Jennifer Duncan, "Working from Afar: A New Trend for Librarianship," *College & Research Libraries News* (April 2008): 217.

[9] Duncan, 218.

[10] Jonathan I. Dingel and Brent Neiman, "How Many Jobs Can be Donate at Home," *Journal of Public Economics* 189, (2020):

[11] Craft, "Remote Work" 230-1.

[12] Craft, "Remote Work" 230-1.

[13] Elaws - Fair Labor Standards Act Advisor. Accessed July 22, 2022. https://webapps.dol.gov/elaws/faq/esa/flsa/014.htm?_ga=2.256530376.211724262.1624979702-1117798218.1624395962.

[14] "Top 10 Advantages and Disadvantages of Working from Home." *ClickTime*, accessed 22 July 2020, https://www.clicktime.com/blog/top-10-advantages-disadvantages-working-from-home.

Appendix A

In which state do you currently reside?

[select dropdown ▼]

Q4. Indicate the library/organization affiliation:

○ Public Library
○ University/Academic Library
○ State/Community College Library
○ School Library (K-12)
○ Special Library

Q5. Is your role considered part of technical services?

○ Yes, as a **librarian**
○ Yes, as **staff** member
○ Neither

Q6. What was your position title between March 1st - June 1st, 2020:

[   ]

Q7. During the time period of March 1st -June 1st, 2020, did you personally experience any of the following (select all that may apply):

☐ Furlough
☐ Reduction in hours
☐ Pay cut
☐ Permanent layoff
☐ Temporary layoff
☐ Contract not-renewed
☐ None of the above

☐ Other

[   ] (please describe):

Q8. Please note the word "home" will be defined as a location other than the address of your employment and does not necessarily mean the place where you reside.

Q9. On average how many hours did you work in a typical week...

	Physically at your "library" (please note that this may include working at different library branches)	Hours worked at home	#Conjoint, Total#
Before March 1st, 2020:	0	0	0
Between March 1st -June 1st, 2020:	0	0	0

Q10. Were you mandated to work from home on a full or part time basis between March 1st -June 1st, 2020?

○ Yes
○ No
○ Other

[   ] (please describe):

Q11. How accessible was the library to you during March 1st -June 1st, 2020? Such as: Were you able to go in it to retrieve work related items?

○ Completely closed off to employees
○ Fully open to employees
○ Fully open to employees but on a limited basis
○ Other

[   ] (please explain):

Q12. Did you feel that you had the support of your employer to make your work from home possible?

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

Q13. Please elaborate on how you felt regarding having the support of your employer to make your work from home possible:

[text box]

Q14. Prior to COVID-19 pandemic did you believe your job had the capability of working from home? Either as full time or part time.

○ Definitely yes
○ Probably yes
○ Might or might not
○ Probably not
○ Definitely not

Overall experience working from home

Q15. What was your overall experience working from home?

Q16. Overall do you feel that you were productive working from home?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
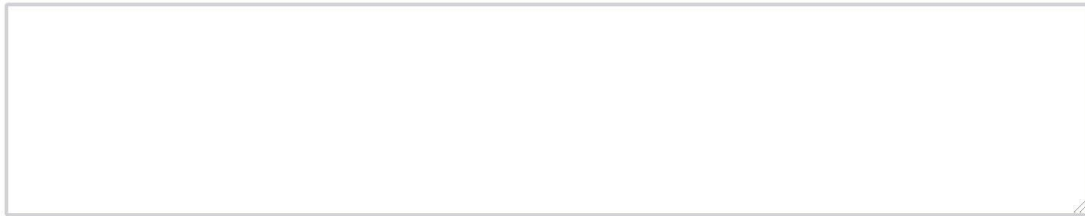- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Q17. Did you have to alter your job to make it possible to work from home?

- ○ A great deal
- ○ A lot
- ○ A moderate amount
- ○ A little
- ○ None at all

Q18. If any, please explain some of the changes that you made to your job to make it possible to work from home.

Q19. The following are a list of perks related to working from home. Please select your top three perks. The choices were inspired by: "Top 10 Advantages and Disadvantages of Working from Home." *ClickTime*, https://www.clicktime.com/blog/top-10-advantages-disadvantages-working-from-home/. Accessed 22 July 2020.

- ☐ Flexible schedule.
- ☐ Custom environment.
- ☐ Cozy clothes
- ☐ It's easier to make calls.
- ☐ Knock off some weekend to-do's
- ☐ No office distractions
- ☐ Zero commuting
- ☐ Save money
- ☐ Forget crowds and traffic
- ☐ More time with loved ones
- ☐ Other
  [_____] (please describe):

Q20. The following are a list of disadvantages related to working from home. Please select the top three disadvantages you found at work. The choices were inspired by: "Top 10 Advantages and Disadvantages of Working from Home." *ClickTime*, https://www.clicktime.com/blog/top-10-advantages-disadvantages-working-from-home/. Accessed 22 July 2020.

- ☐ Willpower.
- ☐ Difficulty sticking to a routine.

☐ Missing important calls or pings.

☐ Power naps.

☐ Boredom.

☐ Working slowly.

☐ No second monitor.

☐ Connection issues.

☐ Waiting for an answer.

☐ More distractions.

☐ Sedentary.

☐ Other

[   ] (please describe):

Q21. Given the opportunity would you want to be able to work from home on a more permanent basis?

○ Strongly agree

○ Agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Q22. Please elaborate on why you would or would not want to work from home on a more permanent basis:

[   ]

Last Question

Q23. Any additional comments/statements you feel of value to assist in this survey:

```


```

Powered by Qualtrics