



# Exploring Autonomy in Academic Librarianship: Strategies from Early Career Librarians

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# Overview



01

**Understanding  
Autonomy**

02

**Themed Discussion**

03

**Strategies for  
Growth**

04

**Your Stories +  
Q & A**

# Learning Objectives

- 01** **Validate** your experiences – You are not alone
- 02** **Identify** how hybrid work reshapes autonomy
- 03** **Develop** strategies to thrive in self -directed roles





01

# Understanding Autonomy





# What is Autonomy in Academic Librarianship?



## High Autonomy


- Setting your own priorities and workflows
- Determining how and when work gets done
- Initiating projects and partnerships
- Flexible schedules and remote work options
- Self-directed professional development

## Different from

- Being left unsupported or directionless
- Isolation or lack of mentorship
- Unclear expectations or job responsibilities

*"Autonomy is not the same as being on your own."*



A stylized illustration of a library. At the top, a dark red shelf holds a row of colorful books in shades of brown, blue, purple, orange, red, green, and dark red. A dark red ladder with black rungs leans against the shelf. To the right of the ladder, a red book is open and lying flat. On the left side of the image, a large, pale yellow sun is partially visible. The background is a light cream color, framed by dark red borders at the top and bottom.

# The Research on Autonomy & Well - Being

# What the Research Tells Us



## Autonomy as a Positive

- Linked to higher job satisfaction
- Associated with increased motivation and creativity
- Reduces burnout when paired with support

“The more autonomy an employee has, the more satisfied he or she will be with his or her job.” - Karim (2008, p. 77)



Karim, N. H. A. (2008). Investigating the correlates and predictors of job satisfaction among Malaysian academic librarians. *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*, 13(2), 69–88.



# What the Research Tells Us



## Autonomy as a Challenge

- Can increase stress for early career professionals
- Requires self -management skills not always taught in LIS programs
- Boundary -setting becomes individual responsibility



# Autonomy & Self-Determination Theory



Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

Autonomy is one of three basic psychological needs:

- **Autonomy** : Freedom to choose and direct one's work
- **Competence** : Feeling capable and effective
- **Relatedness** : Connection and belonging at work

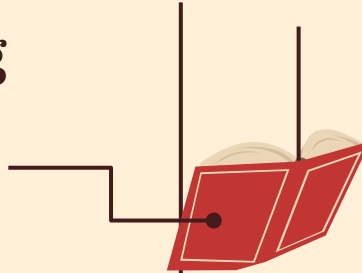
When these needs are met → higher motivation, creativity, and well-being.



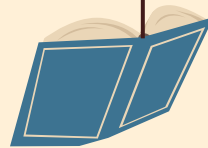
# Self-Reflection... Your Experience

How would you describe your current feelings about your autonomy?

**A) Empowering**  
I love the independence



**B) Comfortable**  
I've adjusted well



**C) Uncomfortable**  
Still finding my footing



**D) Overwhelming**  
I often feel lost



**E) Mixed**  
It depends on the day/project



# Research Spotlight: The Academic Library as Workplace





## What the Data Says (Albro & McElfresh, 2024)

### Using a 5-Point Likert Scale

Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)



#### Strengths in Academic Libraries

- Job autonomy (M = 4.0)
- Task completion clarity (M = 4.0)
- Meaning of work (M = 3.7)

#### Areas for Growth

- Perceived investment in employee development (M = 3.0)
- Social support from supervisors (M = 2.7)
- Engagement & role clarity (M = 2.9)



Source: Albro, M., & McElfresh, J. (2024). Academic library as workplace: Using the knowledge intensive work environment survey target (KIWEST) to explore challenges faced by knowledge workers. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 9(1), 85-98. <https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/15/8>

# New Academic Librarians and Autonomy

## Oud, 2008

- Unexpected elements of academic librarian roles:
  - Less collaborative work
  - "Flexibility and independence" (autonomy!)
  - Suddenly being considered an "expert"
- Difficulty learning how to effectively manage time

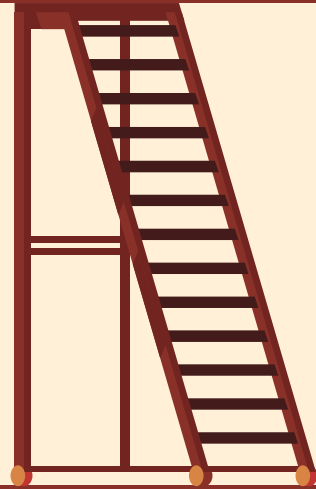


## Faulkner, 2015 (Guest Editorial)

- Felt left to her own devices as a new librarian
- Wanted more guidance and direction
- Real issue: imposter syndrome



# 02 Themed Discussion



# The Transition: Student to Professional



## In Library School

- Structured syllabi, deadlines
- Clear assignments with rubrics
- Regular feedback from instructors
- Cohort of peers on same timeline
- Defined semester boundaries



## In Your First Role

- Self-created goals & timelines
- Ambiguous parameters
- Feedback may be infrequent
- Colleagues across career stages
- Work is ongoing, no clear "end"



# Post-Covid Hybrid Work: Opportunities

01

## Flexibility

Changes in when/where  
work happens

02

## Time

Reduced commute or travel  
between locations

03

## Focus

Fewer office interruptions  
during the workday

04

## Connection

Geographic barriers  
reduced for collaboration



# Post-Covid Hybrid Work: Challenges

## 01 Boundaries

Blurring effect between work and home

## 02 New culture

“Always on” culture and expectations

## 03 Formality

Reduced informal mentorship and learning

## 04 Isolation

Lower sense of group belonging; disconnection

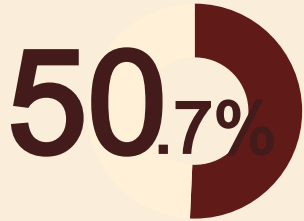
## 05 Routine

Self-management of schedule and productivity



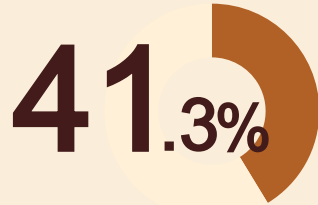
# Flexible Work in Academic Libraries

Hybrid work is no longer a temporary perk - it is becoming the dominant workplace model.

A large infographic showing the percentage 50.7%. The number is in a dark brown font, and a semi-circle to its right is filled with the same color, representing the percentage value.

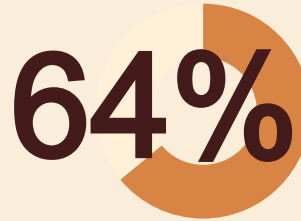
50.7%

of posted positions  
were hybrid  
(20%+ offsite eligible)

A large infographic showing the percentage 41.3%. The number is in a dark brown font, and a semi-circle to its right is filled with a medium brown color, representing the percentage value.

41.3%

of institutions report  
all or some librarians  
are hybrid/remote eligible

A large infographic showing the percentage 64%. The number is in a dark brown font, and a semi-circle to its right is filled with an orange-brown color, representing the percentage value.

64%

of institutions adopted  
flexible work arrangements  
during or after March 2020

## KEY TAKEAWAY

50.7%

Hybrid work  
has become  
the majority  
model in job  
postings,  
signaling a  
lasting  
structural shift  
in workplace  
autonomy.

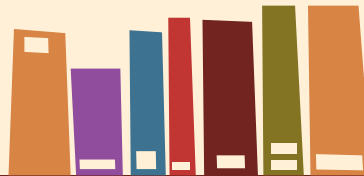
# Imposter Syndrome: Common Thoughts

*“Everyone else seems to know what they’re doing...”*



*“Am I spending my time on the right things?”*

*“Should I be more productive?”*



*“What if they realize I don’t belong here?”*

# Why Autonomy Amplifies Imposter Syndrome





**Imposter syndrome  
thrives in ambiguity.**





03

# Strategies for Growth



# #1: Build a community of support

## Professional communities

Join organizations, reading groups, new faculty/staff programs.

## Mentorship

Identify mentors and schedule check-ins.



## Regular supervisor meetings

Come with questions, share goals, clarify expectations.

Having autonomy does not mean operating completely solo.

# #2: Establish Boundaries & Routines



## Temporal

Use your calendar for everything, not only meetings.

### Example Routines:



## Spatial

Establish a workspace (for remote work).

- "No-meeting Fridays" for deep work
- Daily 15-minute planning session
- Monthly goal review and adjustment
- Weekly "wins" log to combat imposter syndrome



## Mental

Respect your time and limits.

# #3: Track Your Work & Celebrate Wins

Why?	How?	Celebrate!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Combats imposter syndrome by showing progress</li><li>• Provides evidence for annual reviews and promotion</li><li>• Helps identify patterns in how you spend time</li><li>• Creates record of growth and development</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Weekly “done” list (not just to-do list)</li><li>• Monthly accomplishments log</li><li>• Save positive feedback in a folder</li><li>• Annual reflection document</li><li>• Teaching/research/service portfolio</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Share accomplishments with mentors or peers</li><li>• Acknowledge small victories, not just big ones</li><li>• Build celebration into your routine (end-of-week reflection)</li></ul>

# Your Turn - Discussion & Sharing

- What surprised you most about your first autonomous role?
- What's one thing you wish you'd known earlier?
- What support would be most helpful for you right now?
- Which takeaways from today do you see yourself applying in your work?



# Key Takeaways



**Be patient**



**You're not alone**



**Hybrid work brings  
its own challenges**



**Seek structure  
and support**



**Experiment  
and reflect**



**Community  
matters**

# Stay Connected. Stay Supported.

**MiALA Interest Group  
(IG) for Early Career  
Librarians**



**Helpful  
Resources:**



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# Thank you!

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