

# Teleworking in Health Libraries: A Survey of Academic Librarians' Viewpoints

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study aimed to survey head and staff librarians' viewpoints on teleworking in library in the academic libraries of the universities located in Kerman city, Iran in 2013. **Design/methodology/approach:** In this exploratory survey, seventy head and staff librarians were selected from the academic libraries of four main universities in the city. They completed a validated and reliable researcher-made questionnaire on teleworking in health libraries. Data was analyzed in SPSS 19. **Findings:** The subjects' attitude to teleworking in library was positive in spite of their relatively low familiarity with teleworking and their perceived low ability to do teleworking. They enumerated some advantages, disadvantages, problems, challenges and developing ways for teleworking, especially in the case of Iran health academic libraries. **Originality/value:** The newly emerged teleworking practice is increasingly developing worldwide. Iran health academic libraries should focus it for providing better library services, managing ever-increasing library costs and satisfying ever-changing user demands.

**Keywords:** Tele-working, health Academic libraries, Medical librarians, Iran.

## Introduction

Nowadays, the need for physical attendance in the workplace has been decreased as a result of developments in telecommunicating technologies and teleworking techniques. The nature of work

throughout the world has been seriously changed because of these advanced communicating tools. Economic pressures along with unpredictable and fast changes in business resulting from global competencies cause organizations to rethink about new job designs and structures. As a result, organizations are becoming increasingly independent of their physical places. They have been well aware of the importance of compatibility with the newly-emerging changes and conditions in order to decrease in their costs and time-wasting as well as increase in their flexibility and efficacy. In addition, they have considered the importance of teleworking as an added-value and competitive advantage. Considering these main views, some organizations tend to decrease the physical presence of their staff in the workplace and increase their virtual presence by applying various teleworking procedures (Bailey and Kurland, 2002).

As reported by Smith (2004), teleworking as a new term has emerged in the 1970s. Teleworking occurs when Information and Communication Technologies enable work to be done at a geographical distance from the location where the work is needed to be done or would have traditionally been carried out in the past (Hynes, 2014). Teleworking means to work in every place with applying telecommunication technologies instead of attending the same workplace (Fulton, 2002; Prati, 2002). These technologies include among others telephone, fax, modem, computer and electronic and voice mail (Lim and Teo, 2000). As previously noted, teleworking has been emerged due to technological developments, economic pressures on organizations and their attempt at decreasing the cost of work and their need for survival in global competing market. Other reasons include organizations' attitudes to developing service globalization (Azami & Yoosefzadeh, 2011), reducing economic hazards, empowering their staff members to establish their family relations and so on. Managers and employers are both searching the ways for more use of organizational capacities together with low costs as possible (Blacke, 2001, Azami et al., 2010, 2018). Teleworking can be of the potential procedures by which the organization is used more than ever and its costs for service-provision are diminished as well.

Since teleworking provides effective solutions to some problems relating to the workplace, it is not a general suitable solution to all occupations. It is effective way in some works and some

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individuals (Blake, 1999). In some works, for example those needing face-to-face relations, teleworking cannot be applied generally (Prati, 2002).

Despite its strengths, teleworking has some weaknesses including among others managers' negative attitudes towards it, the issue of remote controlling, the possibility of staff isolation, decrease in social contacts and job discussions, staff's concerns about their inaccessibility to job rewards and work opportunities, their inaccessibility to skill training held in the workplace and so on (Fulton, 2002). In addition, the incomplete training in doing teleworking and the lack of appropriate technologies for its successful administration, low Internet speed and information security issues are of other related main concerns in this context (Prati, 2002; Pérez Pérez, 2005), especially in developing countries (Tajedini et al, 2018).

Teleworking is heavily emphasized in many countries such as Canada. The U.K. had above 2.2 million teleworkers in 2001 (Carr, 2006). The total number of people who worked from home or remotely for an entire day at least once a month in 2010 was 26.2 million in the U.S.A (WorldatWork Association, 2011). Teleworking has been increased worldwide in recent years.

As noted by Duncan (2008), teleworking is a new trend in librarianship. Library and information centers, especially academic libraries are of organizations that teleworking can be applied, at least in some part of their routine work. Academic libraries have some serious problems such as budget shortcomings, limitations on workplace and human resources and they need to provide some services for their users remotely in all places around. Their users sometimes need information in closing times and holidays. It is necessary to employ some teleworkers providing needed services outside the library workplace and in times other than formal work time of libraries (Blake, 1999).

Library and information professionals deal with information production, organization and dissemination. Teleworking has been developed in the field as a result of technological development and accepted and expanded worldwide as a main occupational opportunity for librarians and library staff (Blake, 1999; Prati, 2002). As Eden (1996) states, teleworking (including telecommuting, telecataloguing, remote cataloguing and so on) begun to emerge in the library environment in the middle of the 1990s. Teleworking in library and information field includes report writing, research conducting, information retrieval, indexing and abstracting, editing, cataloging, collection development, ordering, translating, programming, data entering and even administration (Blake, 1999). However, some works including shelf reading, circulation, document delivery services and weeding need library staff's physical attendance in the library (Black and Hyslop, 1995). In spite of its low application in the field and few studies and little focus on it in library research agenda, teleworking has longer been demonstrated in information consults provided by reference librarian and reference service provision via e-mail and other electronic tools (Blake, 1999; Putnam, 2001). Some other services such as chat, online

reference interviews and remote information consult can be considered as some kinds of teleworking modes in libraries (Sajedeh Malekzadeh et al, 2016; Okhovati et al, 2016; Azami et al., 2009).

### *Problem Statement*

In Iran, libraries of all kinds, especially academic libraries have been encountered budget shortcomings and limited human resources. Besides, these libraries have limited physical places for providing user service. Traffic problems and resulting difficulties staff run into and user mobility in great cities are important barriers to easy and continuous access to libraries. These highlight the importance of teleworking in the libraries in Iran; especially ones located in its great cities and/or are remote from the central city.

It is worth noting that there is not any enough and directing information on the library telework in Iran academic library context. The only research on the topic in Iran was conducted by Tahavori (2014) in the case of the National Library and Archives of Iran. This study focused the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking in this library from its teleworking librarians' viewpoints.

The present study aimed at investigating teleworking benefits, problems and procedures from the viewpoints of head librarians and staff librarians working in the academic libraries located in the universities in Kerman city, Iran. These academic libraries / librarians can be conceived as a sample of Iran academic librarians / libraries in other similar settings in the country as well as similar contexts in other developing countries. As teleworking function in optimal time management, its benefits for better library service provision and its role in improved cost-benefit have become of main concerns, the possible results of such an exploratory study can help library administrators to better focus on the issues of teleworking in libraries and make some preparations for its administration.

### *Research Objectives*

The main objectives of this exploratory survey included:

1. Determining head librarians and staff librarians' familiarity with and use of teleworking and their ability to do teleworking in terms of their genders and academic degrees;
2. Identifying their viewpoints on the appropriate units of the library for teleworking;
3. Identifying their viewpoints on the facilities needed for teleworking;
4. Determining the challenges of and opportunities for teleworking in the academic libraries; and
5. Identifying the ways to expand teleworking in the studied libraries.

### *Literature review*

Nowadays, considering the importance of teleworking, many researches have been conducted some researches on the subject in other fields. However, few studies have considered teleworking in the field of library and information sciences.

As noted by Prati (2002), teleworking arrangements in libraries often took place in informal ways. This fact has caused a lack of useful information in the literature. Teleworking arrangements in library settings often emerge only in mailing lists due to the necessity for teleworking librarians to exchange information and experiences with their users and colleagues. Eden (1996) states that telecommuting, telecataloguing, and remote cataloguing begun to emerge in library environment in the middle of the 1990s. Reports and statements on telework mostly include personal experiences of some libraries in some libraries rather than scientific papers (Prati, 2002)

As a formal research in the field, Fulton (2000) examined the impact of teleworking on the work done by information professional through a combined research method, including participants' observation, interviews and diaries. Fulton investigated the work of twenty pairs of teleworking and at-office librarians and information professionals performing a variety of functions (administration, consulting services, and traditional library services). The study revealed that although teleworkers and at-office workers performed similar amounts of work, work processes differed between the two groups. Teleworkers were often missing the information necessary to complete tasks at home and tried to cope by repeating some parts of the tasks at home as well as dividing tasks according to the available resources.

In another work, in order to examine the ways in which library and information professionals can facilitate teleworkers' information access, Fulton (2002) focused on the information environments of 20 teleworkers and 20 in-office workers in the same job. This study provided the foundation for work accomplished by information professionals. The researcher predicted a restructuring of organizations and of information into electronic formats to accommodate works done from home results and revealed that teleworkers still relied heavily on printed information sources and adopted specific strategies for ensuring availability of information in their at-home work environments, including asking their colleagues to send information to them at home. Fultron noted that library and information science professionals have a vital role to play in teleworkers' interaction with information.

Carr (2006) showed how telecommuting can be employed to advantage the Jamaican library system. The primary research tool was a 12-itemed questionnaire administered to all levels of library staff across the island. The results showed that library staffs all over Jamaica were interested in the concept of telecommuting.

As noted above, the only research in Iran was that of Tahavori (2014). Her study focused on the advantages and disadvantages

of teleworking in Iran National Library from its teleworking librarians' viewpoints. The survey was limited in the sense that it focused on *the* national library in the capital of Iran, Tehran.

## Method

Research population of the survey included all managers (head librarians) and staff librarians working in Kerman's academic libraries located in its 5 main universities in 2013 (N=92). Of them, 70 managers and/or librarians participated in the study and completed a researcher-made questionnaire on teleworking in the library (n= 70).

The questionnaire included some closed (multi-choice) and open-ended questions. The closed items were in a 5-point Likert type scale. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by some library specialists and its internal consistency amounted to  $\alpha=.82$  in a sample of 20 librarians (4 librarians from each of these university libraries). Some descriptive and inferential statistical methods (especially one variable and independent t-test) were used for data analysis in SPSS 19.

## Findings

Of the subjects, 52 (74.3%) were female and 18 (25.7%) were male. Regarding their academic degrees, 58 (82.9%) and 12 (17.1%) had BS and MS in library and information sciences, respectively. Most subjects (35, 50%) had between 1-10 years of working background. Others had more than 10 years of working background.

The subjects were not familiar enough with teleworking in the library. Only 14 (20%) subjects were familiar with teleworking in the high level. Most subjects (32, 45.7%) were familiar with the notion in the moderate level.

As table 1 shows, the comparison of librarians' familiarity with teleworking in terms of their gender revealed that there was not a significant difference between male and female librarians regarding their familiarity with teleworking in the health library ( $t=2.34$ ,  $df=68$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

Table 1. The results of independent sample t-test for comparing male and female librarians' familiarity with teleworking in the library (n=70, df=68)

Variable	Gender	No.	Mean	SD	t	p
Familiarity with teleworking	Male	18	2.75	1.17	2.34	.13
	Female	52	2.61	.77		

As table 2 shows, librarians with MS degree were relatively more familiar with teleworking than librarians with BS degree (with the mean rate of 3.08 versus that of 2.36). However, there was no significant difference between librarians' familiarity with teleworking in the library regarding their academic degrees (BS versus MS), too ( $t=1.10$ ,  $df=68$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

Table 2. The results of independent sample t-test for comparing librarians' familiarity with teleworking as to their academic degrees (n=70, df=68)

Variable	Degree	No.	Mean	SD	t	p
Familiarity with teleworking	BS	58	2.36	1.02	1.10	.60
	MS	12	3.08	1.31		

Only 14 (20%) subjects were using teleworking in their daily work. As shown in table 3, there was a significant difference between male and female librarians in terms of their use of teleworking in daily occupational affairs in favor of women ( $t=3.40$ ,  $df=68$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Table 3. The results of independent sample t-test for comparing male and female librarians' use of teleworking (n=70, df=68)

Variable	Gender	No.	Mean	SD	t	p
Use of teleworking	Male	18	1.61	.50	3.40	.00
	Female	52	1.86	.34		

Considering librarians' academic degrees (MS versus BS), ones with BS degree were significantly using teleworking more than ones with MD degree as Table 4 shows ( $t=2.54$ ,  $df=68$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

Table 4. The results of independent sample t-test for comparing librarians' use of teleworking in terms of their academic degree (n=70, df=68)

Variable	Degree	No.	Mean	SD	t	p
Use of teleworking	BS	58	1.96	.28	2.54	.01
	MS	12	1.77	.42		

As table 5 shows, the subjects' ability to do teleworking was significantly lower than what was expected ( $t=4.29$ ,  $df=69$ ,  $p<.01$ ). It can be said that the studied librarians had not acceptable ability to do teleworking in their daily work.

Table 5. The results of one variable t-test for measuring librarians' ability to do teleworking (n=70, df=69)

Variable	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Ability to telework	2.44	.08	69	4.29	.00

The subjects were asked to rank the library units where teleworking can be best suited. Of them, 52 (74.3%) assigned the first rank to the library units involved in information organization. The units of collection development had the second rank (34, 48.6%). As expected, the units of reference work and circulation had the lowest rank (8, 11.4%).

Librarians' viewpoints on the advantages of teleworking in health libraries were explored, too. As table 6 shows, the most important advantage of teleworking was to provide more opportunities for good and enough familiar relations (with the mean rate of 3.87). The least important one was to decrease in traffic problems (with the mean rate of 3.35). All factors were statistically significant as Table 6 shows ( $p<.01$ ).

Table 6. The results of one variable t-test for advantages of teleworking in health libraries from librarians' viewpoints (N=70, df=69)

Advantages	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Providing more opportunities for good and enough family relations	3.87	.70	10.41	.00
Time consuming	3.83	.83	8.32	.00
More effectiveness	3.70	.90	6.46	.00
Decrease in cost	3.51	.91	4.71	.00
More job flexibility	3.50	.97	4.29	.00
Providing more occupational opportunities	3.38	1.06	3.24	.00
Decrease in traffic problems	3.35	1.16	3.22	.00

The subjects rated the problems with doing teleworking in the health libraries. Lack of required technologies and infrastructure (with mean rate of 3.74) and increase in work stress (with mean rate of 3.22) were the highest and lowest scored problems from the subjects' viewpoints, respectively. As table 7 shows, all the factors were statistically significant ( $p<.01$ ).

Table 7. The results of one variable t-test for problems with teleworking in health libraries from librarians' viewpoints (N=70, df=69)

Problems	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Lack of technologies and infrastructure	3.74	.89	6.94	.00
High costs of hardware/software	3.63	.92	5.72	.00
Staff's few knowledge	3.55	.88	4.88	.00
Managers' incomplete support	3.55	.91	4.71	.00
Lack of policies and regulations	3.51	.93	4.25	.00
Increase in work load	3.31	.84	3.12	.00
Increase in Job stress	3.22	1.06	3.01	.00

The subjects were asked about the ways of developing teleworking in the health libraries, especially in the case of Iran academic libraries. As table 8 shows, they believed that developing information and communication technologies (with the mean rate of 4.14) and facilitating office automation (with the mean rate of 3.70) were the highest and lowest rated ways of developing teleworking in the libraries. As table 8 shows, all the factors were statistically significant ( $p<.01$ ).

Table 8. The results of one variable t-test for ways of developing telework in health libraries from librarians' viewpoints (N=70, df=69).

Developing ways	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Expanding ICTs	4.14	.99	9.59	.00
Adequate internet connection speed	4.03	.90	9.56	.00
Staff training in teleworking	3.97	.85	9.54	.00
User training in teleworking	3.77	.92	7.41	.00
Financial support	3.73	.93	6.54	.00
Reducing telecommunication costs	3.73	.93	6.49	.00
Facilitating office automation	3.70	.85	6.35	.00

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study is one of the first studies on teleworking in libraries in Iran. In line with Tahavori (2014), our results showed that all head and staff librarians had positive attitudes toward teleworking in libraries. This revealed that all of them are aware of the importance and added-value of telework in libraries.

However, their familiarity with teleworking in health libraries was relatively low and unsatisfactory. This finding is reasonable because of a lack of related academic courses in Iran library and information science education programs on the topic as well as in continual training courses. As noted by Tahavori (2014), this highlights the importance of developing such courses in the country.

It is interesting that female librarian used teleworking in their job affairs more than male ones. One possible reason is that women can do their home and family-related responsibilities better when teleworking at home. Other possible reasons for this finding need further research, however.

As expected and in accord with Blake and Hyslop (1995), the subjects agreed that teleworking is appropriate for library units offering information organization and acquisition than units providing information dissemination and delivery. The possible reason is that information dissemination is better done in face-to-face communication settings, as we can see traditionally in circulation, reference and public relation units of many libraries. They had low skills in doing teleworking. Again, the possible reason is a lack of related training and insufficient infrastructures for teleworking in Iran. As Tahavori (2014) and Carr (2006) noted in their studies, such a result emphasizes the necessity of formal training in teleworking. The subjects emphasized the necessity for both staff and user training as two ways of developing telework in academic libraries.

There were some barriers to developing telework in health academic library settings that should be removed as subjects noted in this study as well as in that of Carr (2003). Lack of technologies and infrastructure and high costs of hardware/software that needed for teleworking as well as staff's low knowledge on it were of serious barriers.

The results of this study is similar to that of Tahavori (2014) in which she found that in spite of its serious problems and deficiencies, especially from infrastructural perspective, all participants agreed the importance of teleworking in different units of Iran National Library. The study by Carr (2006) in Jamaica showed that participants believed that teleworking would facilitate their work and decrease the time and cost of transporting to physical office.

It can be argued that teleworking in developing counties, including Iran is in its infancy and some attempts are needed to publicize it. Sufficient infrastructures, managers' positive attitudes and financial support are of important antecedents.

Libraries face some main challenges for offering an appropriate teleworking context. Government administrators should try to overcome the challenges.

It can be argued that teleworking is going to be developed in the future because of its remarkable benefits for organizations (Lett, 1994), including libraries and information centers (Fulton, 2002). It is suggested that some units of library where teleworking can be easily done are identified and the ways of teleworking in them accurately determined. A clear-cut policy is needed for teleworking in libraries for better clarification of teleworkers' job descriptions and responsibilities. The policy developed by the University of Gorgia Libraries published in its website (available at <http://www.libs.uga.edu/staff/teleworkingpolicy.pdf>) for its libraries, and that of University of Washington Libraries Staff Intranet (available at:

<http://staffweb.lib.washington.edu/units/human-resources/employee-information/general/libraries-guidelines-for-telework>) are two examples. After doing some teleworking practices, the feedback on them can be analyzed for removing and/or lessening the possible weaknesses as well as improving the possible strengths.

This study had some limitations. The small number of subjects can limit the generalization of the findings into other populations. As the conditions are relatively similar in Iran's other states and academic settings, it can be interpretably said that Iran librarians would agree the findings. Other studies in Iran public libraries are needed because of the wider expansion of these libraries throughout the country.

University faculty members and students prefer the convenience of anytime, anyplace access to scholarly materials when conducting research and completing assignments. Distance education programs are common whether the students are across town or across the continent. Faculty researchers collaborate with their peers nationally and internationally by utilizing virtual technologies. Health Academic libraries have been quick to integrate electronic and digital technology into their operating environment by investing heavily in the purchase and creation of digital collections as well as the purchase of the hardware and software applications to deliver content to these virtual scholarly communities. Librarians have adapted working virtually. This article explored librarians' freeing from the physical boundaries of the library, allowing them to provide their end-users with virtual library services by teleworking.

Further research, especially in mix-method, is needed for better exploration of the factors affecting telework in health libraries. Some cultural and social factors may influence its acceptance and application. This explorative study in the case of Iran can be a first step to continuous research on this necessary practice of our information-embedded age.

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