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Job Precarity, Contract Work, and Self-Care

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Introduction

For those entering the library and information science (LIS) profession, it is often the case that the first opportunities for employment are contract or auxiliary roles. In library school this is presented as an essential way of entering into the profession. For those who enter library school without previous library experience, this is a particularly strong and salient argument; of course, you have to start somewhere. It is also implied that contract and auxiliary positions could lead into permanent work within an organization or institution—an assertion not borne out by evidence (OECD, 2015). When I landed my first permanent job after three short-term contracts, I felt like I had paid my dues and was reaping the benefits. However, as I reflect back on these experiences and how they fit the overall trend of job precarity in libraries, I see many troubling aspects of this process. This feature will look at job precarity as it applies to my experience in academic librarianship with a focus on financial insecurity, devalued labour, as well as mental and physical health issues. This is not meant to be inclusive of all aspects of library work.

Job Precarity

Job precarity, for the purposes of this discussion, refers to a labour force that is working on term or contract part-time positions, and/or working multiple jobs (Shaker, 2018). To put this into a broader context, the International Labour Organization (2011) describes this arrangement as a lack of “decent jobs, security, protection, and rights.” Job precarity has led to workers experiencing precarious labour who do not have the security to plan for the future because of the uncertain nature of their work (Standing, 2011, p.10). A 2017 CUPE survey of public library workers supports this finding. The survey found that 1 in 5 had more than one job, took longer to find permanent work, and

had no or minimal access to pensions and extended benefits (CUPE, 2017). The likelihood of precarious employment is also higher for younger workers, women, newcomers, and racialized groups based on the type of work available and earnings (Branch & Hanley, 2018; Ioprespub, 2018; Lewchuck et al., 2013; OECD, 2015; Standing, 2011). Many aspects of contract work make it challenging for new graduates to become established in the field. While in specific circumstances the use of contract work may be understandable and practical, to fill a vacancy due to parental, medical, or research leave; the unrealistic expectations placed on those within these positions inhibits long term job success.

Financial Insecurity

There are many financial considerations to take into account when moving for employment, and even more so when moving for a temporary or term position. I have been fortunate in all of my contracts that moving expenses were reimbursed, but this is not always the case. Regardless of whether you are paying for the move yourself, or getting reimbursed after the fact, the financial expense upfront is significant. Coupled with this, is the incredibly stressful challenge of finding affordable housing with less than a year's guaranteed employment. For me, this has resulted in paying more to rent a place on a month-to-month basis rather than signing a year lease, signing leases I knew I would be unable to afford come the end of my contract, using Employment Insurance and credit to pay my rent, and relying on my partner to pay the majority of expenses while I was in between jobs. In addition to this, paying rental deposits and first and/or last month's rent (depending on what province you are in), is a huge additional financial expense on top of moving costs. More than once I have had to pay rent on two places in one month in order to ensure accommodation at the start of a new position, while having a place to live while finishing my old position. While these are understandable expenses to accrue when moving somewhere for a permanent position and a guaranteed income that may financially balance out in the long run, this is not the case when you have to do it again a few months later or multiple times at the start of your career.

Devalued Labour

The overarching trend of precarious labour in LIS speaks to a larger and longer historical practice of devaluing labour and time. Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) outline that part of the harm of long-term precarious work is that it "... has made the availability as well as the quality of jobs more risky and uncertain" (p. 2). There are many historical, political, economic, and social aspects as to why this has become the trend. While this is outside of the scope of this piece, I have seen and felt the consequences of this for myself and others compelled to take term positions, with the reality of the highly competitive nature of gaining an entry level position (Levesque & Skyrme, 2019). Combined with this is the uncertainty of when and if another permanent position will be available, which can cause crippling self-doubt, anxiety, and stress. I myself subscribed to the belief that I did not have value as a librarian until I had more direct experience in libraries. I believed that non-library work experience was somehow inherently less valuable than that of library work in being considered an attractive candidate for librarian

positions. Most positions that I was looking at applying for required a minimum of 2-5 years of library experience, which I did not have. By the time I landed my current permanent position I had cobbled this together from contract positions. When I reflect on the sacrifices and stresses I endured to meet the needs of this precarious employment arrangement, I have realized that simply meeting the “experience” requirement appeared to be more important than what I actually brought to the job in terms of skills and background. This is in conjunction with the practice of employment in libraries being constructed from precarious positions, which requires people to take on more work in order to support the needs of the organization (Lewchuck et al., 2003).

Mental and Physical Health

Existing within an uncertain work cycle can cause anxiety, stress, and provide challenges to maintaining a work-life balance. Research has found job precarity to be as harmful to an individual’s health as unemployment, which speaks to its fundamental inequality. Some of the key health consequences are fatigue, exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and reduced use of sick time. Additional challenges include, but are not limited to, financial instability, emotional strain, frequently adjusting to new work cultures, burnout, imposter syndrome, and being given lesser consideration for future positions compared with permanent colleagues (Benach & Muntaner, 2007; Benach, Vives, Amable, Vanroelen, Taraga, & Muntner, 2014). Combine this with any existing health concern, and the stress and strain of precarious employment can be exacerbated and extended (Levesque & Skyrme, 2019).

I got my first library job (a six-month contract) based on a phone interview. I had not met my future colleagues in person, nor had I visited the institution beforehand. I was four months out of library school, had applied for dozens of jobs without a single contact or even rejection. I was frustrated and desperate to get something. I rationalized to myself that I could live anywhere for six months and that the hassle and costs of moving would be worth it to get actual library experience (the job was 1400 kilometers away). When I moved for this position it became clear that not only were there challenges with starting my first “real” job in the field, but there were more challenges than I expected, specifically around adapting to an organizational culture quickly.

Connected with this is the social isolation for new and contract hires. This is a very real concern within temporary work and for new librarians (Oud 2005, 2008), and something I experienced throughout my contracts to varying degrees (see Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). It takes time to make friends in a new location, in and outside of work. Becoming part of an organization is not easy, comfortable, or always safe. To try and do this in less than a year is emotionally and physically exhausting. Once you have built those relationships and that network, you have to leave and start the process over again, potentially multiple times. I moved five times in last five years for work including a co-op position during my MLIS, which has made it challenging to build and maintain relationships across all of these institutions. For two of those moves I was by myself, so all aspects of relocating were on me. Moving with a friend, partner, or family can make the experience more manageable and supportive, but can also put your support system in a position of isolation and upheaval as well. On top of this, the cycle of applications,

interviewing, rejection, getting hired, moving, starting work, adjusting to the organization, and then wrapping up—all to start the cycle again is a tremendous strain on anyone, and harder with each repetition of the cycle. If the work you are doing is auxiliary or part-time, this often means needing to work more than one job in order to support yourself and/or your family. Not all temporary work requires a move, but that expectation for new hires in academic library positions is high.

Preparing for a precarious position

Preparing for these realities starts in the interview process. It took time for me to learn to ask the right questions in job interviews in order to get a sense of what supports were available for new hires, temporary or otherwise. It's important for employees to understand reporting, deliverables, evaluations, and general expectations for their success. Asking directly about an organization's process for mentorship, onboarding, and orientation is essential so that you will know how you will be supported as you start and learn the position. Being assigned a mentor is one way to learn important aspects of a new position, but in my experience as a contract or term librarian, formalized mentorship is rare. There is also the inherent power structure within any organization, where "[t]eaching about culture is often overlooked by long-term employees who are supervising the onboarding process, as they have become accustomed to, and embedded into, the system of power and do not easily recognize that cultural navigation is a learned skill." (Levesque & Skyrme, 2019, p.7). Therefore, in precarious roles the onus is often on the employee to inquire about expectations around how work is assigned, the approach to collaboration with other units, or the composition, nature, and structure of teams. I have only once been given a mentor as part of my time as a term librarian.

In the Job

There are also additional challenges that come with starting a precarious position and for responsibility to lie with new employees to "adapt themselves to the environment in which they find themselves." (Levesque & Skyrme, 2019, p.4). As Oud (2008) highlights, it can take 6-9 months to acclimatize to a new organization, and as was the case for me, that was the length of my contract. It is also not uncommon in academic library term positions to be excluded from some aspects of work. When I was doing contracts, I missed out on participating in hiring committees (as per collective agreements) and was often allotted fewer professional development funds compared with my permanent colleagues. Being able to take full advantage of committee work or professional development opportunities to develop your practice and engage with other colleagues is essential at any stage of your career.

The other side of this is the increased expectation, desire, and necessity to always say yes while in precarious work. As new librarians, there is a high level of awareness of being expected to bring innovation into the organization (Mosley, 2006). Again, while not exclusive to precarious work, taking on excessive workloads and volunteering time above and beyond what is expected to ensure continued work, contract extensions, and getting a good reference, makes it so easy to reach a point of burnout quickly (Cassidy,

Versluis, Menzies, 2018). The drastic imbalance of power as a term employee is also such, that saying no to colleagues/supervisors, or developing a boundary for the amount of work taken on is challenging.

Taking care of yourself in precarious work

Given the challenges outlined above, how is it possible to even prioritize yourself within this context? There is plenty of research and writing that points to the importance of self-care in the workplace, and in maintaining a work-life balance in order to prevent burnout in librarianship (see Campbell, 2008; Del Basque and Skarl, 2016; Harwell, 2009, Olin, 2015). However, this is easier said than done, and often a narrative of privilege that is not afforded to all. The language around care and self-care in this profession is extremely gendered and often heteronormative to an extent that is detrimental and demoralizing. Self-care is a complex and often problematic term emphasizing privilege, power, and access to time, money, and resources. It does not acknowledge the systemic issue within the profession of placing self-care as the responsibility of the individual rather than setting those boundaries and expectations at the organizational level (Levesque & Skyrme, 2019). Care is personal, individual, and based on experience. Below are some examples of self-care that worked for me.

First, setting a firm schedule of when and how I did my job seeking and application writing helped me separate job searching from the other aspects and responsibilities in my life. In the beginning, it was very easy for me to spend hours upon hours looking at job postings, and writing, editing, and revising applications. The pressure to find work makes this a necessary practice, but it is not sustainable. For me, when I had to go through this cycle every 6-9 months on top of working a full-time job made me burn out quickly. Additionally, setting a specific location where I would work on my applications was hugely beneficial. This helped me to set my intentions. When I was at that spot, I worked on getting a job. It took four months after completing my MLIS to get my first job. During that time, I was working two part-time jobs and making myself sick over the job-search process. Setting boundaries by limiting where and when I did my job seeking and applications helped me maintain a balance.

While in contract or term positions there are some additional small things that I found helped to support me and still do my job. These are a work in progress but include, taking a full lunch break, going outside at some point during the day, leaving on time, asking colleagues to get out of the building to grab a coffee, sitting and working outside of my office occasionally, and carving out some time in my calendar (and honouring it) to do some professional reading or writing. Now, this is not always possible due to considerations such as additional commitments, physical and mental health concerns, or family responsibilities, and that is okay. You have to find the balance that works for you and allows you to maintain your own sense of self.

Conclusion

All of this is to say that job precarity is a real and complicated aspect of all types of library work. While self-care is definitely not the only solution to this problem, unfortunately the onus is often on the employee, not the employer to be proactive in ensuring success of temporary workers. Small steps within your ability and experience to practice prioritizing yourself within this process is something that can help keep balance in job precarity. While I do think that a deeper analysis needs to be done on library school training, hiring practices, and the nature of precarious work especially for new grads, it is a huge capitalist structure that this reality works within. We need to hold each other accountable for how and why we use precarious work in libraries.

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