Getting Off on the Right Foot: Psychological Contracts, Socialization Theory and Library Student Workers

Miriam L. Matteson*, Emily Hankinson

Kent State University, School of Information, 274 E. First Ave., Columbus, OH 43201, USA

ABSTRACT

Academic libraries rely on student employees to manage a wide range of operational areas. Employing students can be beneficial to the library, to the students, and to the library patrons, but there are also challenges in recruiting, training, and supervising a student workforce. In this article, we introduce two frameworks from human resources management that describe and explain new relationships between employees and employers. Psychological contracts are tacitly held expectations by employees and employers that direct attitudes and behaviors about the work, attitudes toward the organization, and interpersonal relationships. Socialization refers to the wide range of tactics that organizations and newcomers may take to adjust to a new work situation. In the article, we first explore each of the constructs and provide a short review of empirical studies that show the relevance of each construct as it pertains to student workers in libraries. We then offer some suggestions for steps library managers can take based on these frameworks to maximize the benefits of the student employee workforce for the students and for the organization.

Introduction

"…for some years now, the primary criteria we use when hiring work-study students is whether they are breathing or not." (Byrne, 2007, p. 38).

"We have had two student assistants named Student Assistant of the Year for the entire university, and many more left us heartbroken when they graduated." (Byrne, 2007, p. 38).

These two quotes (the first one tongue-in-cheek presumably) from Byrne's column on student workers perhaps better than anything else reflect the yin and yang of student workers in an academic library. Libraries benefit from, though also struggle with, sustaining a student workforce. Student workers can be enthusiastic, hard-working, and innovative, just as they can be hard to come by and difficult to keep. Students make up a critical component of the workforce in academic libraries and manage many operational areas including circulation and reserves, helping patrons find materials, and greeting patrons as a first point of contact (Brenza, Kowalsky, & Brush, 2015; Mestre & LeCrone, 2015; Mitchell & Soini, 2014). Students working a reference point answer basic questions while directing more complex research questions to librarians (Faix, 2014; Mitchell & Soini, 2014). Such tiered models of research assistance enable patrons' initial needs to be met right away by student workers, while still valuing the expertise of reference librarians

to help those who need more specialized, in-depth research assistance (Faix, 2014). Student workers may give library tours to incoming students and help market the library to classmates, increasing student engagement with library resources and services across the campus (Folk, 2014; Mestre & LeCrone, 2015). Students are often asked to work evening shifts allowing the library to stay open later. Student workers also perform a variety of tasks in technical services, archives, special collections, and collections management.

There are many positive outcomes to the institution, to the student workforce, and to the user population, from employing student workers. By placing student workers across all areas of library operations, librarians and other full time staff can focus time and energy on other tasks, such as collaborating with faculty on research, providing information literacy instruction, participating on campus-wide initiatives, joining in research, outreach and liaison work across campus, and collaborating with student services all of which extend library services and increase the value the library brings to a campus (Brenza et al., 2015; Mestre & LeCrone, 2015; Mitchell & Soini, 2014; Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). Further, the financial savings achieved from hiring student workers enables libraries to maintain or increase hours and services offered. Research shows that students who work on campus drop out at lower rates (Cottrell & Bell, 2015; Mitchell & Soini, 2014). Although the student worker population in general experiences a relatively high turnover rate, if students are brought in to the

organization early in their time on campus, it is likely they are willing to stay in the position for the remainder of their time at the institution (Mitchell & Soini, 2014). This occurs as students become invested in the work and are entrusted with responsibility for work that is more complex over more routine tasks (Logan, 2012) Giving students more responsibility and putting them in peer leadership positions can introduce new perspectives and contributions to library operations, which helps librarians better relate to their user group (Mestre & LeCrone, 2015). This connection to the library can also serve as a recruiting tool for the profession (Folk, 2014). Working in a library helps students gain an appreciation for what libraries do and the value they add to the educational experience, which in turn can help cultivate future supporters, advocates, and users of libraries (Folk, 2014). Because students are closest to the student experience, they notice issues faster and are able to articulate these issues from a student perspective (Mitchell & Soini, 2014). Peer leaders are able to be source of expertise to their fellow students and can help classmates connect with library resources and services (Mitchell & Soini, 2014).

Student library workers gain technical and soft skills, work experience, and preparation for future positions in addition to a regular paycheck. On campus jobs appeal to some students because of the limited number of hours a student is legally allowed to work while at the same time providing a flexible schedule (Folk, 2014; Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013). With limited hours and a flexible schedule, students are less likely to interrupt their education, leading to higher retention and graduation rates. In comparison to students who do not work at all, those working a limited number of hours during the week have a higher cumulative grade point average (Folk, 2014), and student workers with moderate work schedules of fewer than 20 h per week develop skills in time management, communication, customer service, and leadership (Jacobson & Shuyler, 2013; Mestre & LeCrone, 2015).

Hiring student workers can positively affect the primary users of the academic library by being someone students can relate to. The visible presence of student workers may increase the likelihood that student patrons will seek out assistance preferring to approach another student rather than librarian (Brenza et al., 2015; Faix, 2014). This preference can be used as a conduit to directing student users to additional, more in-depth help from library professionals (Brenza et al., 2015). Student workers may also be in a better position to assist students because they are facing similar assignments and are familiar with the expected quality and completion demands (Brenza et al., 2015). This leads student workers to have deeper insights on where a student might be struggling and have ideas for how to move them forward, such as helping them articulate their problems or questions and providing solutions or answers in a language and style that is meaningful to the student (Brenza et al., 2015; Faix, 2014).

As the preceding paragraphs enumerate, there are many positive outcomes to hiring student workers. But there are also a number of recurring challenges. Economic problems, namely limited financial aid and budget cutbacks, are cited as potential obstacles when hiring student workers. Either by policy or through budget restrictions, libraries may only be able to hire students who have received federal work study as part of their financial aid package. This limitation may make it difficult to attract students to work in the library and it may also limit the number of hours they are eligible to work (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). The relatively high turnover rate of student workers in academic libraries is another issue that increases the effort librarians spend on recruiting, hiring, and training workers (Mitchell & Soini, 2014; Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). Libraries must consider the duration, frequency, and format of training given that students may or may not return to the position in the next academic semester, term, or year. Some libraries fear a loss of control over the quality of service provided by student workers, which must be addressed in training (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). Libraries also face issues of repeated absences from work, socializing, or doing school work on the job (Farrell & Driver, 2010; Mitchell & Soini, 2014). Such performance issues may arise from

a student's perception that the job is merely a temporary paycheck, the possibility that the student has never been trained to work in a library, or a student's lack of ideological and emotional attachment to the library's purpose (Cottrell & Bell, 2015; Farrell & Driver, 2010). For some students, working in the academic library is the first job they have held and thus in addition to learning the skills required to complete the tasks, they are also learning how to be responsible employees in a professional environment (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). Given the variety of positions students fill, along with variation in their preparedness for the work, training students can be a time-consuming, complex activity. Librarians may find it impractical to do much more than basic training, which opens the door for potential performance issues (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010).

Without a doubt, students are a valuable but also challenging employee workforce in the library. Perhaps the fundamental question librarians ask themselves is "Is it really worth all the effort we expend on student workers in libraries?" (Burrows, 1995, p. 84). In order to be able to answer that question in the affirmative, managers of student workers would benefit from delving into human resources management concepts that can be brought to bear when working with students. In this article two constructs are introduced, *psychological contract* and *socialization*, that provide powerful theoretical and empirical knowledge for library managers when working with a student workforce. These two theories are conceptually linked in that they both describe the early stages of the work relationship between the student and the library. Understanding the mechanisms at play at the beginning of the work relationship can help student workers and librarians and establish a positive, mutually beneficial work experience. While it is important to apply effective management knowledge throughout the tenure of the employee, there are certain gains to be made from the initial work period that can bring lasting benefits to the organization such as reduced turnover, greater engagement and productivity, increased job satisfaction, and higher quality work performance. From the students' viewpoint, establishing a positive relationship with the organization at the outset of employment can help increase self-efficacy and belonging, build skill sets, and establish successful employment history. In the article, the authors first explore each of the constructs and provide a short review of empirical studies that show the relevance of each construct as it pertains to student workers in libraries. Then some suggestions are offered for steps library managers can take based on these frameworks to maximize the benefits of the student employee workforce for the students and for the organization.

Connecting management theory to student workers

As mentioned, much has been written about student workers in academic libraries, however, no accounts were found of the frameworks explored in this article (*psychological contract* and *socialization*) linked with student workers in the library literature.[1] Although no research was found that looked specifically at student library workers using either of these two frameworks, articles where the population studied may have some shared characteristics with student library workers were included. For example, research on contingent or temporary employees, who while not a precise match to student library workers, do possibly share the sensibility of not quite being a full member of the organization, was included.

Psychological contract

Psychological contracts are implicitly held expectations or assumptions between an employee and an employer that govern to some extent the behavior of each party (Rousseau, 1989). A new employee

---

[1] A few studies have used the construct of socialization applied to full time workers in libraries (Ballard & Blessing, 2006; Lee, Oh, & Burnett, 2016; Oud, 2008).