

Leveraging Remote Work Services in Libraries:

Building Community and Strengthening the Local Economy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the preliminary findings of the first year of the Remote Work Through Libraries Initiative, a three-year project investigating how libraries' remote work services impact community and economic vitality. Remote work support is a nascent frontier for library services, with limited existing research. A novel initiative led by the Maine State Library, in partnership with the Department of Economic and Community Development, allocated over \$1.7 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds to 39 public libraries. This project will fortify libraries with tools needed to attract and assist remote workers, including updated physical spaces and technologies to accommodate workers' needs.

INTRODUCTION, PURPOSE, AND KEY QUESTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a profound shift in work habits, particularly in the rise of remote work, which has continued even as pandemic restrictions have eased. While some employees have returned to traditional office environments, a substantial portion of the workforce continues to operate remotely, prompting a reimagining of workspaces and a growing demand for community resources that support remote work. This shift has had wide-ranging implications, especially for public spaces like libraries that are, once again, on the leading edge of meeting these new needs.

This case study uses data and anecdotes from the first year of the Remote Work Through Libraries Initiative (RWTL), a three-year project to enhance library services to support remote work and bolster community vitality. By examining how libraries have adapted their services through RWTL and the preliminary outcomes of these adaptations, this study strives to understand the broader implications for community cohesion and economic development seen so far. The initiative aims to be a model for yet another way libraries can evolve to meet contemporary challenges and opportunities.

The key questions this case study looks to answer include

- How have RWTL libraries adapted their services to support remote workers?
- What are the preliminary outcomes of these adaptations on community cohesion and economic development?

LIBRARIES, COVID-19, AND THE RWTL INITIATIVE

Libraries have traditionally served as centers of information and community engagement. They have bridged gaps in access to knowledge and technology by providing free and reliable resources to people of all ages and backgrounds. Over time, libraries' roles have expanded to include a wide range of services, such as literacy programs, digital skills training, and various community development initiatives. These services have positioned libraries as critical infrastructure in addressing economic disparities and promoting social equity.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered library services, prompting innovative approaches to continue serving communities despite physical closures. Many libraries offered outdoor Wi-Fi, curbside book pickups, and virtual programming, all of which underscore libraries' roles as hubs of digital access, information, and social interaction, particularly in times of crisis.

The Remote Work Through Libraries Initiative is a significant step in supporting Maine's remote and hybrid workforce by leveraging public libraries as vital community resources. Funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) as part of Governor Mills' broader economic development strategy, this initiative has allocated over \$1.7 million to improve the infrastructure in libraries across Maine. The goal is to establish or enhance services that cater to remote workers, business owners, and entrepreneurs, many of whom operate primarily in the digital

space. By aligning with state economic development goals, RWTL aims to create well-equipped, inclusive workspaces that foster local economic growth and revitalization.

THE MAINE STATE LIBRARY AND RWTL LIBRARIES

The Maine State Library (MSL) is the driving force in the RWTL Initiative, acting as the lead organization and hub, coordinating efforts across the state. MSL's involvement ensures the initiative aligns with broader state objectives, including economic development and workforce support. The initiative includes 39 public libraries in 15 of Maine's 16 counties, spanning some of the smallest rural libraries to the largest urban locations. These libraries serve diverse communities, including Maine's island populations, areas undergoing significant workforce transitions, and regions with large seasonal population swings. Examples include the Thompson Free Library in Dover-Foxcroft, which is creating enhanced remote working and training spaces, offering privacy booths, and upgraded HVAC, and the Carver Memorial Library in Searsport, which is transforming an underused room into a quiet work and study space. Soldiers Memorial Library in Hiram has added an outdoor pavilion for remote workers along with many interior upgrades, while Chebeague Island Library is planning a ~500-square-foot addition dedicated to remote work. Each participating library tailored its project to meet the unique needs of its community while contributing to the overall goals of the initiative.

Maine faces several economic and social challenges, including rural-urban disparities and workforce development needs (Office of the State Economist 2023). The state's heritage industries, such as farming, fishing, and logging, have declined over the past several decades (Daigneault et al. 2021). Small businesses lining Main Streets have all too commonly been shuttered (Flaherty 2021; Mailman et al. 2012). These changes, among others, have prompted efforts to diversify the economy (Maine IEAB 2023). Libraries serve as crucial infrastructure that can support these efforts by providing access to technology, educational resources, and now, remote workspaces. The initiative's focus on underrepresented and economically disadvantaged communities underscores the potential of libraries to play a transformative role in addressing these challenges.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REMOTE WORK THROUGH LIBRARIES INITIATIVE

The primary objective of RWTL is to expand the capacity of public libraries to support remote and hybrid workers across Maine via enhancing library spaces, providing targeted resources and services for remote workers, and boosting local economies by fostering an inclusive environment that supports digital work and entrepreneurship. The initiative is supported by \$1.7 million in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act, distributed through a competitive grant process. Libraries applied for small programming and space-renovation grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000, or large capital improvement grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000. Each library also selected a project focus area, including improving ADA compliance, reaching New Mainers, or supporting working caregivers and parents.

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Libraries taking part in the initiative have undertaken a range of physical and technological upgrades. These include improving Wi-Fi capabilities, creating dedicated coworking spaces, and providing digital tools such as laptop docking stations and dual monitors. Other enhancements include the development of outdoor pavilions, upgrading electrical systems, and installing heat pumps for better climate control. These improvements aim to make libraries more conducive to remote work, thus attracting a broader range of users.

In addition to physical upgrades, RWTL libraries have partnered with local organizations, including the Maine Community College System, to offer training in remote work skills and other employment opportunities, and hosted networking events for local remote workers, further weaving libraries into the fabric of community and economic development.

PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES AND OBSERVATIONS

The new services and spaces in the RWTL libraries have generally been met with positive feedback. Many patrons, including those who had not previously considered the library a viable workspace, have started working in the library on a regular basis. The addition of private work booths or pods, enhanced Wi-Fi, and dedicated coworking areas have allowed remote workers to conduct meetings, participate in video conferences, and complete their tasks in a comfortable environment. These spaces have been in demand, with some libraries reporting that the privacy booths and quiet rooms are being used regularly by six to ten patrons daily. Overall, many users are expressing gratitude for the new and improved resources, even though many are still works in progress.

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Community Cohesion and Engagement

The initiative has had an impact on community cohesion and has positioned libraries as key social hubs for remote workers. The new spaces have provided opportunities for remote workers to connect, fostering connections among individuals who might otherwise feel isolated. RWTL libraries have hosted public forums, drop-in sessions, and community events to gather feedback and keep patrons informed about their projects, further strengthening the bond between the library and the community. The creation of shared workspaces has also encouraged collaboration and networking among users, reinforcing the library's role as a vital community center.

Economic Implications

Early signs point to positive economic impact from these initiatives. Remote workers using the library spaces have reported saving money on commuting and

workspace rentals. This shift could reasonably allow these workers to redirect their spending to local businesses. Some seasonal visitors have even extended their stays due to the availability of reliable workspaces. Increased use of library services by remote workers could boost local economies, both through direct spending and by making the area more attractive to potential new residents.

Challenges Encountered

Despite the successes, libraries have had to deal with several challenges during the early months of this initiative. Technological issues, such as unreliable Wi-Fi connections and the need for upgraded electrical infrastructure in historic buildings, have posed significant obstacles. Some libraries have also faced delays due to contractor availability and scheduling conflicts, which have slowed the progress of renovations. Others have experienced issues around equitable scheduling of these limited remote workspaces. The libraries have worked to address these concerns through community meetings and adjustments to project plans, but these issues have highlighted the need for ongoing community engagement and flexibility as they navigate this new territory.

Areas for Improvement

To date, it has been difficult to evaluate the impact of these projects on the target populations the libraries selected during the application process. Patron privacy is an indispensable value in libraries. The commitment to privacy, outlined in the "Library Bill of Rights",¹ adds complexity to collecting data and tracking users. It will, nonetheless, be important for these libraries to look at how closely their efforts are aligned with the needs of the population group. One potential future challenge will be securing ongoing funding to maintain and expand services for remote workers now that the ARPA funds have been expended. As remote work becomes more widespread, the demand for library resources is likely to grow, which means libraries will need to find more financial support and partnerships with other aligned organizations. Additionally, more extensive outreach efforts could help increase awareness and use of the new facilities, particularly among remote workers who are not yet regular library patrons. Finally, libraries need to better measure outcomes, including more systematic tracking of use, user satisfaction, and the economic impact of the initiative. These data would provide clearer insights into the long-term effectiveness of the program and help refine future efforts.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This case study shows how libraries have further evolved from their traditional roles as information centers into vibrant hubs for community engagement and economic development. By providing essential services such as coworking spaces, technology access, and remote work support, libraries in Maine have become vital to the local economy and community life. These libraries are no longer just repositories of books and information; they are active players in fostering economic growth, supporting workforce development, and enhancing community cohesion. The success of these initiatives highlights how libraries can adapt to meet the changing needs of their communities, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas where such resources are scarce.

The lessons learned from RWTL can be applied to libraries across the country, especially in rural or economically disadvantaged regions. By forming strong partnerships, securing targeted funding, and aligning services with local needs, other libraries can replicate RWTL's success. Because of their adaptability and resourcefulness, libraries, even those with limited resources, have shown that significant impacts can be achieved.

The implications of this case study for public policy are profound, particularly in the areas of funding and rural development. Policymakers should recognize the potential of libraries as key contributors to economic growth and community resilience as some of the most trustworthy institutions in the United States today according to long-term survey data (Pew 2020). Targeted advocacy efforts could lead to increased funding for library initiatives that support remote work and other such needs. Additionally, integrating libraries into broader economic strategies, especially in rural areas, could enhance their role in workforce development and attract new residents. Public policy that supports such initiatives could play a critical role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of libraries as essential community institutions.

CONCLUSION

The Remote Work Through Libraries Initiative has already shown notable positive outcomes for remote workers, community cohesion, and local economies in its infancy. Future research should explore the long-term impacts, scalability, and sustainability of initiatives

like RWTL. Investigating how these programs evolve to support emerging work trends, such as hybrid work models and digital entrepreneurship, would also be valuable. Additionally, more detailed studies on the economic benefits and the specific outcomes for different demographic groups within the community would help refine future efforts. Understanding the long-term implications of such initiatives could provide valuable insights for policymakers and library professionals looking to initiate or expand similar programs.

The Remote Work Through Libraries Initiative serves as a powerful model for how libraries can support remote work and foster resilient communities. By aligning library services with local economic development strategies and prioritizing community engagement, RWTL has set a precedent for how public libraries can adapt to the changing needs of their communities. As the role of libraries continues to evolve, this case study provides valuable insights for policymakers, library practitioners, and community leaders looking to harness the potential of libraries in the digital age. The success of this initiative underscores the importance of continued investment in libraries as key infrastructure for community and economic development, particularly in a world increasingly shaped by digital work and connectivity.

NOTES

- 1 "Library Bill of Rights." American Library Association. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>.

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