**Customer Services Group UK**

**Annual Conference 2022**

**Recruit, Develop, Thrive: staffing in library customer services**

 Hybrid working disussion

**Hybrid working: what are the main issues and challenges (or positives!) arising from hybrid working relationships in your libraries?**

**Summary**

**Different Approaches**

Not all of the libraries represented were able to offer working from home for front line staff, with many acknowledging that the nature of front line work made working off site challenging if not impossible. However, those that did offered a range of both formal and informal approaches to this. One library reported they were able to allow staff to alternate between a week working from home and a week on site. Another offered one day per fortnight. No-one had been able to offer evening or weekend staff the opportunity to work from home. Whereas some libraries allowed a certain level of informal working from home, for instance for medical appointments or transport strikes, others still allowed no working from home and mandated that their staff must work on site.

**Positives of offering working from home**

Those able to offer working from home reported a number of positives from being able to do so, though many mentioned that they had yet to do proper evaluations of impact on both staff and the service. One reported the advantage for employees of being able to reduce weekly costs on travel and child care at a time of greater cost of living pressures; though conversely others pointed out that some staff may prefer to come in to work to save on energy bills at home.Nearly three years into the pandemic, it was pointed out how familiar staff are with the concept of home working so are much better able to respond flexibly to emergency situations such as transport strikes. Being able to work from home was advantageous for in depth work requiring concentration such as reports and data analysis.

**Negatives of offering working from home**

There were a number of comments regarding a perceived sense of unfairness amongst front line staff who were unable to work from home whilst their colleagues in other parts of the service were able to. Some reported a danger of raised expectations amongst those who were permitted to work from home, leading to resentment when they were then required to come on site in order to cover unexpected staff shortages. One library stressed the importance of being clear from the start that arrangements may need to vary during the academic year and that staff can be required to work on campus to cover long term absence or annual leave. There were a number of comments relating to the challenge of maintaining team cohesiveness where some were working from home, whilst others were not. Others reported the positives of working on site for both staff and students. Indeed, many staff welcome the social contact of being with both their colleagues and with students. An important point was that student expectation has shifted more recently with less tolerance of online learning. Many students now expect (and deserve) service delivery to be on campus.

**Other Challenges**

A number of comments acknowledged the value of working from home to work-life balance and the challenge of harmonising this with supporting students and maintaining services. Although there are commonly recognised areas of work that can be done from home including online chat services, enquiries, admin and focussed time for training, there were a number of comments from managers pointing out challenges in both finding work for their staff to do and then communicating with and supervising them remotely. Some required staff to check in at the start and end of their shift whilst others required staff to use Teams as a channel for communication throughout the day. Some libraries mentioned an unintended or unplanned longer term impact on their service from staff working from home. A common theme was that other front-facing teams (ITS, Student Services) are not back in person, or at least not as much as library staff meaning that in some institutions service hours of those services have been reduced, leaving library staff to answer university-wide questions. This, it was felt had impacted on the student experience.

**Comments on the Padlet**

* Our table had a mix of 80-100% percent onsite Customer / User Services provision for Library Assistants. It was discussed that where hybrid working was more commonly offered for other teams or more senior staff within a Library service or institution, this could create a feeling of two tiers, though it was acknowledged that this is due to the operational differences between roles. Where WFH was offered for Customer / User Services Library Assistants, having enough tasks to complete from home and how to allocate and monitor completion of those tasks was discussed. While tasks such as chat and online enquires could be completed from home, how to allocate this work in addition to the need to provide onsite, in person customer services, provided specific challenges. The allocation of some tasks as remote (for example phone calls) was not currently possible at some institutions. Teams had become a key component of communication between onsite and WFH staff during the pandemic. Hybrid cross team meetings were still common, and it was felt these did work well.
* Communication with those working from home varied, some asked staff to check in at the start and end of their shift, others used Teams chat channel for communication throughout the day.
* The table mostly felt that it was a positive decision to offer hybrid working to customer service teams, and one colleague on the table who doesn't offer hybrid working at the moment is going to go back and look into this post this discussion. No feedback had been carried out yet, and no formal service impact surveys had been carried out. It was felt this would be useful to review at the end of the academic year.
* It was felt that there were lots of tasks that library assistants could do from home, focussing on online chat services, enquiries, admin, focussed time for training.
* 50% of our table offered hybrid working to frontline staff with some offering it in an ad hoc way, to one team who managed to rota staff working from home a week at a time rather than odd days. No-one offered home working to staff who work evening/weekend hours.
* It has created a two-tier workforce with resentment from those who cannot work from home to those who work from home up to 80% of the time. Onsite workers do not feel supported by senior management. Onsite workers have to pay more travel costs, have less work life balance because of commuting times, and have higher sickness absence level balances, than those who get to work from home.
* A word of warning from our table was that if you put a WFH pattern in place, it can become a long term expectation. So be clear from the start this any WFH may vary during the academic year and that staff can be asked to work all days on campus for a variety of reasons eg cover long term absence or annual leave
* At our table, only 2 institutions offered hybrid working for frontline services staff. Main benefit of hybrid working is the ability to concentrate on tasks such as reports, data analysis etc; main drawback is the lack of breaks and lack of informal interactions with others.
A common theme was that other front-facing teams (ITS, Student Services) are not back in person, or at least not as much as library staff; in some institutions service hours of those services have been reduced, leaving library staff to answer university-wide questions. Overall giving a feeling that the student experience is compromised.
Another area of concern is resentment felt by customer services teams towards other colleagues who don't have to come in every day and don't seem to be working as hard.
At our table, most institutions didn't have a formal hybrid/flexible working policy.
* Other libraries talked about as hoc arrangements but nothing formal.
* Only one library on our table offered this. There are some issues and it was noted that expectations had been raised to the point that staff felt resentment if asked to come in to cover for unexpected shortages as if they were being asked to come in on a weekend rather than a normal working day.
* Difficulties in building cohesive teams as people on different shifts etc might not see each other
* Cost of living might be an issue moving forward... e.g. transport and childcare costs
BUT some people coming in to save on gas /heating bills
* Student expectation have shifted, limited tolerance of online learning.. Now expect (and deserve) service delivery to be on campus
* Different approaches:
1 day per fortnight for frontline - is that enough to feel the benefit? But none frontline and coming back more which is good to support those in the building. Need to evaluate if the 1 day is working/helping.
Most need to be clear that its not a work from home job  - most FL staff seem to recognise this.
Some staff like being on site as enjoy social contact.
Some staff limited by wider institution policy = e.g. if other teams/colleagues are WFH and arrange all meetings online, sometimes easier to be at home!
Very linked to service design and balance between helping staff have work life balance but also how we keep services going and students supported1!
* We feel better equipped now to deal with train strikes and staff shortages with the tools used to support hybrid working
* When your institution has specified how Many days people may work at home “excluding customer facing roles fairness and complexity are understandable complaints.