7-1-1998

Librarians at work: Are we as satisfied as other American workers?

Johann van Reenen

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ulls_fsp

Recommended Citation

http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ulls_fsp/48

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Communication - Departments at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries & Learning Sciences Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.
LIBRARIANS AT WORK; ARE WE AS SATISFIED AS OTHER AMERICAN WORKERS?

Johann van Reenen,
Centennial Science & Engineering Library,
University of New Mexico

NOTE:
This is an early version (pre-e-print) of a work that was published as:

Introduction

Inc. Magazine’s first annual Inc./Gallup survey [1] on attitudes of American workers showed, surprisingly, very high levels of job satisfaction and a positive outlook on work, workplace conditions and the many recent changes in the ways work gets done. They expected to find a “crisis in worker confidence” as pictured in the daily news and books on the de-jobbing of America, such as William Bridges’ Jobshift: How to prosper in a workplace without jobs (Addison-Wesley, 1994). Additionally, the survey was conducted in November, 1995; a year in which, on average 37,000 U.S. jobs were cut every month! The title “The happiest workers in the world”, made me wonder if this is also true for Library workers.

For almost three decades, libraries have experienced rapid change, first in behind-the-scenes technical processes, then gradually everywhere. This allowed enhanced services to our customers and new opportunities for library workers. Did it make us happier workers, or at least as happy as the general American worker? Many job satisfaction surveys has been reported and analyzed in the library literature. I decided to review these for overall satisfaction indicators and to ask permission from Inc./Gallup to administer six of their 34 questions verbatim to library groups.[2]

Methodology:

The six Inc./Gallup (I/G) questions were added to follow-up surveys sent to participants in a four hour workshop I present on “Risk taking and decision making in the electronic environment”. Two groups answered these six questions ONLY before and after one of the workshops to ascertain if taking the workshop might influence their replies. As expected, no significant difference were found as the course did not directly address these questions. Surveys were completed by librarians attending workshops between December, 1995 and October, 1997, at NASIG 1996 Conference - North American Serials Interest Group (30), SLA/Rio Grande Chapter meeting (11), Health Libraries
Association of British Columbia meeting (18), New Mexico State University education event (15), Computers in Libraries’97 Conference (10), South Central Chapter of the Medical Library Association (30), and at a meeting of New Mexico state and public librarians (18), for a total of 132 surveys. Of these, 77.3 percent (102) were returned correctly completed. Although this is a high rate of return, I believe these results and thus the comparison with the I/G results is preliminary and a complete replication would supply more useful insights.

**Literature survey:**

There are numerous surveys of work satisfaction in various types of libraries and of various types of library workers reported in the literature. I chose six of these to make reference to when appropriate and to place the I/G questions in a broader perspective. The studies were chosen for their comprehensiveness and, in one case [3] also because of the excellent overview of survey results published before 1994. It is interesting to note that the summary conclusions of Lynch and Verdin [4] holds true for most of these studies, with an additional generalization (number 7 in the list below) that can be drawn from both the work of Horenstein [5] and Leckie and Brett [6]. These conclusions are:

1. Older workers were more satisfied than younger workers.
2. Experienced employees were more satisfied than those with less experience.
3. Those who planned to be working in the same library five years hence were significantly more satisfied than persons with other plans.
4. Those lacking supervisory responsibilities had the lowest satisfaction while department heads were the most satisfied.
5. Reference department employees had significantly higher levels of satisfaction than employees of any other department, except acquisitions.
6. Professional librarians were more satisfied than nonprofessional staff.
7. The factor that consistently scored the highest satisfaction rates was working directly with customers.

One should remember these underlying complexities when considering the results from the six, rather generalized, I/G questions used to compare librarians with other workers.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS.**

I chose the six questions from the I/G survey so as to include two questions regarding job satisfaction and the opportunity to do one’s best, two to ascertain opportunities to learn and use one’s full potential, and two about the future.
Question 1 (also Q.1 of I/G): On a 5-point scale, where 1 is EXTREMELY DISSATISFIED and 5 is EXTREMELY SATISFIED, how satisfied are you with your place of employment?
RESULTS in percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>1+2</th>
<th>3+4+5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIBRARY WORKERS</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>80.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. WORKERS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Horenstein (1993)** 68.03
Bloom/McCawley (1993) 61
UNM General Library 5 15 27 38 12 20 77 ***

* I extracted replies from public library respondents as a subset.
** I added comparable results extrapolated from studies by Horenstein [5], Bloom and McCawley [7], and from a recent survey at my own organization (UNMGL) that asked a similar question [8].
*** “No replies” excluded.

Satisfaction rates are high for library workers according to the majority of previous surveys, including those listed in this article. A Canadian replication of the Horenstein study (above) also found “above satisfactory levels of overall job satisfaction.” [6]. Yet, the average U.S. worker expressed a 10.6 percent higher overall job satisfaction rate than the highest rate for library workers from any of the studies. How one asks the question also makes a difference. In a recent survey conducted by LJ/Library Journal [8] nine out of ten respondents said that “they enjoy what they do.” The same survey found that librarians’ top three job satisfaction factors were: working with patrons, helping people find what they need, and diversity of job responsibilities.

Question 2 (also Q.2 of I/G): At work, do you have the opportunity every day to do what you do best?
RESULTS in percentages.
The lower rating from library workers were also true for sub-groups of public librarians (62 percent positive) and health sciences librarians (54 percent positive). Obviously, library workers as a group do not feel as challenged, i.e. being able to use most of their skills daily, as do a high percentage (82%) of American workers. There are probably many reasons for this, but one frequently singled out by other studies [3, 4] is the stratification of library positions and the narrow scope of some jobs, especially in technical and processing areas. The high satisfaction rating for diversity of duties found in the LJ survey, as mentioned above, shows an encouraging trend. Another factor which might be important here is workload. Both the Horenstein[5] and Leckie/Brett [6] studies of job satisfaction of academic librarians found that “levels of satisfaction with workload were below satisfactory on the scale” and “scores ranked it near the bottom.” In the Canadian study, 28 percent remarked that their workloads were a “very distressing aspect of their positions.” [6]. This, too, is reinforced by the LJ survey which found that “while emerging new technologies are yielding new roles, most librarians are still having to juggle their new responsibilities with their existing one, leading to excessively long hours and job descriptions that could easily accommodate two, or even three, full-time people.”[12]

Question 3 (Q.9 of I/G): This past year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow?
RESULTS in percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIBRARY WORKERS</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. WORKERS</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Library workers are exposed to a lot of training and continuing education as the 91 percent positive responses show. This response rate is seven percent higher than that of the average U.S. worker. Libraries are obviously investing in their employees during these times of rapid electronic change. This is also confirmed by the recent ARL study of the
state of formal training and development in ARL libraries. They found that most libraries (73%) have a budget for staff training and development and conclude that all respondents agree “that these programs create a working environment conducive to personal and professional growth.” [9] and that the overall effect on employee morale appears to be very positive.

Question 4 (Q.14 of I/G): In terms of your potential, about what percentage of your ability do you use in your work?

AVERAGE PERCENTAGE FOR:

LIBRARY WORKERS 63 %
(PUBLIC LIBRARIANS) (55 %)
(HEALTH SCIENCES LIBR.) (58.8)
U.S. WORKERS 78 %

As in question 2, regarding their ability to do their best at work, library workers also rate themselves lower in the potential ability they use at work compared to other workers. It would be interesting, in fact important, to know what prevents nearly 40 percent of library workers from doing their best and using their full potential at work.

Question 5 (Q.15 of I/G): Do you believe you will continue with your current company/organization until you retire?

RESULTS in percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIBRARY WORKERS</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. WORKERS</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of this question might be surprising as library workers are generally thought of as employees who commit to one organization for a long time, yet these results indicate they are as likely to 'move on' as the general workforce. Lynch and Verdin's [4] survey in 1983 also found that only 40 percent of librarians and 27 percent of non-professional staff "expect to work in the same library five years hence."
Question 6 (Q.28 of I/G): Do you worry that your job may become obsolete because of advances in technology?

RESULTS in percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIBRARY WORKERS</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. WORKERS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>88*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some “No Replies”.

Apparently, very few U.S. and library workers worry about being replaced by the machine, or in the librarian's case, by a 'knowbot'. This is encouraging considering that in the 1991 Pennsylvania study [7] only 43 percent of respondents felt that "the library profession has a bright future", while 50 percent thought their own library had a bright future. This change of perception could be due to the extensive training activities in libraries since then and that, in reality, only three percent of positions were lost to technological advances according to respondents in the LJ survey.

ARE AMERICAN LIBRARY WORKERS LESS SATISFIED AT WORK THAN THE AVERAGE AMERICAN WORKER?

This seems to be so, although the overall job satisfaction of library workers is still high at 80.4 percent. What is most striking is the difference between Library and U.S. workers when one compare responses that rate job satisfaction very high to extremely high (columns 4 and 5 of Question 1). These workers conceivably make up the enthusiastic leading edge of worker groups. Only 44.1 and 43.75 percent of all library and public library workers, respectively, fall into this group, while 71 percent of the average worker rates here. In our own library 50 percent rated here. The number of workers in libraries who were either extremely or very DISsatisfied, 19.6 percent, were also higher than for the INC/Gallup survey (nine percent).

At a time of tremendous opportunity for information workers in the evolving information economy, one would expect library workers’ ‘excitement rating’ (columns 4 + 5 in Question 1) to be at least as high as that of the average American worker. In other words, that a very large sector of the library workforce, by all standards, early adopters of technology and the Internet, would be excited about being part of the information and knowledge workplace. Especially considering the large number who reported
opportunities to learn and grow at work (91%), and the results of the survey done by LJ which found a “career renaissance of sorts”[8]. More than 6 out of ten surveyed said that their job responsibilities have changed in the past year and three out of four said they had done so in the last three years. All library workers reported fundamental changes in the way they did their jobs. Work done by Baker and Sandore [11] suggests that, contrary to the popular stereotypes, librarians have embraced new technologies enthusiastically. “It is not, then, the advent of new technology which causes attitudes to shift. Rather, it is the uncertainty and turbulence that accompanies such rapidly-advancing technologies that causes confusion and ambivalence which can cloud the path toward high motivation and resultant productivity.”

What is the importance of job satisfaction and what factors contribute to it? Paul E. Spector sees job satisfaction as "an emotional-affective response to a job or specific aspects of a job: it is assumed to present a cluster of evaluative feelings about a job." and Subodh Nandy says that job satisfaction is "only a relatively enduring state which undergoes a change with the needs of the individual, the capacity of work situation which fulfills these needs, and the individual's own perception of the situation" [ Both quoted in 10]. Thus feelings and emotional reactions to work are important factors in satisfaction. How we speak and write about our jobs and the future of our profession will influence library workers’ job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

In my "Risk Taking' workshop I try to convey the idea that librarians' time for innovation and risk taking has arrived. We are poised to help the U.S. economy shift gears to an information economy and to take up the banner for equal access to the Internet and to information in general. I frequently find skeptics in the audience! It seems that libraries are investing in lots of training and re-training, but are we focusing too little on the bright future of knowledge workers, and in particular, on information workers who are prepared to take the necessary risks? Are we devoting too much press to journal cancellations, predatory publishers, and chaos on the Internet?

This comparison with the average American worker, incomplete as it is, highlights the trends found by the Library Journal survey about the evolution of library jobs. It elucidates the contrast between perceiving these re-invented jobs as “exciting” and “exhilarating”, and the worry that was expressed by one interviewee that “libraries are slipping inexorably away into some new, unpleasant world. Information has replaced knowledge; quantity over quality.” [8]

Libraries need to re-organize to not only accommodate, but highlight the ‘new’ jobs while clearly indicating which duties and services we see as lower priority and which may have to be stopped entirely. This may address some workload and motivational issues. It is also becoming more important that our profession focus on the successful re-invention of library jobs, not only in library journals, but also in the popular press, when doing
training and staff development, and in our visioning and strategic planning. As the saying goes “belief changes reality!”

NOTES AND REFERENCES:


[12] Extracted (with permission) from the results of a Training and Development survey administered to all staff and librarians (180 in all) at the University of New Mexico General Library during June, 1997, by Baldwin, DA, and others.