Workforce Development and Job Help in Public Libraries: Website Content Analysis [Research Paper]

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Abstract: Public libraries may offer workforce development websites and websites to help patrons become job-ready. Workforce development covers a wide range of services, including resume building, mock interviews, applying for jobs online, and resources for entrepreneurship as well as more focused assistance for those recently released from prison, immigrant communities, adults with special needs, seniors re-entering the workforce, and other underserved populations. Using an expanded web content analysis, this study investigated the public library systems for the 50 most populous cities to determine if (and how) they are providing these resources.

Keywords: Public Libraries Workforce Development, Public Libraries Employment Assistance, Web Content Analysis.

Introduction

In the past few years, the American economy has been pressure tested by a variety of forces; political and social unrest, a global pandemic, changes in manufacturing and automation, and supply chain disruptions. Even the ways in which people apply for jobs and the ways they carry out their work (remote verses in-person) have changed dramatically. Economists have dubbed the resulting shift and shortage in the workforce the "Great Resignation." The rate of job quitting in the United States has reached highs not seen since the start of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey program in December 2000. While extrapolations using historical quit-rate data for manufacturing suggest that the U.S. economy exhibited even higher quit rates in the 1960s and 1970s, the recent quit rates are too high to be explained solely by labor market tightening (Gittleman, 2022). "The Great Resignation isn't a mad dash away from the office. It's the culmination of a long march toward freedom. Flexibility is more than choosing the place where you work. It's having the freedom to decide your purpose,

your people, and your priorities" (Grant, 2021, para. 1). Whatever the cause, economies across the country have been impacted as labor has fluctuated and diminished.

Even before the events of the past few years, an increasing number of public libraries were creating workforce development departments and positions focused on helping patrons become job-ready. Workforce development covers a wide range of services, including resume building, mock interviews, applying for jobs online, and resources for entrepreneurship as well as more focused assistance for those recently released from prison, immigrant communities, adults with special needs, seniors reentering the workforce, and other underserved populations (Mt. Auburn Associates Inc., 2022). In 2019, the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program funded a new initiative in Measures that Matter-investigation into the important role that libraries play in providing access to the internet, computers, employment services and training (Jaros, 2019). Like that investigation, this analysis looked at the scope of workforce development programming offered by public library systems in the 50 most populous cities in the United States by harvesting data from their websites. The population numbers were taken from the website World Population Review (nd), which aggregates the most recent US census data. The websites were searched *via* Google using the keywords "workforce development" along with the name of the library system in August 2023. The study looked at the types of programming offered and electronic resources offered.

Literature Review

Workforce development in public libraries

Workforce development in libraries has encompassed a variety of services for patrons, including assistance with resume building, online job searching, and access to entrepreneurship resources. Additionally, these departments have provided online and in-person classes focused on increasing technology skills, due to the increased need for labor with higher digital literacy. While some studies have looked at specific case studies of workforce development in public libraries (Measures that Matter, n.d.), most articles tended to focus on specific reasons for its creation and application. While much of this research critiqued specific library policies, deficiencies, and structural inequities in the populations they served, it also emphasized ways in which libraries worked with outside partners to create environments for professional growth. The most common themes included Covid and the ensuing economic downturn, policies that promoted DEI for historically underserved populations, partnerships with community stakeholders that encouraged entrepreneurship, and assistance in building professional skills when searching for work. One important clarification; the term "lower-skilled" in reference to persons in the labor market in this study was not meant to be derogatory. It was simply about their professional skills, like digital knowledge, interviewing experience, resume-building expertise, etc.

A 2018 survey by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development in which 55 public libraries in 35 states responded found that 88 percent of respondents reported that there was a medium to high demand for career services. Eighty-nine percent of these respondents felt that the role of the public library in career services will increase and 75 percent reported providing career services already. "Respondents reported that public libraries are regarded as accessible alternatives to traditional workforce service providers due to their flexibility, accessibility, and openness to all patrons (Holcomb, Dunford, and Idowu, 2019, para. iii).

In a pilot study of 10 libraries of various sizes and in various locations, researchers identified standard services, specialized services, and community hub services in regards to workforce

development and small business development. Standard services, which were found in some form or another in all of the libraries, included things like computer access and collections with staff available to assist. Specialized services included services like occupational and literacy training and designated staff and physical spaces, while community hub services include partners and shared spaces. The pilot study found libraries inconsistently evaluate their workforce programs success and that "one of the more critical services public libraries provide is supporting digital literacy through basic computer access, one-on-one assistance, or specialized workshops" (Mt. Auburn Associates Inc, 2022, para. ix).

Economic downturn and the great resignation

One of the most significant impacts on the American economy in decades was the Covid pandemic. The disruption to the economy left both psychological and economic scars on the global workforce. In the United States, where advances in technology and outsourcing had already negatively impacted certain sectors of the job market, the disjointed response and subsequent "shutdown" left many workers and companies in economic chaos. The emergent new economy looked different, with scores of employees working from home and companies unable to fill positions due to the labor shortage (Mitchell, 2022). This labor shortage, dubbed the Great Resignation, along with supply chain complications, have changed the landscape of the labor market across the country.

One of the best ways an individual could market themselves during an employment search was with a comprehensive, well-written resume. Unfortunately, resume writing was not something historically offered in schools and as a result, they varied in appearance and style. In the last decade, the traditional paper resume has been replaced with a digital format. Workforce development programs have been able to help people format professional resumes and upload them to job sites. In Berra's article about the impact that the pandemic has had on the economy, he referred to his library's "support for the unemployed and underemployed" by adding a "resume review/job-search coaching service" (Berra, 2021, para. 2). In addition to these new services, libraries focused on highlighting the databases already in place, increased Wi-Fi access, and hotspot loaning. While this report does not supply numbers for those using the services, it clearly indicates that these services had a direct impact on students and community users during the pandemic, and it serves as a guide for services that other libraries can also utilize.

Another significant factor that continued to impact lower-skilled workers was the digital divide, or, the gap in digital knowledge and lack of available electronic resources available to many lower-income workers, including the lack of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), like computers, the internet, software, etc. Even though their research was conducted before the pandemic, they found that "The digital divide is not simply a matter of access to ICTs. Even if an individual has access to a computer with a broadband Internet connection, that person still needs to possess the competence to operate the hardware and the necessary software programs" (Taylor, et al 2012, para. 198). Of course, this only addressed the digital component, without taking into account the lack of information literacy, or ability to problem-solve, that these workers might have had. Libraries in the study also served in roles beyond technology provider and acted as teachers of technology and providers of assistance in job-seeking like "access to job databases, civil service exam materials, and resume and online job application assistance" (Taylor, et al 2012, para. 204). In every category, the percentage of libraries providing these services supporting workforce development has increased during 2010-2011.

Post-Covid, the digital divide remained a major factor in hiring and employment. Many public library systems, as well as the municipalities they reside in, had adapted workforce development

programming to deal with the higher-than-usual unemployment and digital needs to get people job-ready. A 2020-2021 survey about digital inclusion during the pandemic by the Connecticut State Library emphasized that "Covid-19 has only put a spotlight on divides that have existed for decades (Real, 2021, para. 285). The study cited by Real also found that 72.9 percent of the public libraries that responded to the survey increased their assistance with employment databases and resources from 22.5 to 32.6 percent. And finally, in her article about the optimization of library resources post-Covid, Jones emphasized that libraries were essential for connecting people to employment, stating "It is essential that libraries collaborate with industry and education to help patrons acquire necessary credentials and certification to make them marketable" (Jones, 2020, para. 955). Libraries worked to assist customers with finding jobs and learning new skills, especially STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) skills, and these collaborations with industry helped to bridge the gap between the needed credentials and certifications to make customers more marketable.

The movement towards diversity, equity, and inclusion

In recent years, the private and public sectors have embraced the idea that diversity in hiring brings stronger candidates and a more robust workforce. In their updated 2017 strategic plan, the American Library Association included Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion as one of their key action areas (ALA, 2022). Workforce development programming in public libraries often focused on the needs of historically underserved communities, including people of color, senior citizens, LGBTQ+ individuals, incarcerated and recently released members of the community, as well as others. These marginalized communities have been traditionally left behind and have had a greater need for employment services.

The impact of automation on the economy had been dubbed "The Fourth Industrial Revolution" by the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2016). This economic shift had already left many marginalized workers, who are often lower-skilled and low-wage, behind. Workforce development departments have offered resources and assistance for people who have decided to start their own businesses. In her article about the role of public libraries and their relationships with equitable communities, Barbakoff (2021, para. 175) discussed connecting library programming to entrepreneurship, or "connecting these creative activities to economic empowerment in an intentional and systematic way". By offering entrepreneurial and small business services as a part of their workforce development programming, public libraries have helped patrons start their own businesses.

The effects of digital exclusion caused by decades of infrastructural neglect and divestment in communities of color have created additional challenges for workforce development librarians. The reality is that even when libraries think they have offered equal services to the community, they may not be, which is why policies centered on equity are so important. In his qualitative study on the effects of digital exclusion in communities of color in California, Pun drew on research about African-American community college students. The experiences of these "digitally denied" students illustrated that they "relied on their public libraries to use technology resources to complete their school assignments but faced barriers" (Pun, 2021, para. 6). His research demonstrated that basic library services are not sufficient and additional programming is needed for those on the other side of the digital divide.

Another group often left behind in access to digital learning has been senior citizens. As many older Americans re-enter the labor force, they have found that their digital knowledge is often lacking, making it difficult for them to obtain jobs in certain sectors. In his research on digital information access for seniors in Alabama public libraries, Lawley observed that "these studies

demonstrate the need for effective educational outreach programs, such as promotional events, advertising, and off-site visitations that promote technology awareness for senior citizens" (Lawley, 2022, para. 6). The movement towards DEI was very successful in identifying and directing resources to groups who had suffered years of marginalization. However, some populations got less attention but still faced stark inequities. In particular, people in rural areas often fell behind when it came to digital inclusion due to a lack of community resources, remote locations, lack of access to transportation, etc. Examining data from the 2012 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey (PLFTAS), found that "rural libraries, on average, have weaker technological infrastructure and can offer fewer support services, such as training classes, than urban and suburban public libraries" (Real, 2014, para. 6). With these limited resources, workforce development through libraries has been harder to deliver but needed.

Materials and Methods

This web content analysis involved studying the content of the 50 most populous cities in the United States for their ownership of 11 specified resources and their offerings of specified services. The first step was to identify the 50 most populous cities in the United States (Table 1).

The population numbers were taken from the website World Population Review, which aggregates the most recent US census data. Once the cities were identified, their corresponding library systems were searched on Google using the city's name and public library. The 50 most populous cities resulted in 54 libraries because New York consisted of three systems, Houston consisted of two systems, and Los Angeles consisted of two systems. Each website was then searched first for a workforce development page. Then it was searched for job and employment resources. Each library was then searched for the 11 resources and the three types of services. Searching took place in August 2023. Information was collected on types of programming and electronic resources. A webometric study was selected for two reasons. First, the Pew Research Center (2024) reports that 96 percent of adults in the United States use the internet, and 79 percent of homes have access to broadband internet service. It makes sense then that people looking for workforce development and employment resources would use the internet and library websites. Second, it was not practical to visit 50 cities to view resources on site. Additionally, interviews were not conducted because the study focused on information accessible to the public from their websites. If information is found-either easily or not so easily-then it provides insight into what potential users can find or not, and whether they follow up their online information seeking with a face-to-face follow-up trip is not the focus of the study.

Table 1: Top 50 Most Populous States in 2023

	City	State	2023 pop. #		City	State	2023 pop. #
1	New York City	NY	8,992,908	26	Las Vegas	NV	659,348
2	Los Angeles	CA	3,930,586	27	Memphis	TN	628,970
3	Chicago	IL	2,761,625	28	Detroit	MI	616,710
4	Houston	TX	2,366,119	29	Baltimore	MD	575,133
5	Phoenix	AZ	1,656,892	30	Milwaukee	WI	571,939
6	Philadelphia	PA	1,627,134	31	Albuquerque	NM	570,172
7	San Antonio	TX	1,466,791	32	Fresno	CA	556,339

8	San Diego	CA	1,410,791	33	Tucson	AZ	549,382
9	Dallas	TX	1,336,347	34	Sacramento	CA	542,481
10	San Jose	CA	1,033,430	35	Mesa	AZ	523,824
11	Austin	TX	1,013,293	36	Kansas City	MO	522,580
12	Jacksonville	FL	987,960	37	Atlanta	GA	522,328
13	Fort Worth	TX	972,228	38	Omaha	NE	509,178
14	Columbus	OH	941,364	39	Colorado Springs	CO	497,720
15	Charlotte	NC	917,527	40	Raleigh	NC	486,796
16	Indianapolis	IN	907,802	41	Long Beach	CA	468,086
17	San Francisco	CA	894,584	42	Virginia Beach	VA	465,914
18	Seattle	WA	775,523	43	Oakland	CA	455,622
19	Denver	CO	750,130	44	Miami	FL	455,075
20	Nashville	TN	715,913	45	Minneapolis	MN	444,168
21	Washington	DC	715,891	46	Bakersfield	CA	420,246
22	Oklahoma City	OK	711,372	47	Tulsa	OK	419,414
23	Boston	MA	693,062	48	Aurora	CO	404,615
24	El Paso	TX	687,722	49	Arlington	TX	402,915
25	Portland	OR	673,122	50	Wichita	KS	402,080

The "Public Libraries' Role in Workforce and Small Business Development" report detailed three types of service-standard, specialized, and community hub. Specialized services include "designated workforce development space and staff, technology workshops, work-readiness workshops, career coaching, digital navigation, support groups, and adult literacy and occupational training and certification" (Mt. Auburn Associates, 2022, para. vii). The report provides information on what 10 libraries are doing, and the following live services were investigated based on the report: resume building, online job searching, and interview preparation for patrons. Since resume building and online job searching are found in both workshops and reference assistance in the report, it was assumed that these are things that any library could be employing as long as they have reference librarians. Interview preparation, while more specific, was also included as a live service based on the report.

Since the electronic resources that support workforce development and career development/employment ranged from zero to over 50 listed depending on the libraries, a method to determine "top" job resources was used. In 2021, the Public Library Association presented a series of webinars focusing on workforce and career services. Although the series provided a wealth of how-to information, there was not a comprehensive list of resources that libraries should have or provide access to (ALA, 2021). It was decided that the resources of the New York Public Library, as the one of the library systems of the largest city, would be the source for the standard. Using "Databases with Career Advice & Job Search Tools Available from Home" (https://www.nypl.org/education/adults/career-employment/virtual/databasests), the following databases/online resources were identified: Brainfuse JobNow, Coursera, Career Cruising, Firsthand Career Insider (Vault), The Chronicle of Higher Education, Learning Express, LinkedIn Learning/Lynda.com, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Data Axle (Reference USA), Vocations and Careers OneFile (Gale), and Career One Stop. Appendix A contains the details of each resource.

The intended result was to illustrate which programming and content were most common among

the libraries studied. The expectation is that other library systems will use this study to build a framework for their workforce development programming or expand existing services or content. This was accomplished by asking these research questions:

- R1. Do the libraries have workforce development pages and/or job and career pages?
- R2. What does the ownership by the libraries of the 11 e-resources look like?
- R3. How were libraries offering assistance with resume building, job searching, interview preparation, and skill classes to patrons?

Assumptions

It was assumed that the information retrieved from each library website was accurate. Additionally, it was assumed that these library systems were following workforce development models and guidelines consistent with those endorsed by the American Library Association and the Public Library Association ("Workforce Development," 2023).

Limitations

The study is limited by the accuracy of the information posted on the websites and whether Google found the current information for each library. It is limited to what was available in the month of August 2023. As the focus was on libraries in populous cities, rural libraries are not included. Additionally, the study is limited by the fact that it does not survey the libraries themselves and does not include use of the libraries resources or buildings.

Results

R1. Do the libraries have workforce development pages and/or job and career pages?

The top 50 cities ranged in population from almost 9 million residents down to just over 400,000 and covered 27 states as well as the District of Columbia. Out of 54 libraries in these cities, almost half had workforce development websites and all but three had job or career websites. All of the libraries with a workforce development website also had information on a job or career website. The three cities without a workforce or job employment or career help website were Miami, Baltimore, and Houston (Harris County Public Library). However, even without a designated website, all three libraries' websites still provided access to some of the electronic resources.

R2. What does the ownership by the libraries of the 11 e-resources look like?

As seen in Figure 1, five of the resources were available at half of the libraries: LinkedIn Learning/Lynda.com, The Occupational Outlook Handbook, Learning Express, Data Axle (Reference USA), and the Chronicle of Higher Education. The most owned or linked to resource was LinkedIn Learning or Lynda.com. Forty-six of the 54 libraries (or 85.1%) provided this resource. LinkedIn Learning provides by subscription on-demand access to over 20,000 online courses viewable on computers or mobile devices. The second most popular resource owned by 45 or 83.3 percent is the free Occupational Outlook Handbook, a government resource for career guidance featuring information on what is expected in a particular job, qualifications, salary, outlook, and more. The Occupational Outlook Handbook is the only freely available resource on the list making it odd that nine libraries did not link to it. Learning Express is provided by 38 (70.4%) of the libraries and provides a variety of tutorials, tests, eBooks, and more through

Ebsco. Data Axle (Reference USA), owned by 30 of the 54 libraries, provides consumer business information. The Chronicle of Higher Education has a more singular focus on jobs, advice, and careers in academia and is made available by half of the libraries.
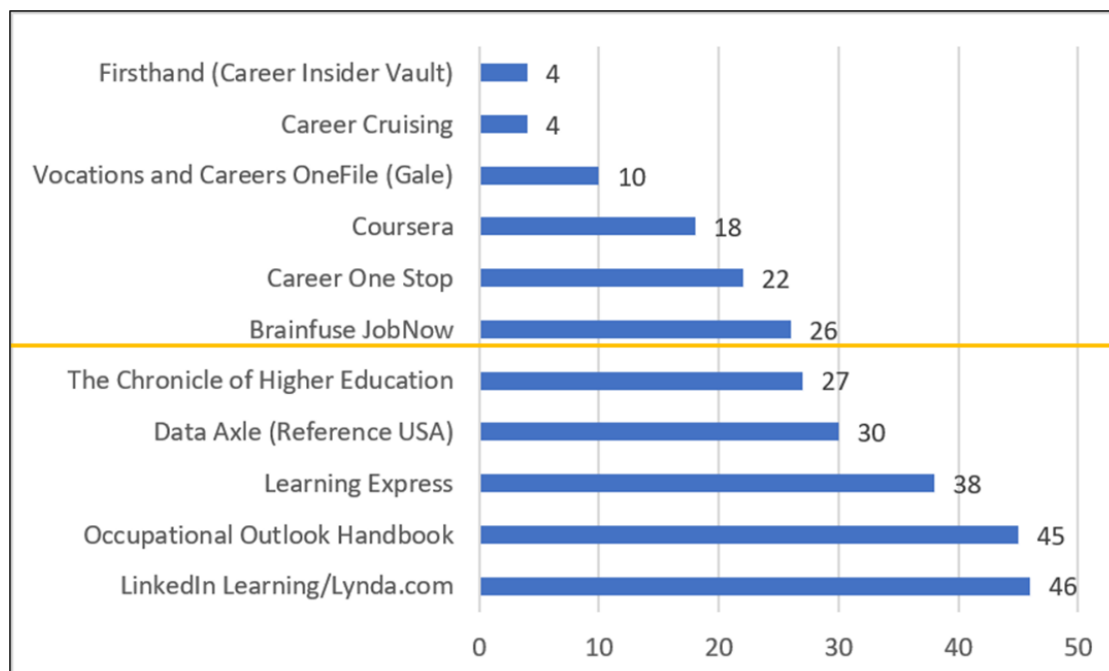

Figure-1: Ownership of the 11 resources (n=54 libraries).

All of the libraries owned at least one of the e-resources. The average ownership was five with a range of 10. Figure 2 shows the number of libraries with the number of e-resources. Twelve libraries owned 5 of the resources, but their ownership varied. When looking at the average ownership subgroup, one resource was owned by all 12 libraires. The Occupational Outlook Handbook, the one completely free resource on the list. LinkedIn Learning was owned by 11 libraries in this subgroup.
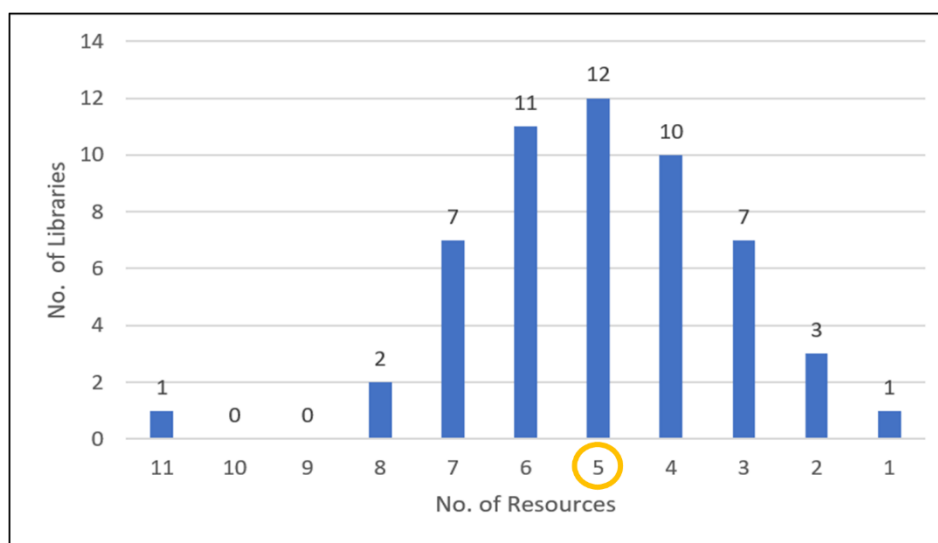

Figure-2: Number of resources owned by number of libraries.

After New York Public Library with the ownership of 11, Brooklyn Public Library and Los

Angeles Public Library were the next highest providers of the resources with eight out of the 11. Baltimore, which did not have a workforce development website or job employment website, only had one resource. LinkedIn Learning. Miami and Harris County Public Library in Houston, both without workforce or job employment websites, were also low providers of e-resources. Miami offered four and Harris County offered two. Table 3 presents the 33 libraries with five or more of the e-resources available.

Table-3: Libraries with 5 or more of the e-resources.

New York (NYPL)
New York (BPL)
Los Angeles (LAPL)
San Diego
Columbus
San Francisco
Denver
Fresno (County)
Kansas City
Tulsa
Houston (HPL)
Philadelphia
Los Angeles (LACPL)
San Antonio
Dallas
Boston
Tucson (Pima County)
Colorado Springs
Long Beach
Minneapolis (Hennepin County)
Bakersfield (Kern County)
New York (QPL)
Fort Worth
Charlotte
Indianapolis
Seattle
Portland (Multnomah County)
Las Vegas
Memphis
Milwaukee
Alburquerque
Virginia Beach
Wichita

R3. How were libraries offering assistance with resume building, job searching, interview preparation, and skill classes to patrons?

This information was difficult to assess. Some of the e-resources in R2. Brainfuse JobNow, Coursera, Career Cruising, Firsthand Career Insider (Vault), Learning Express, LinkedIn Learning/Lynda.com, Vocations and Careers OneFile (Gale), and Career One Stop, offer training, resume help, job searching, and interview help through videos and remote assistance. They are not always, however, categorized in that way on the websites. There were four libraries that were identified as not offering help on resume building, job searching, and interview skills:

Jacksonville, Baltimore, Long Beach, and Oakland. Oakland offers access to three resources that do in fact cover these things, but they are not highlighted in a manner that patrons would easily be able to know it was available. Long Beach offers access to four, and Jacksonville offers access to two. Only Baltimore appears to truly offer nothing in this category through their library. Figure 3 details what is offered online and face-to-face or not found in each category. Overall, about half (49.5%) of the offerings were offered face-to-face, 32.4 percent were offered online or virtual, and 18.1 percent were not found.

Discussion

The results of this analysis indicated that almost half of the libraries in this study, had workforce development websites and almost all of them had employment websites. Even those without official websites, still offered resources although at a much smaller scale with only one to four resources being available. In the case of interview help, resume help, and job searching help, there were more libraries that did not have easily identifiable access to these services on their websites. Some libraries are relying on virtual services to fill these needs, when really any librarian at a reference desk could be trained to assist in job searching and resume assistance. Baltimore County Public Library had one resource on the list, no identifiable website on the topic, and offered no virtual or face-to-face service for career seeking. A visit to the Baltimore County's Career Center, which offers three locations for workforce development, education programs, and training programs, does not appear to offer very many virtual services and does not list access to the 11 selected resources in this study. In a county with a current unemployment rate higher than the national average, it seems as if their public library may have missed an opportunity, but without insight into their budgets or reasons for not having the online resources, it would be unwise to lay blame. Jacksonville also scored low in the study with none of the services being offered and only four of the e-resources being found, but the population has access to three workforce development sites with some virtual services and resources, although not the ones looked at by this study. For libraries with few services and resources available on their websites, they may be relying on outside resources provided by city, county, or state governments, and future studies should look into this. Another issue could be that the libraries website designs do not lend themselves to easily finding the information on career assistance or workforce development. If the population needing workforce assistance has low technology skills, then burying information on the website may be detrimental. This study should be followed up by a survey of librarians at the 54 libraries to see if information was missed, mislabeled, or really is not available. An additional study into what training has been provided or is available for information professionals at these locations would also be beneficial.

The Mt. Auburn Associates report broke workforce/career services into three broad categories: standard services, specialized services, and community services. They are defined as the following:

- **Standard services:** Activities include general computer use, job data bank search, access to related collection material and specialized online programs, and staff assistance to help access resources (sic).
- **Specialized services:** These services include designated workforce development space and staff, technology workshops, work-readiness workshops, career coaching, digital navigation, support groups, and adult literacy and occupational training and certification.
- **Community hub services:** Libraries, in partnership with other workforce development providers, provide space for public workforce entities such as one-stop centers, partner with adult education providers, host job fairs, and partner with other workforce service providers.

- Libraries in this study had varying degrees of standard services with many offering specialized services. Their inclusion of community hub services fell outside of the scope of the study; however, the libraries with actual workforce development websites may be good candidates for also providing community hub services. In the 10 case study libraries, the study found that the majority of the workforce development work was done by general reference librarians, sometimes in conjunction with special training, and happened through general library funding (Mt. Auburn Associates, Inc., 2022). Additionally, the libraries play a pivotal role in improving technology access and literacy and increasing community well-being.

What libraries provide access to varied from a small handful of electronic resources to upwards of 50, but a list of best resources and best free resources was not found in the literature. A study of what libraries could and should provide as a minimum for workforce and career assistance would benefit libraries trying to decide what to fund and what to include. Holcomb, Dunford, and Idowu reported that 75 percent of their respondents in 38 states indicated that libraries in their states were offering some type of career services (2019). Similarly, this current study found that overall, 82 percent of the libraries offered some kind of career services when looking at virtual help and face-to-face help, 72 percent for interviewing, resume assistance was at 83 percent, job searching was at 85 percent and 87 percent for skill classes. An important aspect of the study by Holcomb, Dunford, and Idowu was that survey respondents and interviewees highlighted that libraries provide essential services and strengthen communities with these used and needed services, but that awareness of public libraries providing assistance in job-seeking is lacking (2019). Libraries without websites or libraries without links to resources on their websites can be contributing to that problem. A study investigating best practices would also benefit public libraries and a study that included where and how resources are grouped and identified would be beneficial to libraries.

Barbakoff described how libraries could "help their communities develop economic resilience and equity" (Barbakoff, 2021, para. 167). Libraries are positioned to help patrons "transition to this new economy" (Taylor, et al 2012).

Conclusion

Both made it clear that libraries must not only be at the forefront of helping underserved patrons with job readiness, but they also had a duty to create inviting spaces that make them feel welcome. It appears that there is a lot of potential for the expansion of existing services as well as the implementation of new services at public libraries not currently offering workforce development.

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