

Reflecting on the Impact of Hybrid Work on an Academic Library Using the Socio-Ecological Model

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Abstract

COVID-19 led to a dramatic change in the academic library work environment, with many workers shifting to a hybrid work schedule once they returned to in-person work. The authors reflect on the impact of this schedule shift through the novel use of the socio-ecological model (SEM). The SEM looks at the impact of choices through varying circles or levels. The authors discuss the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels of impact that the switch to hybrid work had within their context and discuss their role as unit leaders and the decisions made to address these varying impacts.

Introduction

As leaders at the University of California (UC) San Diego Library, a large public university library that is organized into programs serving specific functions in the library, the authors used the socio-ecological model (SEM), a public health framework, as a reflection tool to examine the impact of hybrid work on their academic library and their program in particular. Because a public health crisis was the driving force for the change, the authors used a public health model, SEM, to make sense of how hybrid work impacted their academic library workplace. This allowed the authors to consider not only the impact hybrid work has on individuals and their relationships in the program, Academic Engagement and Learning Services (AELS), but also the impact hybrid work has on the greater community and society. SEM, while not designed to be a decision-making tool, gives library managers an already existing and simple method to consider the impact of hybrid work on levels of influence ranging from individual to societal. The authors believe that as library leaders, to be truly person-centered, a holistic and systematic approach must be taken when considering the implications of hybrid work on our library and beyond. Bi-directional communications between the team and upper management often place middle

managers at the center of competing priorities, and this tension is palpable in discussions of hybrid work. The holistic lens of the SEM helped the authors consider all the factors at play in the balance between our responsibility to the organization and expectations of library leadership and our advocacy for the team's needs.

SEM in Context

SEM dates back to the 1970s, when it was formalized by Urie Bronfenbrenner as the ecological framework for human development (1979), initially focused on children's development. SEM has deep connections in public health, where ecological models of behavior have had strong influence over the past three decades of health promotion work. Other investigators (Sallis, Owen, and Fisher 2008) explain that "the core concept of an ecological model is that behavior has multiple levels of influences, often including intrapersonal (biological, psychological), organizational, community, physical environment, and policy" (p. 466). The levels of the model can vary. Sallis et al., coming from a perspective of health behavior, describe the levels as intrapersonal, organizational, community, physical environment, and policy; De-Toledo, O'Hern, and Koppel (2023), coming from a work and commute perspective, use intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community and policy; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), coming from a perspective of violence prevention, use individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.

There are a handful of examples looking at the workplace through the lens of the SEM model (Berkowitz et al. 2022; Fisk 2023; Li and Lee 2023), the majority of which have a health-based focus. Related examples in the library literature focus on sustainability (Connaway et al. 2023; Embree and Gilman 2020; Mathiasson and Jochumsen 2022; Missingham 2020), rather than the SEM specifically; however, these are connected due to their shared focus on the wider environment. Finally, there are some articles within the library literature that discuss the prevalence (Petersen 2023) and challenges of hybrid work (Grams 2022) without touching on broader implications such as societal or environmental concerns.

In 2020, COVID-19 forced a change to fully remote work; this emergent change has now developed into more flexible hybrid work in the "post"-Covid era in many organizations, including our academic library. The authors, therefore, set out to answer the question, "How has hybrid work impacted each of the SEM levels in our specific context?" As COVID-19 was a public health emergency, using a public health framework, SEM, seemed an appropriate framework to

understand how the forced move to remote and then hybrid work impacted our academic library workplace.

The levels of influence in the SEM have been defined in various ways by different researchers. The authors defined the SEM levels as follows. The individual level involves the needs of each person in the hybrid work environment and the various factors affecting work-life balance; the relationship level includes interpersonal and organizational aspects internally within our library; the community level describes impacts on our program's outreach, instruction, and research advisory services that serve the needs of our campus students, faculty, and staff; and the societal level places our library's hybrid work experience in the larger context of our local area, the San Diego region, as well as the broader society in which the authors live and interact. The four levels are interrelated domains that provide a useful framework for managers to support employee well-being, consider positive outcomes for public services, and contemplate the impact of hybrid work on our broader society.

The authors conducted a reflective exercise using SEM to consider the implication of hybrid work on the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. SEM provided the authors with a systematic reflection tool to consider the broad impact of hybrid work. This exercise led to increased awareness of the challenges with balancing the needs emanating from different levels and a deeper understanding of the tensions inherent to hybrid work in a public services department.

Individual Level Impact

As managers, the authors often see and hear about the impact of hybrid work on the individual lives of our employees. The authors also experience the impact of hybrid work on their own lives.

While all staff in the authors' program can work at least one day a week remotely, some job descriptions allow for more remote work and flexibility. No one in our program is fully remote. Most staff in our program are expected to be onsite two days a week. Different responsibilities, though, lead the number of onsite days to expand or contract from week to week. For example, not everyone in the authors' program works at the in-person reference desk. Those who do have a consistent on-campus responsibility at least one day a week. The authors hear from individuals the feelings of discontent that result from the variations in remote work and flexibility that staff have.

The authors have observed that hybrid work has the potential to provide for better balance between work and non-work life, especially for individuals with caregiving responsibilities. For example, library staff spend less time commuting, giving them time back in their day to devote to other responsibilities or interests. Also, not having to commute to campus as many days a week allows library staff to live further away from work in more affordable housing. This is particularly important in a city with a high cost of living, such as San Diego (Fernandez 2022).

There are negative and mixed impacts of hybrid work. Since library staff may not be onsite on the same days, there is a lack of in-person connection. This combined with the tendency for our staff to have very regimented onsite schedules concentrated on user-focused tasks leads to a lack of serendipity with work collaboration, which also impacts the relationship level of SEM. It is also challenging to offer all individuals meaningful onboarding and mentoring experiences since prior to hybrid work these focused on in-person interactions that allowed for more casual and point-of-need conversation. Carlos and Muralles (2022) note that serendipity is an important part of relationship building in in-person onboarding and difficult (while not impossible) to replicate in a hybrid or remote environment. All these factors lead some library staff to experience a loss or lack of social cohesion.

Some individuals do choose to come to campus more than two days a week. Access to library resources such as printers are one reason for this choice. Some staff find the library environment more conducive to work than a home environment. It is important to differentiate between the experiences of individuals that choose to come onsite more days per week versus staff who are required to come onsite to fulfill their job responsibilities. It is important not to conflate these two groups because those who choose to come on campus more often can shift to doing more remote work whenever they want. Those who have to come onsite to fulfill their job responsibilities do not have this luxury to shift to remote work.

The authors and library have attempted to mitigate and support the impact of hybrid work on individuals. As much as possible, the authors have tried to recognize the variability of individual experiences and not make assumptions about what the best on-campus and at-home balance is for an individual. This, of course, has to be balanced with the fact that users are coming to campus regularly and the AELS program is responsible for in-person services including outreach, reference, and instruction. The authors worked with IT staff to convert employee workstations to laptops with docking stations so that staff have technology that easily transitions from campus to home. The authors were fortunate that the library was already moving to a mobile-first model for staff prior to the pandemic. Staff also have the option of having a second monitor to take home so that they can replicate their on-campus work experience at home.

Individuals also complete HR contracts, which provide specific details about what will be supported and what will not. This gives the authors the opportunity to be clear and equitable with staff working in a hybrid environment.

The authors have observed that hybrid work is overall positive for individuals in the program. One observation to support this is the fact that no one in the program chooses to work completely onsite or has advocated to work completely remotely. As managers, the positive impact of hybrid work on individual employee experience and morale is important to be cognizant of when considering hybrid work's impact on the other levels of influence.

Relationship Level Impact

The hybrid work modality allowed employees to retain some of the positive aspects of working from home while regaining some of the benefits of connection with others. As the shift from remote to hybrid work illuminated individual needs and preferences, it also brought positive and negative impacts at the relationship level of the SEM. The authors defined the relationship level as the interpersonal aspects of work that influenced preferences and behaviors regarding hybrid work. These include relationships with supervisors and managers, co-workers, teams, and collaborators across the library. As organizational and team dynamics evolved with the changes in communication methods, the authors observed changes in team cohesion that followed the pandemic's pattern of isolation followed by a gradual renewal of connections. For example, supervisors and direct reports increasingly used instant messaging tools such as Slack for spontaneous internal communications. This enabled faster turnaround for management decisions or approvals outside of scheduled meeting times. Slack also allowed more seamless teamwork and collaboration with colleagues. Instant messaging significantly increased during the library closure; the average number of employee-to-employee direct messages (DM) more than doubled (from about 950/day to more than 2,000/day). After the library reopened, hybrid work enabled more choices and the average daily number of DMs decreased to about 1,450/day. The library closure had forced all conversations to move online, and hybrid work allowed more balance. Although DMs decreased after reopening, they remained much higher than the pre-pandemic level. This suggests that after Slack was widely adopted by necessity, its use was normalized. At the same time, the decrease suggests it is not always preferred, or it is less needed in the in-person mode where information flows more spontaneously. Hybrid work supports both intentional communications that can be conducted online, and the unplanned communications that take place when coworkers are regularly together in person. Work

relationships involve more planning when onsite availability varies, and coworkers have more choices about how to communicate. Online communications are generally more intentional and focused, which may help employees save time in their day. On the other hand, hybrid work reduces the chance encounters that help colleagues stay informed. They may miss opportunities to collaborate if they are less aware of each other's activities. Thus, hybrid work decreases team cohesion and increases the importance of the manager's role as a communicator. As the informal grapevine had dwindled, the authors observed that team members were less informed about initiatives across the library. They became more proactive about maintaining broad awareness and sharing updates with the team to ensure their inclusion in projects of interest and cross-functional partnerships where their expertise was needed.

Team interactions have also changed for both the better and worse in hybrid mode. Attendance in monthly library-wide forums more than doubled with the transition to Zoom; moreover, the ability to record meetings meant that every employee could access the content, including those working evening shifts or unavailable during the forum. Participation also increased, both verbally and in chat, in program meetings, perhaps due to a sense of distance making the virtual space more comfortable, or a lower barrier to participating by typing in chat rather than speaking up. Chat also helped meeting facilitators do more inquiry and synthesis to move discussions forward. Because chat statements often paralleled the verbal dialog, they provided a guide that allowed facilitators to bring the discussion back to previous points where chat discussion had continued, ask a chatter to expand on a point that was unclear, or to identify common threads and summarize a discussion. Although online meetings increased employee engagement, they also brought challenges with nonverbal communications. It was harder to read the room. The authors also noticed that meeting attendees would leave in significant numbers when breakout rooms were announced. This had not been seen in the previous in-person mode. The authors might account for this as "Zoom fatigue," or suppose that social norms for leaving a meeting are more forgiving in the virtual setting. Although the authors did not discourage people from signing off during a Zoom meeting, they did consider alternative ways to generate the upward feedback that might have been gained from small group discussions.

The SEM framework revealed that both individual and relational needs influenced the experience of hybrid work, and thus the authors took a person-centered approach to mitigate losses in team cohesion. Intensive training in participatory, inclusive, and anti-oppressive practices (Brown and Galoozis 2021; DeEtta Jones and Associates 2023) enable them to take steps to advance inclusiveness within the team. The authors implemented numerous tools and

strategies, starting with a shared visioning process via a series of 90-minute “retreats” in Zoom. Mindful of power dynamics in meetings, the authors worked on ways to provide leadership and guidance without dominating discussions. They increasingly used strategies such as silent writing exercises and shared documents for developing ideas and goals with the team. They implemented feedback mechanisms, such as “plus/delta,” a tool for framing group discussions of what is working well or needing improvement, and “gradients of agreement” for decision making and building consensus. They established more consistent processes of gathering asynchronous feedback between meetings to allow more time for team members to process discussions and respond to one another. This allowed dissenting voices and opposing views to be heard and helped advance discussions in subsequent real-time meetings.

Work on inclusive management practices might have been done regardless of the pandemic, but the impact of hybrid work on our team pushed the authors to improve our communications and presented opportunities to develop these skills. The authors worked on balancing transparency with anti-oppressive practices. It is a balance because managers need to present a clear vision but not impose their vision by assuming consensus exists when it may not. It means allowing space for employees to contribute to decisions and build a collective team vision. As middle managers, a big part of inclusivity is advocacy, ensuring that team feedback reaches senior leadership, and sharing as much as possible from senior leadership with the team. Bi-directional communications between the team and upper management often place middle managers at the center of competing priorities and the tension was acute in discussions of hybrid work. The holistic lens of the SEM helped the authors consider all the factors at play in between our responsibility to the organization, expectations of library leadership, and advocacy for the team’s needs.

Community Level Impact

The next level of the SEM is impact on the community. In this case, our primary community can be best defined as the students, staff, and faculty of the University of California San Diego. The authors have observed a roughly equal number of positive and negative impacts on this community from hybrid work in our roles as managers.

One of the most enduring themes that emerged from hybrid work was changed, and often increased, access to our services for our campus community. Instruction is a major example: the program offers workshops to early-career and transfer undergraduates as part of each college’s writing intensive course series. These workshops reach thousands of students each

year. Previously these sessions were held in person, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., over the period of three grueling weeks each quarter. In 2020, our general instruction coordinator and a team converted the workshops to an online modality. The authors' program offered these workshops in a hybrid format during fall of 2022 and discovered that nearly all students preferred to attend online at times more convenient for their schedules. It is important to recognize that student preferences may not align with their learning needs (not all students learn well via Zoom). The general instruction coordinator has worked extensively to check with program coordinators to determine what modality should be used from quarter to quarter; this means that some workshops have indeed transitioned back to an in-person or flexible format. The coordinator and her team have also worked to update the content covered in the workshops in response to program coordinator and student feedback.

Another critical impact is the growth in accessibility options for instruction. In addition to the benefit of fitting into student schedules, for all of our online instruction the authors have been able to use tools such as closed captioning, recording sessions so students can rewatch the workshop at their own pace, offering the option to use chat or speak to a librarian privately in a breakout room, ensuring that required library tutorials are compliant with technical requirements, and other forms of basic accessibility. The authors know that this has increased the availability of library instruction for many users (including the significant international student population, which is 16% of the undergraduate student population), but it is unclear whether users with other kinds of needs (including any students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD, who can struggle with online learning) have benefited (Hughes 2023; UC San Diego Institutional Research 2022). As managers, the authors worked with librarians to discuss the best modality for instruction based on safety as the campus began to return to in-person activities, but the authors could also consider working with librarians to offer guidance on how to structure conversations for instruction based on student learning needs.

Consultations were another area where COVID-19 forced a change in the service model. Program members increased the number of hours that librarians were available for user consultations due to staggered work hours and the ability to book what had been commute hours for at-home days. Some users preferred to meet in person, and most librarians in most circumstances were able to meet this preference. While users often booked an appointment or emailed a librarian prior to COVID-19 changes, librarians were more accessible for drop-in, onsite consultations. The authors encouraged program members to meet user requests in person for consultations, instruction, outreach, or other services. They worked with program members who were resistant about returning to on-site work, even on an irregular basis,

establishing a clear expectation that this was part of the hybrid work contract that had been signed to meet user needs. The individual need for entirely remote work conflicted with the community need for our services in a particular modality; given expectations that had been developed around program services prior to COVID-19 and recognizing that entirely remote work would not meet those expectations, the authors made a decision and discussed it extensively with the program as a group and on individual levels. The authors also found that Health system users, who are on a different part of campus and who previously would frequently need to cancel a consultation due to an emergent patient concern, were able to attend online consultations because they did not need to travel (and because if something did come up, they could easily reschedule using the virtual calendar). Thus, the program experienced an increase in virtual user consultations as a natural outgrowth of increased librarian availability and flexibility in ways to meet.

Outreach was an area that faltered in the online environment but picked up significantly in a hybrid one. The authors encouraged program members to document their outreach successes and to demonstrate our value through visibility at campus events. The latter came via reconnecting with former partners in other units across campus and via attendance at virtual meetings and events where possible. As managers, the authors were concerned that, when campus administrators signaled a desire for increased in-person services across campus to meet the needs of the large residential student population, the authors would fail to demonstrate our program's value in a hybrid environment without evidence otherwise. The authors placed an emphasis on gathering success stories, gathering quantitative data to show the impact of new and changed services, and working with users who did demonstrate a preference for in-person services.

Finally, the authors changed reference and research advisory services significantly by adding a local chat service in addition to an in-person reference desk. While the library had participated in consortial chat for many years, during the pandemic the authors added locally based chat to replace the service hours the reference desk had been open. As the library reopened in fall 2021, program leadership made the decision to keep both services active, which effectively doubled the staffed service hours for reference. During that quarter and the one that followed, the authors worked with librarians who had extenuating circumstances and asked them to staff local chat instead of the reference desk. As local circumstances improved, the authors worked with everyone in the program to set the expectation that the reference desk would be staffed and open in-person. This was another example where there was a conflict between the community and the individual; the authors relied on long-standing service

expectations and recognized that fully remote work would not meet them, while hybrid work would. This required discussions with administration to determine what personal protective equipment would be made available and to discuss the impact of the program's decisions on other public service areas.

The authors found that the community experienced mainly positive impacts (increased access to services, a choice of which modality to use, better accessibility in instruction), although there were some negative impacts on individuals (such as a need to be on-site for certain services) and the program (decreased visibility in hybrid outreach compared to entirely in-person outreach). The authors worked to mitigate negative impacts, to show our continued value in the hybrid environment, and to balance the needs of the community with those of individual librarians and the program as a whole.

Societal Level Impact

The final level of the SEM that the authors will discuss is the societal level. The authors define society here as the local area, the San Diego region, as well as the broader society in which the authors live and interact.

The University of California San Diego is one of the largest employers in the San Diego region and thousands of people drive to campus on a regular basis (Major Employers in California n.d.). The use of public transit is low despite efforts to change behaviors and expand public transportation options (Comen 2016). Therefore, the decision to allow hybrid work at the campus level has had significant impacts on the environment. In addition to reduced greenhouse gas emissions from people who would otherwise be commuting by car, there is also less traffic on the roads and more parking availability. As managers, the authors have not directly addressed this area of impact on a program level but have commented on the positive environmental effects at the individual level when relevant.

Another positive impact comes from the increase in digital collections and services, which benefits both the local community and nonaffiliated users around the world. With the pandemic came a shift in the service model to what became known as Digital First. Over time, this model has shifted, and the authors offer a balance of digital and in-person services. These services permit users who would prefer to come in, particularly to our Special Collections and Archives, to do so while also allowing some digital access to materials that would otherwise be unavailable for those who cannot come into the library. The authors work to help librarians

balance user expectations of both in-person and online services, but otherwise see no negative impact from this expansion.

Finally, the hybrid work environment affects employee recruitment efforts. The program has continued to use an entirely online model for recruiting. Two changes that the authors made in response to this environment were inclusion of informational webinars to candidates and provision of interview questions ahead of time at certain interview stages. The authors have seen mixed impacts from the recruitment efforts. Some employees have expressed concern about candidates who are unable to visit the campus, library, and workspaces in person. Others have noted the environmental benefits from not flying in candidates as well as the benefits to candidates who are offered opportunities to interview in a space where they may be more comfortable (Arch et al. 2021). The authors continue to debate this topic to determine the best path for both candidates, the library, and society as a whole.

Conclusions

The authors believe that library managers should be guided by a mindset of person-centeredness and environmental sustainability in decisions about remote and hybrid work. The authors' analysis of the impacts of hybrid work in their library program using the SEM provides a reflective approach to hybrid work that follows these precepts. This approach can be helpful when articulating reasoning about hybrid work to team members and senior library leadership. Using the SEM allows middle managers such as the authors a clear way to reflect and communicate to both their team and upper management the impact caused by hybrid work. Academic libraries are increasingly starting to value their role in global sustainability and acknowledge the need to think about the individual, relationship, community, and societal implications of their decisions. One important note is the SEM was not designed to be a decision-making tool. It instead allows library managers to consider the impact of a decision on different levels of influence in a systematic way. The authors' novel use of SEM demonstrates that library managers of any level can use this existing framework to examine the implications a library decision, such as hybrid work, has on various levels of influence including our larger society.

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