

Museums in a Pandemic: Workforce Impacts

July 29, 2020

The ACM Trends Reports team is exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's museums. By mid-May, many museums had adjusted aspects of their staffing to navigate the early implications of the unfolding situation. This report describes effects related to full-time and part-time staff, as well as volunteers, and implications for the children's museums workforce.

The data comes from responses to a special survey conducted in mid-May 2020. Overall, 109 US-based children's museums and 6 non-US museums were represented in the survey responses. We found that, at that point, most full-time employees had either no change to their employment or reduced hours, whereas most part-time employees were laid off or furloughed. Museums communicated in different ways and to varying extents with volunteers and staff that had been laid off or furloughed. The findings offer opportunities for children's museums to reflect on staffing decisions, as well as their communication styles and goals.

This report is the third in Volume 4 of the ACM Trends Report series, which studies the early impacts of COVID-19 on the field. ACM Trends Report #4.1 provided a quick snapshot of the early impacts, and Trends Report #4.2 described financial impacts. Trends Report #4.4 will explore early impacts on visitors, members, and partners. We will continue to monitor the pandemic's impacts on the field over time.

ACM TRENDS

#4.3

ACM Trends #4.3

The children’s museums’ workforce is critical to the operation of institutions and the success of the field. We explored this idea in ACM Trends Report #1.10, which showed that, on average in 2016, 76% of children’s museum personnel consisted of volunteers, 16% were part-time staff, and 8% were full-time staff. On average, each of these groups devote different amounts of time to working at children’s museums, with full-time staff contributing the highest number of hours. The following findings focus on US museums unless otherwise noted.

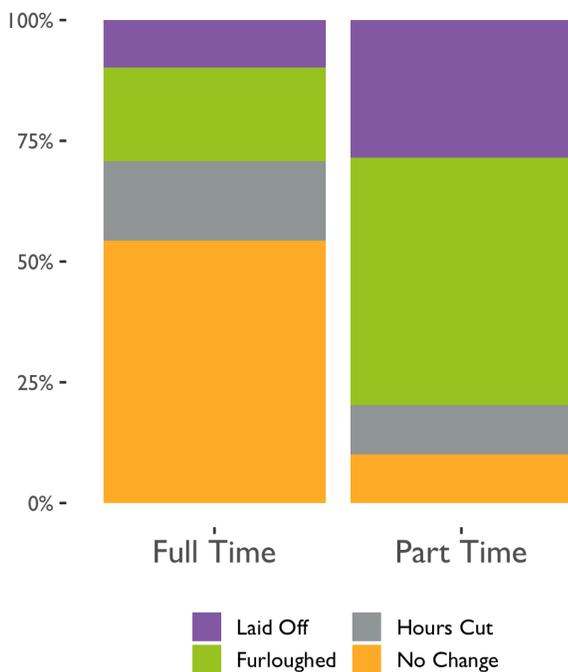


Figure 1. The proportion of employment statuses for full time and part-time staff for children’s museums in mid-May.

The May 2020 survey showed that children’s museums made staffing adjustments in response to the pandemic, which affected workers in different ways. Figure 1 shows that, on average, full-time employees were the least likely to be dramatically affected by staffing changes, with over two-thirds having hours reduced or no changes to their employment. However, about 80% of part-time staff were furloughed or laid off. Overall, 36% of participating children’s museums laid off or furloughed staff. By comparison, 44% of museums of all types said they laid off or furloughed staff in a June survey (AAM, 2020).

The actions taken by children’s museums varied greatly, with some laying off or furloughing almost all their staff while others made few changes. The averages were generally consistent across size categories, though Small museums were the least likely to cut full-time staff. When we compare the financial impacts described in ACM Trends Report #4.2 to staffing impacts, there is no reliable relationship between relief funding received or the size of the museum to the proportion of staff laid off or furloughed. This suggests that the decision to change staffing appears to depend on the conditions surrounding each museum.

Two factors may have influenced these conditions. First, the Small Business Administration was in the process of disbursing Paycheck Protection Program funds around the time of this survey. (ACM Trends Report #4.2 showed that these funds were the most commonly received among children’s museums.) Museums that had recently received relief funds may not have made rehiring decisions by the time of the survey. Second, some leaders reported in ACM Leadership Calls that they made decisions about layoffs and furloughs based on whether they anticipated their part-time staff would receive unemployment benefits; in these cases, museums tried to prioritize their full-time staff as they planned how to use relief funding.

Staffing and operations decisions today seem to match historical patterns in museum hiring, and may have lasting negative impacts for children’s museums and the broader museum field. Media reports suggest that museum layoffs and furloughs are most likely to first affect lower paid floor or frontline staff, including visitor services workers and educators. These positions also tend to be filled by

ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

museums' most racially and ethnically diverse professionals. Widescale layoffs of these individuals may affect perceptions of a museum's concern for staff, as well as affect the field's ability to attract talent in the future.

New Roles, Duties, & Services

As the shape of day-to-day business has evolved, most participating children's museums ($n = 80$) reported experimenting with reassigning personnel to new roles and duties by mid-May. As museums reopen throughout the summer, these reassignments are evolving and will be reported on in future reports.

For half of respondents, the majority of these reassignments focused on two connected responsibilities. First, staff reassigned to programming have produced and delivered new learning and experiential content, including videos. Second, reassigned personnel have also focused on creating online content for websites and social media.

The next most common duty for reassigned personnel was operations, though it was far less common than programming and online content. Staff reassigned to operations worked on fundraising, accounting, general administration, and management.

Some children's museums – primarily Medium and Large organizations ($n = 5$ and 13 , respectively) – looked outside of their staff to contract services for their institution and personnel. The most common reason for these services was to obtain legal advice. Other services were related to human resources, as well as physical and mental health services. Museums outside of the US also reported using these contract services.

Communicating with Personnel

Many museums kept lines of communication open with laid off and furloughed staff as well as volunteers. Of the 75 institutions that laid off or furloughed staff, 59 institutions explained the goal of their ongoing communications with personnel. About half of these museums, across all sizes, used communications to provide general museum updates, which focused on the institution's status, leaders' decision-making, reopening plans, and funding status. A third indicated their goal was

to discuss future staffing plans, including updates on when they plan to rehire or revise staffing structures. Roughly a fourth said their goal was to sustain engagement with staff, using check-ins to convey both the museum's interest in their return to work, and the value of personnel to the museum. Three museums, one in each size category, indicated that they sought to provide emotional support to laid off and furloughed staff in their communications. When communicating with volunteers, the most common goals were to continue engagement and provide updates about the museum.

We also asked museums about the communication methods they use and how often; this information adds nuance to the reasons for communication decisions. Figure 2 shows the ways that children's museums communicated with personnel whose work had been substantially altered by mid-May, particularly staff who were laid off or furloughed as well as volunteers.

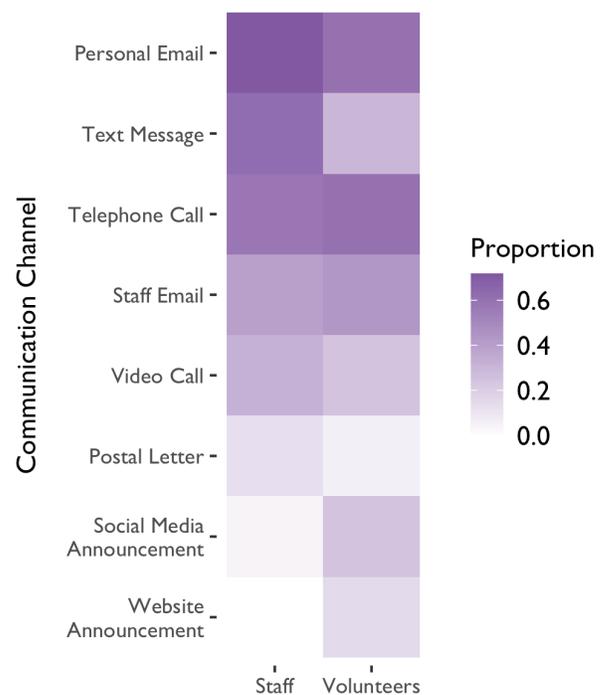


Figure 2. Proportion of communication methods used by museums for furloughed / laid off staff and volunteers.

Note. $n = 65$ museums contacted laid off and furloughed staff. $n = 54$ museums contacted volunteers.

Of the 75 institutions that laid off or furloughed staff, 65 were communicating with those individuals. The most common method of communication, for two-thirds of museums, was to use personal email accounts and about half through text messages. To a lesser extent, they also used telephone and video calls.

Participating museums communicated less with volunteers. Only 54 of the 109 participating museums indicated that they communicated with volunteers at all. Telephone calls and personal emails were used by half of the 54 museums that responded, with the third most popular method being the use of institutional email accounts. At the time of the survey, nine institutions had no contact of any type with personnel whose work had been impacted by the pandemic.

The Takeaway

Decisions about personnel may be among the most important and complex issues that children's museums navigate during the pandemic. The early data from May 2020 show there are opportunities for supporting staff and volunteers in ways that benefit both museums and workers throughout the crisis.

The survey data suggest many museums may be missing a chance to engage their volunteers, a group that makes up the largest portion of personnel at children's museums. There may be tasks that volunteers can do at home, particularly in support of the personnel who have been reassigned to producing programming and online content. Even if volunteers cannot be engaged in the work of the museum right now, regular communications can help reinforce their value to the organization.

By mid-May, most of children's museums' full-time staff were employed, even though some had reduced hours. Part-time staff, however, were much more widely affected

by layoffs and furloughs. There is potential for these changes to undermine museums' efforts to work towards diversity and inclusion in their workforce. As leaders weigh future personnel changes, they should consider how to proactively address and support groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic as part of their efforts to meet the needs of their communities.

These early data suggest that museum leadership should carefully consider how to use workforce communications strategies to lay the foundation for recovery. Supportive messaging with museums' community of staff and volunteers can not only deliver on their mission, but also strengthen equity throughout the pandemic.

About This Research

Data for this report was collected by an online survey distributed by ACM through an email invitation to children's museums worldwide. The survey was open between May 7 and 18, 2020. Overall, 109 US-based children's museums and 6 non-US museums contributed to the dataset. All participating US museums were currently ACM member institutions, representing 36% of membership. Participating museums were roughly representative of all size types.

Figures 1 and 2 show average responses to questions about status of staff, and methods used to communicate with staff and volunteers. Responses were consistent across size categories, unless otherwise noted. For Figure 1, we asked museums about the proportions of staff that had been furloughed, laid off, reduced hours, and kept at their normal hours. Proportions were required to sum to 100%.

A researcher reviewed open-ended responses from the survey and coded themes in an iterative process to summarize data on reassigned duties, roles, and services, as well as goals of communications with cut staff and volunteers. The initial coding process produced a large number of codes, and subsequent coding led to aggregated and more meaningful themes.

References

American Alliance of Museums. (2020). A Snapshot of US Museums' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/07/22/a-snapshot-of-us-museums-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

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