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2023 Remote Work Mini-Survey

OPLA Research and Evaluation Committee
February 1, 2024

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Remote and hybrid work opportunities remain common in 2023, with 84% of library systems reporting that they offer remote work for at least some staff.

Across all library sizes, senior management is most likely to work remotely, followed by administrative staff. Larger library systems are also more likely to have at least some staff work remotely. Libraries serving populations of under 5,000 and populations between 50,000 and 100,000 are the least likely to allow any staff to work remotely.

While many libraries - especially larger systems - have now enshrined remote work permissions within policy documents, job descriptions or collective agreements, the majority of respondents indicated that remote work was permitted on a case-by-case or informal basis.

Remote work permissions are defined based on a balance of numerous factors, including staff preference, operational requirements - including requirements of individual roles, library size, availability of office space, and perception of fairness. Other reasons given included: efficiency (more done away from the branch), mental health (remote work allows for more balance), office space (not enough room for everyone to get work done), and retention & staffing shortages (allowing for remote work is an attraction).
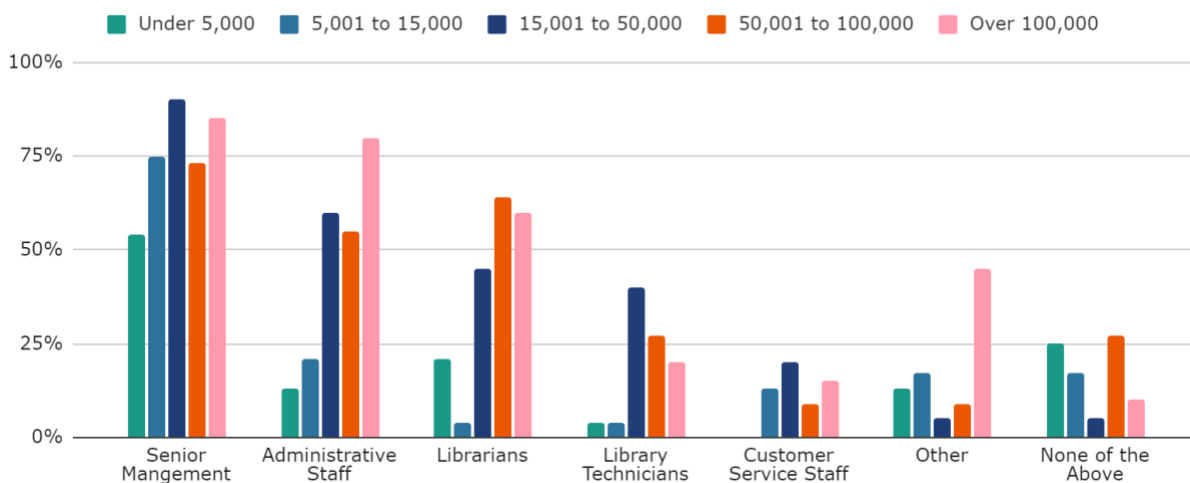
DETAILED FINDINGS

Who works remotely

Across all library sizes, senior management is most likely to work remotely, followed by administrative staff.

Larger library systems are also more likely to allow at least some staff work remotely. Libraries serving populations of under 5,000 and populations between 50,000 and 100,000 are the least likely to allow any staff to work remotely.

Who works remotely by library size

Legend: Under 5,000 | 5,001 to 15,000 | 15,001 to 50,000 | 50,001 to 100,000 | Over 100,000

Categories (x-axis): Senior Mangement, Administrative Staff, Librarians, Library Technicians, Customer Service Staff, Other, None of the Above
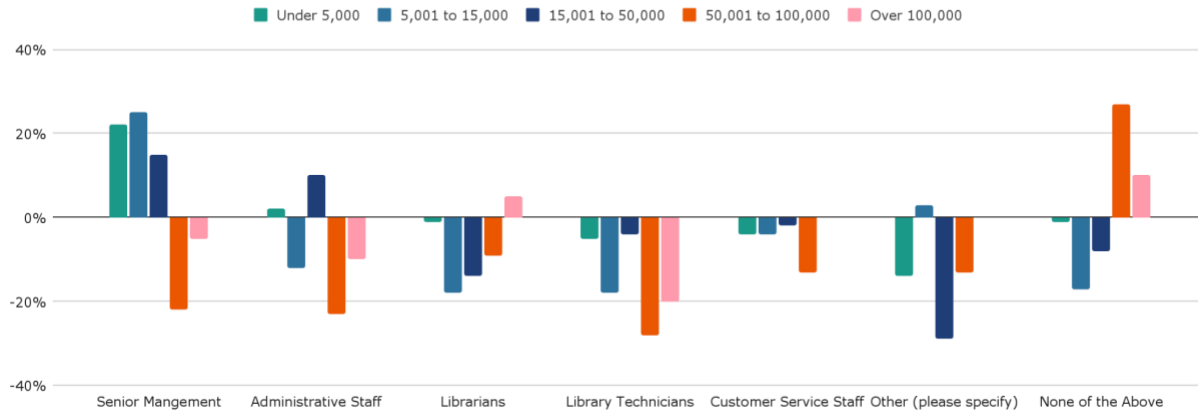
Comments regarding Remote Work

For libraries where no staff work remotely, the primary reason given was library size. However, there were libraries of all sizes where there was no remote work option. The second most common reason given was "fairness"; If not all could work remotely, then no one could work remotely regardless of role. The third most common reason was modeling after the municipality; if the municipality did not have remote work, then the library did not feel able to have their own option.

For libraries where some staff can work remotely, the primary reason given was the nature of the role; if it was possible for the role, remote work was an option. The second most common reason was situational and based on operational needs like training, days the library was usually closed, etc. The third reason given was case-by-case, where remote work was largely staff-driven or responsive to people with particular needs. Other reasons given included: efficiency (more done away from the branch), mental health (remote work allows for more balance), office space (not enough room for everyone to get work done), and retention & staffing shortages (allowing for remote work is an attraction).

Remote Work in 2022 versus 2023

We can see that since 2022, approximately 20% of libraries serving a population under 15,000 people have changed their practices to allow for senior management to work remotely. At the same time, more than 20% of libraries serving a population of 50,000 to 100,000 have changed their practices such that no staff work remotely.

Staff Working Remotely by Position & Library Size, Change from 2022 to 2023

Remote Work: 2022 prediction versus 2023 actual

We can see an attitude change regarding remote work taking place. Many libraries in 2022 predicted that they would not be offering remote work options going forward. However, we can see that across all sizes of library systems, as well as all job categories, remote work options are being offered at a larger percentage than predicted. This may reflect the change in patron expectation towards library services as the appetite towards online library services remains strong post-COVID19 and staff can work remotely to provide these services.

How are remote work permissions defined?

How Remote Work Permissions are defined, by Library Size, 2023
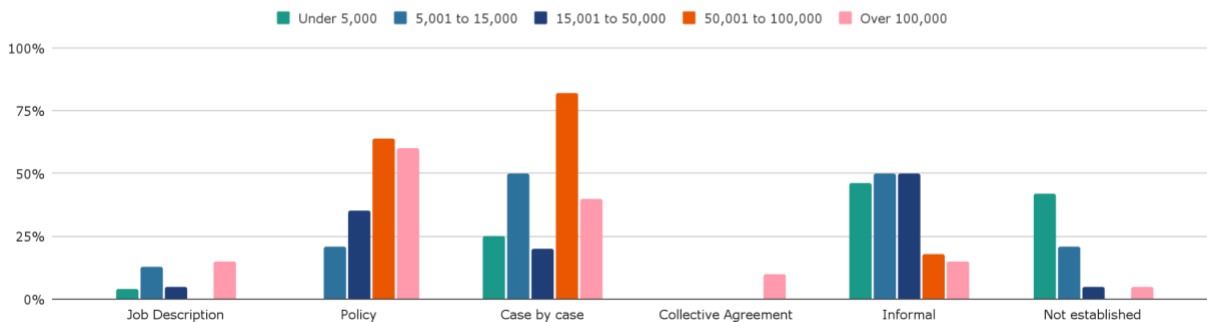
There did not appear to be any consensus regarding the mechanism through which remote work permissions were defined. Most commonly, remote work is permitted on a case-by-case basis (40%) and informally (38%), though a significant number of libraries (31%) reported

having an established policy regarding remote work. Many library systems indicated more than one mechanism employed.

Looking in detail at the responses from libraries with multiple responses, there was considerable disagreement in how remote work permissions were defined. It was not uncommon for one respondent to indicate that a policy exists and another at the same library report that remote work is defined on an informal basis.

This suggests that either there is nuance within each library (e.g. some positions have remote work defined formally, while others have remote work options on an informal basis), or else a lack of awareness across the organization regarding the mechanism through which remote work permissions are defined.

METHOD

In August 2023, the OPLA Research and Evaluation Committee conducted a short follow up survey to the 2022 Resilient Public Libraries survey. This mini-survey looked specifically at remote work practices at public libraries in Ontario. The survey was distributed electronically, via the OLA newsletter as well as the Ontario Library Service CEO list-serv. While the 2022 survey targeted only library CEOs, for this survey, any staff member could respond.

Respondents

We received a total of 138 responses from 99 public library systems in Ontario for an overall response rate of 33%. Larger library systems had the highest response rate, with 78% of libraries responding. Smaller library systems (under 5,000) are underrepresented in this survey, with just 12% of libraries responding. Response rate for the 2023 survey is lower across the board for all libraries, except for the larger systems that serve populations over 100,000.

Population Bracket	Total	2022 Responded	2022 Response Rate	2023 Responded	2023 Response Rate
Over 100,000	29	20	68.97%	20	68.97%
50,001-100,000	23	18	78.26%	11	47.83%
15,001-50,000	46	32	69.57%	20	43.48%
5,001-15,000	68	36	52.94%	24	35.29%
Under 5,000	198	46	23.23%	24	12.12%

Responses by Library Size
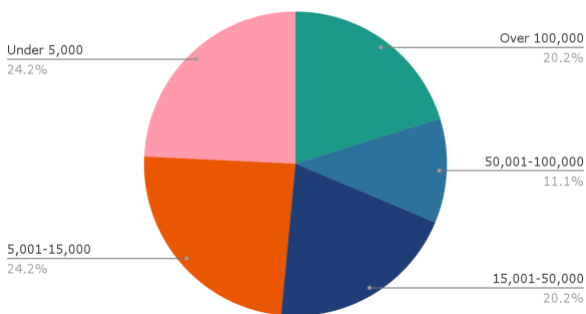
Respondent Position
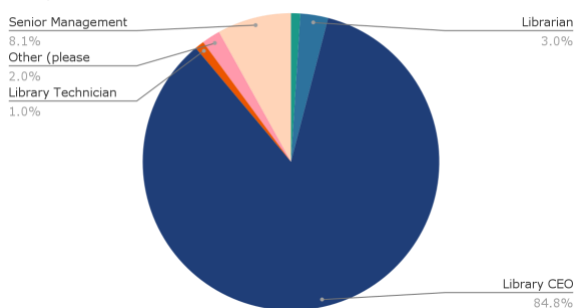
Quantitative Analysis

22 libraries submitted multiple responses, mostly due to multiple staff members completing the survey, though select responses appeared as duplicate responses from the same individual. For

the purposes of the quantitative analysis, only one response per system was counted. Where the CEO responded, this response was prioritized. In all other cases, responses were reviewed individually to select the most representative and complete response.

In order to compare with OPLA Resilient Public Libraries Survey (2022), population brackets are consolidated to: under 5,000, 5,001-15,000, 15,001-50,000, 50,001-100,000, and 100,000+.

Qualitative Analysis

Our team individually reviewed the qualitative responses and then compared interpretations to come up with a consistent way of categorizing the data. Challenges included multiple interpretations from the same library system, and multiple possibilities of interpretations in single responses. When these happened, the team used other data in the responses to assign a primary response, using the secondary response as part of the overall picture and built consensus on the most indicative response.

The team found the qualitative responses to be very descriptive and it was clear that the community has some strong feelings about this topic. The lack of consistency within responses from the same library system indicates that perhaps the communication about this topic has not been as robust as staff may require for complete understanding of new policies and procedures.