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Current Landscape of Work Modes and Tools in Higher Education in the Research Development Field

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Abstract

We conducted an online survey of National Organization of Research Development Professionals (NORDP) members in the higher education research enterprise to identify trends in work modes and expand insights into how the current workforce is shaping the profession. We find: (1) Hybrid work has emerged as a dominant work mode and likely is here to stay; (2) Flexibility, communication, and expectations around RD work is critical for successful teamwork as RD professionals need to connect with leadership and investigators and meet their varying expectations; (3) Remote workers have the highest rated rates of personal productivity and personal well-being; (4) In-person workers perceived their work mode as the most permanent. Remote workers are unlikely to consider fully in-person roles in future; and (5) While institutions have done well in terms of providing basic technology support (laptop, monitors), they have neglected to provide resources for their remote workers (e.g., coverage for internet, phone and office supplies). With this first of its kind study in the RD field, our goals are to share the potential of work modes and empower our colleagues to either leverage these results into their institutions or advance the research by expanding the survey.

Introduction

In March 2020, the world was hit with a global pandemic and many academic institutions sent their faculty, staff and students home to work, study or teach remotely (Sahu, 2020). The work life we had all known ceased to exist and changed overnight. Regardless of their academic classification or ranking as academic institutions, colleges and universities across the US shifted their non-essential workforce to work remotely, creating lasting effects on students, teachers, and support staff (Sahu, 2020; Bhatnagar et al., 2022; Külekçi Akyavuz et al., 2023; Perkins et al., 2022; Takona, 2023). The 2021/22 academic year represented a return to pre-COVID in-person educational status for most colleges and universities and created opportunities for institutions to consider a range of in-person, hybrid, or remote options for employees (Marcus, 2023), representing a new phase where working modalities were no longer driven by a public health crisis. In response, college and universities across the US adopted work modality policies that reflected their individual institutional circumstances, providing a unique opportunity to examine the transition to remote, hybrid or in-person work modes across a range of factors, and offering insights into work mode trends, how work modes are perceived, and how work modes are shaping higher education.

In July 2021, the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) conducted a survey of their members focused on remote work (Madnick et al., 2021). While responses varied by geographic region and institutional type and setting, the results showed that most research administrators (over 75%) were working remotely. Further, survey respondents reported overwhelmingly positive outcomes of remote work, reporting elevated levels of employee satisfaction. NCURA conducted a follow-up survey in January 2022 (Madnick et al., 2022). with similar trends reported: over 80% of private institution respondents, and 71% of public institution respondents, were working remotely. Moreover, 48% of respondents indicated their institution intends to permanently allow remote and/or flexible work.

Since NCURA members represent a wide range of research administration positions (e.g., pre-award, post-award, research compliance), the 2021 survey represented a terrific, albeit broad, understanding of workforce trends within positions supporting academic research. To refine this understanding, we focused on a related profession, research development (RD), that is represented within NCURA, but is more narrowly defined and benefits from its own professional organization, the National Organization of Research Development Professionals (NORDP).

NORDP includes more than 1,000 members representing institutions across the country grouped within seven geographic regions. As a growing and distinct need within the research enterprise in higher education, RD positions span research intensive (R1) to predominantly undergraduate or minority serving institutions such as HBCUs/HSIs. While both research administrators and RD professionals have “faculty-facing” roles, they tend to engage in different ways, with the former providing shorter-term, operational support (e.g., developing and submitting proposals, negotiating contracts, ensuring compliance, and managing budgets), and the latter providing longer-term, less defined support (e.g., developing strategies, identifying funding opportunities, building teams, and improving the competitiveness of proposals). With these complimentary approaches in mind, the advisory committee representing NORDP Region 1: Northeast (NORDP-NE) designed and conducted a survey of NORDP members, informed by the NCURA survey, but designed to understand changing work modes and perceptions within the RD field.

Moreover, the results from an RD survey will be of broad interest to the wider NORDP community and other faculty-facing staff positions in higher education. We believe these results will be useful for RD leadership when making hiring decisions, shaping their teams, and justifying competitive hires related to work mode to their institutional leadership.

Method

Survey design was based on the model devised by the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) 2021 remote work survey and distributed using Qualtrics. IRB exemption was granted from the Human Subjects Protection Program at Northeastern University on March 1, 2023. The survey was open from March 2, 2023, to August 18, 2023. It was available for NORDP members to complete. Survey responses were solicited through email from HM on all available NORDP regional listservs. KH is the PI of record on the IRB exemption approval.

Data analysis: In-person, hybrid, and remote work mode categories were confirmed by the follow up question asking the respondent to define their work mode choice. “Other” responses were read and reclassified based on our parameters assigned to each work mode. We collected a total of 9 “other” responses across all three work modes definitions. Of these, 6 responses were consistent with our parameters for their work mode selection, and 3 responses were reclassified: 1 in-person and 1 remote response each were reclassified as hybrid, and 1 hybrid was reclassified as in-person.

For questions comparing a question against current work mode, “Other” responses were read and reclassified if the answer fit in with a selected response. If the response did not fit within the bounds allowed for selection, the “other” response was excluded from that analysis. For questions directly graphed without secondary analysis against work mode, the “Other” category was graphed as selected without further analysis (expanded answers for “Other” categories are available in the full dataset). For comparison questions, if a respondent did not answer a question analyzed, their other response wasn’t included in the data set (for example, a respondent answered they were remote, but did not answer the question asking their perspective on their work permanency).

Questions and Results

In total we had 197 survey respondents between March and August of 2023. Respondents provided categorical demographic information about their NORDP region, position, and institution. The results of these questions are in Figure 1 and Supplemental Figure 1 (see Appendix). The survey attracted responses from all regions in line with their representation in NORDP (see Figure 1A). For position descriptions, most respondents are at a manager or staff level (1B), are salaried staff (1C), and reside in a central office (1D). Institutions were mostly public (1E), in urban/metro settings (1F), R1 Carnegie classification (1G), and did not have HSI, MSI, or PUI status (1H).

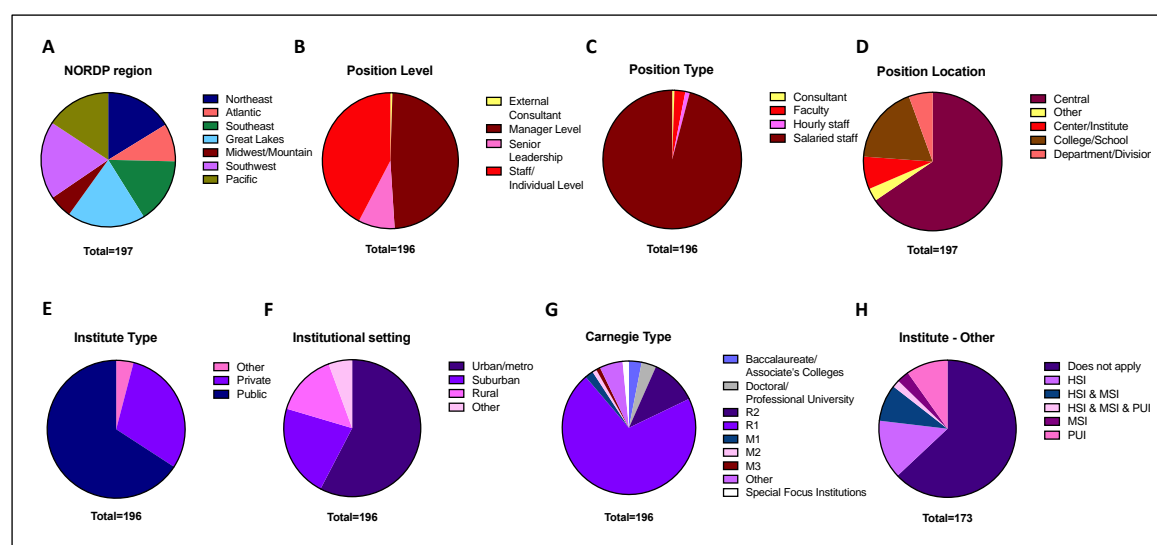


Figure 1. Work Mode Survey Collected Demographics. (A) NORDP Region; (B) Position Level; (C) Position Type, (D) Position Location, (E) Institute Type, (F) Institutional Setting, (G) Carnegie Type, (H) Other Institute Designations. Total respondents shown below each graph.

Respondents then selected their current work mode, with options for fully in-person (most days I am physically located on campus), hybrid (most weeks I spend some days working on campus and some days working off campus), or fully remote (most days I am off-campus). Figure 2A shows that the current dominant mode of work across all respondents is hybrid, followed by fully remote, with the minority of respondents working fully in-person. Additionally, respondents defined “fully in-person,” “hybrid,” or “fully remote” based on their answer to the previous question. As shown in Figure 2B, most in-person respondents are in-person by choice (“prefer to be on site every day”). Most hybrid work mode workers are required to be on-site 3-4 days a week (2C). For fully remote respondents, most (>85%) still occasionally travel on site (2D).

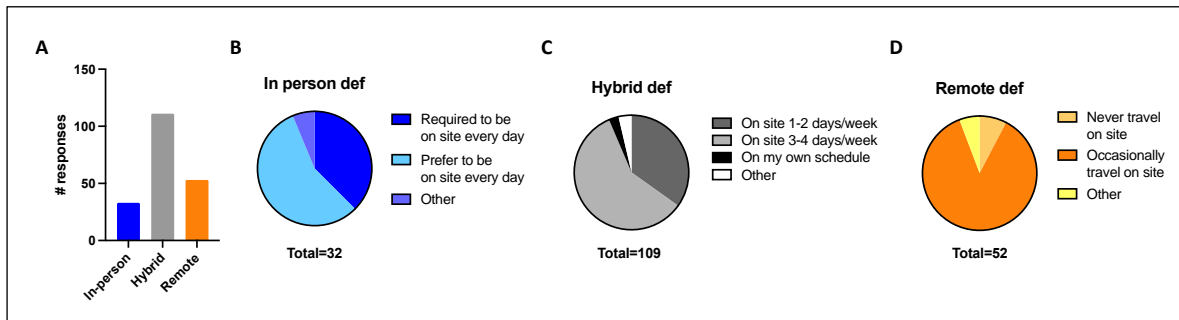


Figure 2. Work Mode Definitions. (A) Responses for in-person (blue, n = 33), hybrid (gray, n = 111), and remote (orange, n = 53) work modes. (B) In-person definition; (C) Hybrid definition; (D) Remote definition. Total respondents shown below each graph for (B-D).

To gain a better understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic effect on research development work mode, we inquired about respondents work mode options “before COVID” and “now,” with selection options of “in-person,” “hybrid,” “fully remote (from local area),” “fully remote (from outside a commuting distance),” and “other.” Respondents could select more than one option. The before COVID question also included a “not applicable” option, which no one selected. Results are shown in Figure 3A, with respondents reporting substantially more hybrid and remote work opportunities now compared to the in-person mode that dominated before COVID. In a separate question, we also asked respondents, “Roughly how far from your institution are you if you are working a hybrid or fully remote schedule?” Figure 3B shows that even with the rise in hybrid and remote work opportunities, most respondents live within one hour drive or transit from their institution.

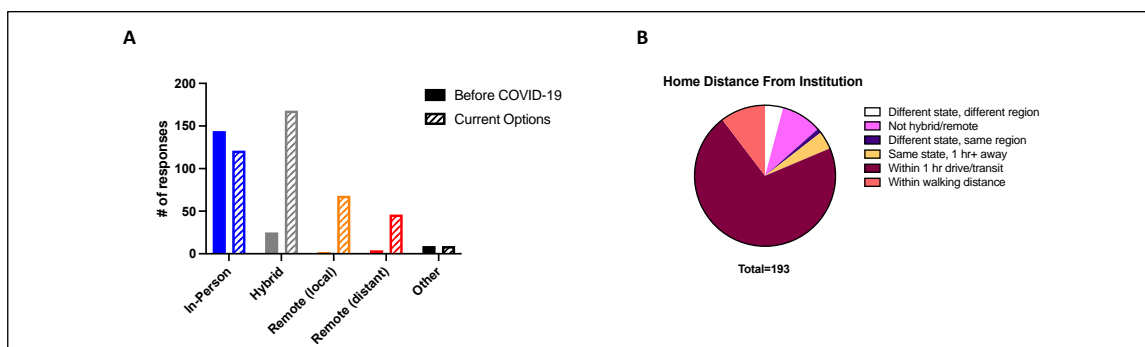


Figure 3. The Effect of Work Mode Trends from COVID-19. (A) Respondent work mode options before COVID-19 (solid bars) and current options (slashed bars). Y-axis shows number of responses. (B) Respondents home distance from their institution (n = 193).

We next compared a series of questions against the work mode selected by the respondent. When looking at work modes by NORDP region (Figure 4A), we found that the Midwest/Mountain region had the largest percentage of in-person workers, while the Pacific region had the larger percentage of remote workers. Interestingly, there was a clear trend in work mode by institutional setting (Figure 4B), where remote workers are more likely to work for institutions in urban settings and in-person workers are more likely to work for institutions in rural settings. We did parse our data for NORDP regions further by institutional setting to see if that explained the regional differences observed, but they did not (e.g., the Midwest/Mountain region respondents did not have a larger percentage of rural institutional settings, data not shown). Lastly, we examined work mode by when the respondent was hired into their position (see Figure 4C). Regardless of hiring in relation to various points in the COVID-19 pandemic, work mode was distributed evenly, inferring that seniority is not a strong factor in work mode.

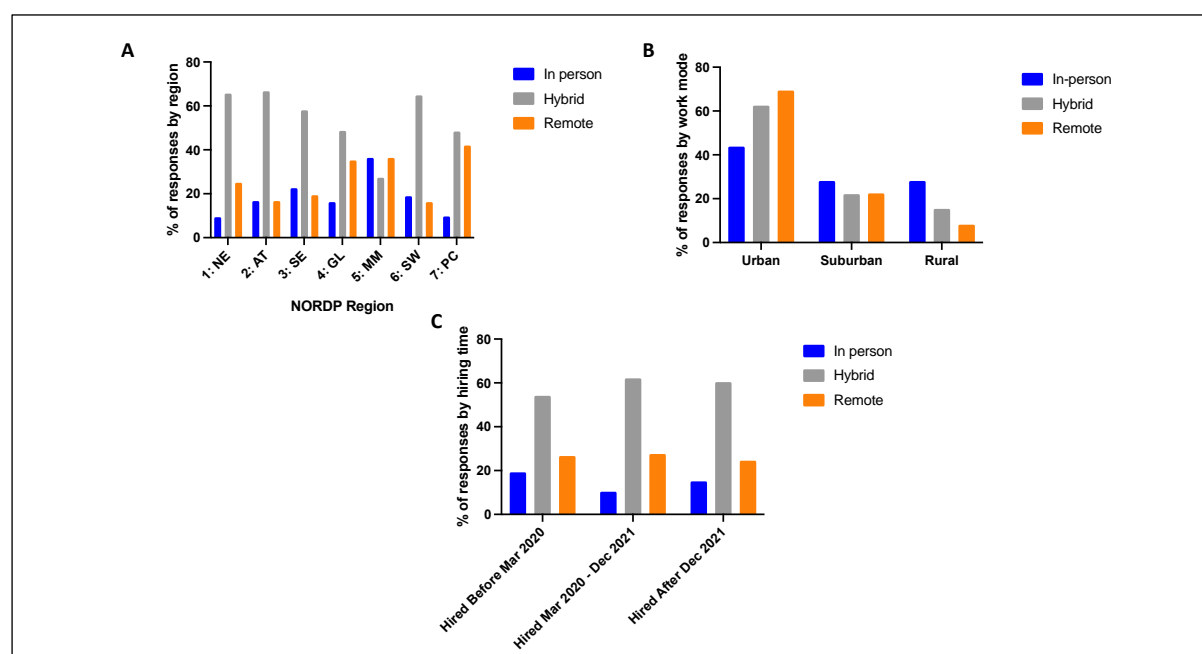


Figure 4. Collected Demographics by Work Mode. (A) Work mode by NORDP Region. Y-axis shows percent of responses by region. NE: Northeast (n = 32); AT: Atlantic (n = 18); SE: Southeast (n = 31); GL: Great Lakes (n = 37); MM: Midwest/Mountain (n = 11); SW: Southwest (n = 37); PC: Pacific (n = 31). (B) Work mode by institutional setting. Y-axis shows percent of responses by work mode. In-person (n = 32); hybrid (n = 104); remote (n = 49). (C) Work mode by hiring time frame. Y-axis shows percent of responses by hiring time. Before March 2020 (n = 109); March 2020 - December 2021 (n = 29); after December 2021 (n = 53).

To understand the future outlook of work modes in research development, we asked respondents a series of forward-looking questions (see Figure 5). Most respondents, regardless of work mode, view their work arrangement as permanent or somewhat permanent (5A). When asked if they would change their job for one with more flexibility, 35% said *yes*, 40% said *maybe*, and only 25% said *no* (5B). The likelihood of a respondent taking a fully in-person role in the future was well correlated with the respondent’s current work mode (5C). We also asked about visibility when working remotely (5D), which showed variability with trends for remote respondents feeling more visible and in-person respondents feeling less visible when working remotely.



Figure 5. Future Job Expectations by Work Mode. (A) Degree of perceived permanency of work arrangement by work mode. Y-axis shows percent of responses by work mode. In-person (n = 32); hybrid (n = 109); remote (n = 52); (B) Likelihood of job change for flexibility (n = 184). (C) Likelihood of fully in-person future role. Y-axis shows rating scale (1 = not likely, 10 = very likely). Lines show mean and S.D. In-person (n = 32); hybrid (n = 104); remote (n = 47). (D) Remote work visibility by work mode. Y-axis shows responses by work mode. In-person (n = 20); hybrid (n = 97); remote (n = 50).

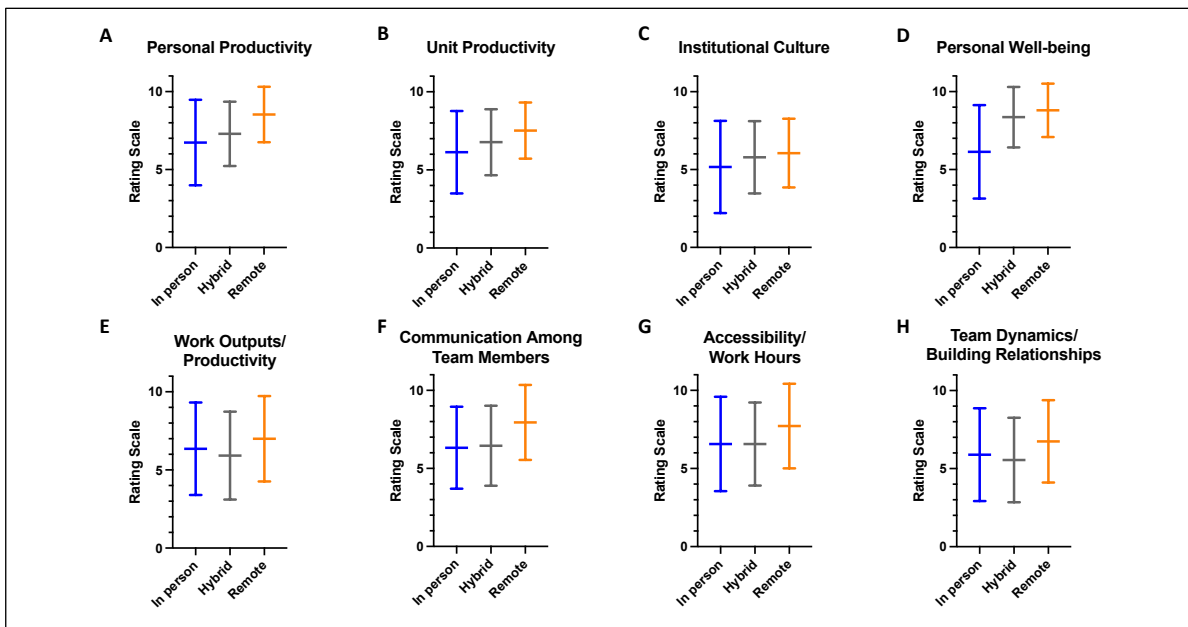


Figure 6. Impact of Productivity and Discussion of Expectations by Work Mode. (A-D) Impact of productivity. Rating scale: 1 = negative impact; 10 = positive impact. In-person (n = 30); hybrid (n = 102); remote (n = 51). (E-H) Extent of discussion around expectations. Rating scale: 1 = no discussion, no/unclear expectations; 10 = lots of discussion and clear expectations. In-person (n = 28); hybrid (n = 98); remote (n = 51). Lines show mean and S.D.

To better understand the impact of work mode on productivity and job expectations, the respondents rated a series of categories (see Figure 6), where a rating of 10 had the highest impact (A-D) or most discussion of expectations (E-H). Trends show remote respondents scoring categories higher for personal productivity, unit productivity, and personal well-being, with no effect on institutional culture (6A-D). Likewise, remote respondents said they had more discussion of expectations around communication amongst team members and accessibility/work hours, with slightly more discussion for work outputs/productivity and team dynamics/building relationships (6E-H).

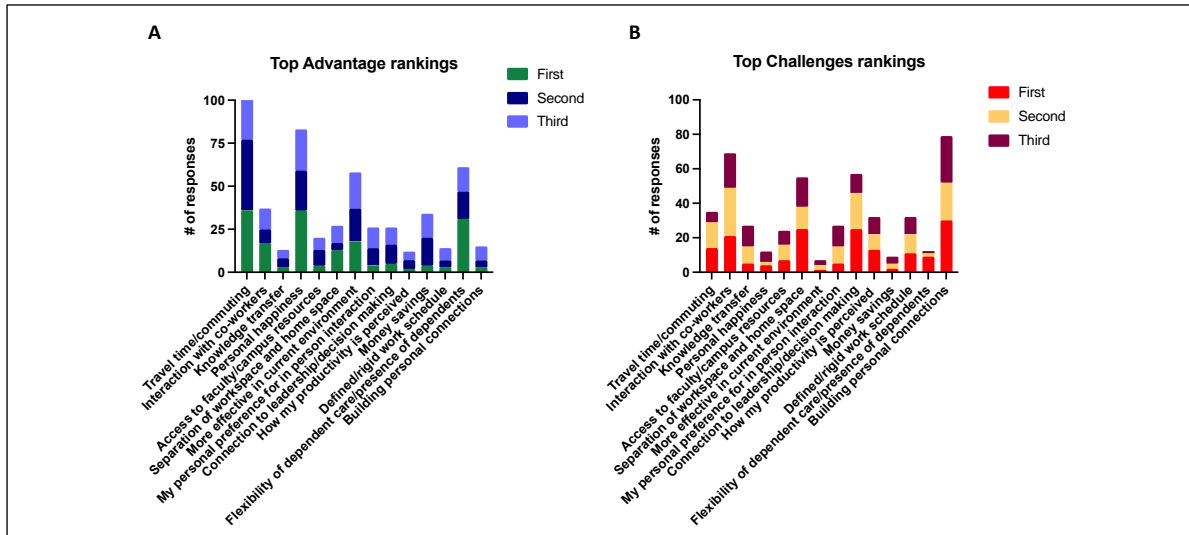


Figure 7. Top Advantage and Challenge Rankings to Workplace Modes. (A) Top three advantage rankings. (B) Top three challenge rankings. Y-axis shows number of responses.

Respondents also ranked their top advantages and challenges to workplace mode. We show the top three response selections in each category in Figure 7. The overall top advantages to workplace mode were travel time/community, personal happiness, more effective in the current environment, and flexibility of dependent care/presence of dependents (7A). The overall top challenges to workplace mode were building personal connections, interaction with co-workers, separation of workspace and home space, and connection to leadership/decision making (7B).

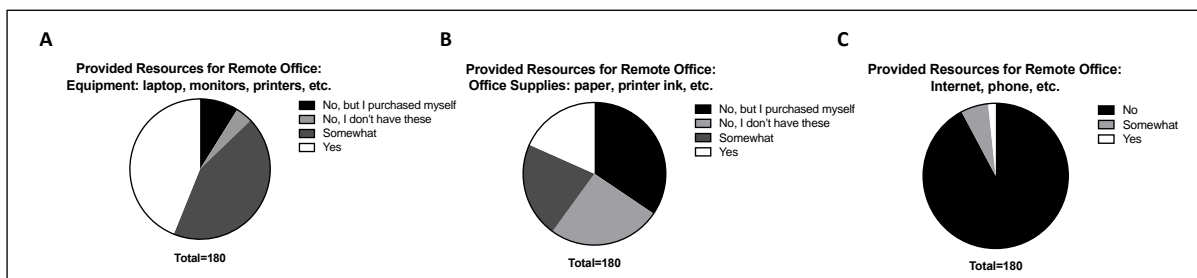


Figure 8. Provided Resources for Remote Work. (A) Equipment; (B) Office Supplies; (C) Internet/phone. Total responses shown below each graph.

Finally, respondents provided an insight into resources and preferred communication platforms. In Figure 8, respondents shared what resources are provided for their remote office: equipment (laptop, monitors, printers)

(8A); office supplies (paper, printer ink) (8B); and internet/phone (8C). Most respondents (87%) are offered at least some equipment (“yes” or “somewhat”), whereas only 40% are offered office supplies, and less than 8% offered internet/phone coverage. For communication platforms (see Figure 9), respondents find email, Zoom, and MS Teams as something helpful they use, whereas Skype, Webex, and Slack are the least used with no plan to use them. Most respondents (60%) communicate with a chat tool in addition to email (9C).

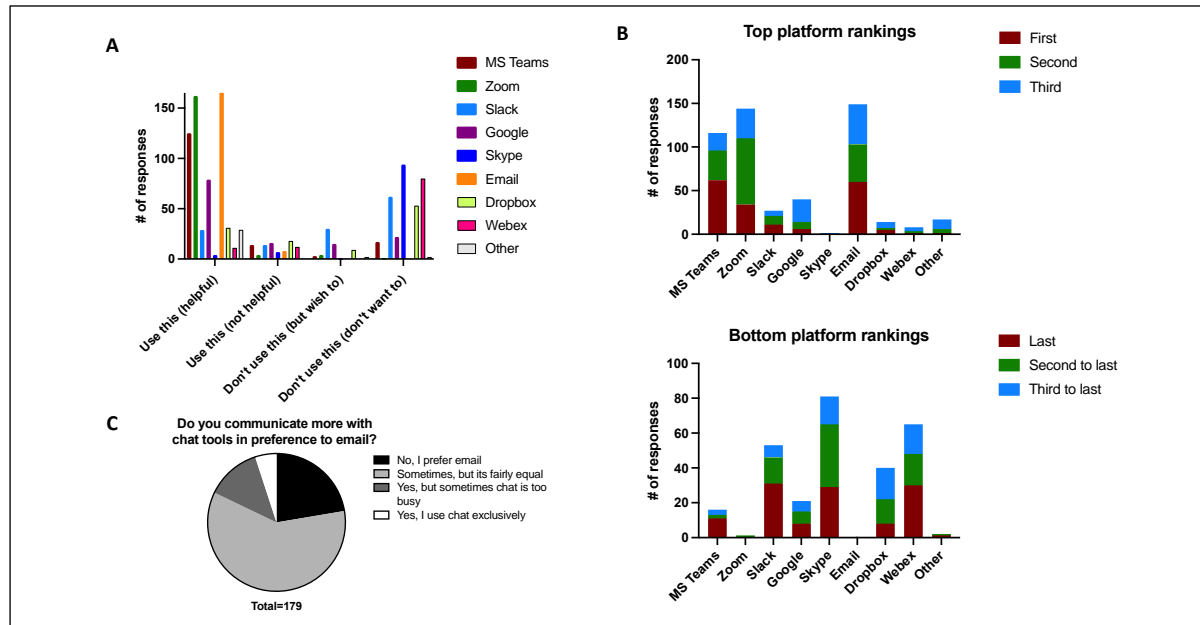


Figure 9. Usage of Communication Platforms. (A) Overall response bins of platform types into the following categories: Use this (helpful), Use this (not helpful), Don't use this (but wish I did), Don't use this (and don't want to). Y-axis shows number of responses. (B) Top three and bottom three platform rankings. Y-axis shows number of responses. (C) Communication by chat tools or email (n = 179).

Lastly, we provided respondents with the opportunity to share additional comments. In table 1, we have listed a sample of those we found most helpful/insightful. In the Overall Discussion section below, we highlight important themes that arose from these open text comments, which might not otherwise have been captured by the survey questions, or that reiterate themes from the responses.

Table 1. Comments Survey Respondents added (Verbatim)

I couldn't live where I do and enjoy my current quality of life if I worked in-person at my current institution. I chose to work remotely to be in an area of the country that is closer to family, has more affordable housing (could not have bought a house near my institution), and allows me to do the hobbies I enjoy.

I had a lot of flexibility and autonomy to work remotely before the pandemic. A lot of the negative changes have stemmed from an office move to a more distant and isolated space with a hotel-space model, which doesn't feel welcoming. Otherwise, I would be motivated to return to the office for 2-3 days/week.

I appreciate the flexibility that my organization and my unit's leadership have provided. I personally prefer to spend the majority of workdays in-person, but like that I have the option to work from home as needed or desired.

Table 1. Comments Survey Respondents added (Verbatim)

I'm the only one in my office who is hybrid, the others are remote (two have moved out of the area). Because I do most of the RD, I want to stay hybrid as I go to in person events at my university to meet faculty. The associate provost our office reports to is currently looking for an office for me where I will actually be around people. Because we are based in a small building which we share with an office of 3 on another floor, I can go the whole day without seeing people, so I tend to work at home unless there's a specific event where I will see people.

My boss allowed each unit to decide what kind of hybrid schedule they would create. Everyone just HAD to come in the first and third Fridays. My team chose to work a hybrid schedule that is mostly remote (one day a week in the office); I chose to work in-person every day. Most of the other units in the office chose to work mostly remote and only seem to come in for half days on the first Friday. There are no real checks and balances because a lot of our work does take us out of the office onto campus, even if we are in-office. It causes inequity conversations of how people are using/abusing the hybrid system and creates a low morale. I chose to come in to the office, and it is empty or the people who are there are upset they are there. It erodes morale. It has made for a very bad work environment and overall I find myself unhappy - interactions with people are either nonexistent or with people who complain about being in the office.

I love working in a remote environment and am very unlikely to work in any other mode, at least until my children leave the house (10+ years from now)

From my perspective as a manager of a pre-award grants team in an academic medical center, remote work is the worst thing that has happened to the workplace, productivity and work product quality in the course of my 35-year career, and might well be the worst thing that could possibly have happened.

I like and appreciate the flexibility of hybrid, but others are abusing the privilege, to the point that it is causing productivity issue for the whole team.

I'm ready to call it quits and go back to fully on site work for everyone.

I think RD is very well-suited for remote work. Being able to work from home has given me a great work-life balance. I no longer mind working in the evenings or weekend if needed since I have the flexibility to take time off during the work week for doctor's appointments, family caregiving etc.

I personally never understood employers' outdated ideas about remote work. The people who are going to slack off and take advantage do so in the workplace just as easily. I am in my 50s - I've seen it all - and I've worked in other environments before working in higher ed. Ultimately, I feel an employee should be judged on work quality and work product - not how many hours they spend in someone's cubicle. Frankly, remote work is one of the few good things that came out of COVID. My institution was taking away people's hard-won closet-sized offices and putting in "call center" environments where no one had a sense of privacy or autonomy - as a way to fit more employees in the same SF and avoid building more admin space. COVID required our institution to re-think the workplace - and many admin staffers benefited. I am much happier working from home where I have created a relaxing, supportive workspace. I can be home to care for my aging dog and create better work-life balance. I am also a lot less resentful of the times when we don't get COL increases b/c I know I am saving money and time as a remote worker. Institutions need to realize that the culture of work is changing and adapt to worker needs if they want to retain a quality workforce. I would say this is even more important for the RD profession, which in my opinion vastly underpays people.

Table 1. Comments Survey Respondents added (Verbatim)

We only worked fully remote until July 2020, and then we worked hybrid until June 2021. We no longer permit remote or hybrid work of any kind.

However because I am salaried and have a lot of flexibility in my job I occasionally make the decision to work remotely for part of a day to prevent the loss of time when driving back and forth to appointments. Our unit head does not monitor whether there are butts in seats at all times.

Hybrid work schedules have always been an option at our university, and were occasionally exercised under the authority of a supervisor in consultation with HR. Post-covid, remote work tools are more mature and refined, and have improved the productivity of employees working remotely. We now see remote work as a more mature tool in our toolbox, and sometimes find that it can now be even more useful in helping us manage through unique personal situations encountered within our team. But we see the knowledge, experience, and relationships/mentoring gained through regular in-person interaction to be invaluable and not achievable through consistent remote work (for most, but not all, positions). Therefore, our default mode is in-person, and we believe this is generally in the best interests of our team members' professional development as well as in the best interests [sic] of achieving our organizational goals. We make exceptions for certain positions, or to help our team members dealing with challenging personal situations.

I wish I could work more from home to avoid the commute, be more comfortable, have more flexibility. But my leadership likes me to be available to bounce ideas off of me very quickly. He does not use any chat software within the Office of Research, so that hampers the free flow of information.

We had to move out of our on-campus space in fall 2021 (we'd been fully remote since March 13, 2020), and in fall 2022 we were allowed to "move in" to a new space just off campus but that is almost entirely leased by the university. Our new space, however, has just 3 offices for the 5 of us, with two of the offices containing two 4' desks side-by-side. So we put our boxes in there, but even if we wanted to we can't all work effectively in that space, since we might be on different virtual meetings at the same time, or one person might need to edit and someone else might be on meetings all day. We appreciate that parking there is free and very close, but it's not conducive to doing our work. Additional space on another floor is available to reserve. For the most part, people in the office who want to go in are going in when they want to (usually just one person), and the rest of us are "okay" at home. Personally, though, I'm feeling very disconnected/disengaged, and I suspect the working mode contributes.

One of the biggest advantages to my current workplace environment is that I (and everyone else in my department, as far as I know) have been given an enormous amount of flexibility to define how remote vs. how in-person I want my role to be. I'm not sure whether or not it will stay this way for the foreseeable future, but I have a reasonable amount of trust that my opinions will be considered as part of the decision-making process, and that feels very important. In previous roles, leadership seemed to unilaterally decide and mandate what employees would do regarding hybrid work, and for me the ability to weigh in on that decision based on my own self-evaluation (of preference, productivity, work quality/performance, etc.) is huge.

I am building a new office in a virtual/remote environment which will become a hybrid environment. Space is a challenge to shifting from fully remote to hybrid; specifically the lack of dedicated space for this new office as of yet.

Flexibility has been key as a working mom. I would change jobs if I did not have a flexible option.

Table 1. Comments Survey Respondents added (Verbatim)

My job and my personal well-being have both greatly improved since I became fully remote because my home office is more pleasant and less stressful to work in than our employer's office, and even though my commute was already pretty short, the additional time and energy that I save from not having to commute and sit in a depressing fluorescent-lit room have greatly increased my happiness. There is no reason my RD role has to be in person because it is entirely done via the computer and conversations that can happen easily by phone and Zoom (although I always tell people I'm happy to come to campus and meet in person if they want, since I live close to campus). We are getting a new VP in the summer, and there are rumors that he will not allow people to continue to work remotely. I have told my colleagues and supervisor that if my position is no longer allowed to work remotely, I will find another remote job and quit, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. I am starting to look at and apply to other positions that are marked as remote or that are in person near me and pay more than my current job. There's no reason to accept mediocre in person jobs anymore when there are plenty that I can do remotely for the same or greater pay. Conversely, if I have to go back to working in person, I'm going to do it in an office where I'm paid more.

It has done wonders for my work-life balance.

I like the flexibility of being remote.

I LOVE having the option to work remotely. This was not even on the table prior to Covid. In the position I worked at, prior to coming here, I drove 3+ hours daily round trip in addition to having to manage a chronically ill child. I begged to have flexibility in my workplace and was told " no one will believe you are working if your butt isn't in the chair." That place almost killed me. I will never work for an institution that does not offer remote as an option again.

Never going back

Our office space is a shared space with scheduled days on campus (ie: our unit comes on Monday and another unit uses same space on Tuesday).

In addition to this, we do have extra space to reserve if you need to come in on an off day. I think this gives even more flexibility to the hybrid work environment.

Working fully remote is very important to me. My productivity is much greater, I don't like commuting to campus, and given my state's draconian budget cuts over the past 12 years and very few raises, the monthly cost savings equals a decent salary increase for me. Moreover, most faculty prefer to meet remotely and have not voiced concerns about or preferences for me to be on campus. I am very willing to go to campus when needed, which is a 30 min commute. My campus office is an interior, windowless room next to a large dance studio and the main entrance of the building thus I'm constantly exposed to noise, and I often had to walk across campus multiple times per day for meetings. I couldn't believe how much my productivity increase when I began working from home. I'm not distracted and can maximize my working time so much better. My mental health is much better too, not having to slog through traffic or bad winter weather and having a bright sunny home office with a cat on my lap.

I believe flexibility is key to keeping productive and motivated individuals. Having a hybrid work place has allowed me to take care of my family as well as have a successful career, where I am adding value to my institution and team.

I missed my office when I was fully remote, but wish I had more autonomy to have a fully hybrid schedule.

Table 1. Comments Survey Respondents added (Verbatim)

Currently, we are only allowed ONE day per week and it has to be a Monday or Friday. If I could, I would prefer 3 days remote and 2 days in office. I was so much more productive when I was at home (and liked my cat coworkers to snuggle with)!

I was fully remote prior to and through the pandemic, then switched to my current role (fully in person) last year in large part because I needed human interaction for mental health. I've found much less interaction than I expected in this role, which has been a big disappointment, so I wish I had more options to WFH when I do not have scheduled in-person meetings.

As an RD professional working with my spouse to try to juggle both of our careers (and the competing geographic demands that they bring), my ability to work remotely has been really important for our family and our wellbeing. I recently left a position and team I loved (where I was working remotely but was the only one on the team who lived outside of commuting distance to the office) for a new, fully remote RD position that has been a big step up in my career (and where I'm no longer the only one on the team living well outside of commuting distance). The fact that I could take this step without having to relocate and uproot my family has given me the chance to grow my career in ways I likely couldn't have had I been required to move across the country.

Working across varied working hours and/or timezones [sic] in a hybrid workplace can be challenging and requires awareness, flexibility & respect

My leadership has been very flexible, allowing individual team members to come up with a model (within reasonable constraints) that works for them.

Issues that exist(ed) for in person modes continue to exist in remote/hybrid schedules and, especially when it involves communication (ie expectations), can be exacerbated by hybrid/remote work.

Hybrid offers the best (and worst) of both worlds - but mostly the best.

1) Research administration has gone almost fully remote at my institution, but there is a feeling that RD should involve a lot of in person activity. I am curious about whether other institutions are seeing the same. 2) I am curious about whether people's faculty development work is primarily in person, hybrid, or online these days. We have a lot of pressure to do hybrid events.

Senior leadership (faculty) haven't bought in to remote communication modes, so that has stifled communication while remote. This has been true for 2 different leaders. They are busy and prefer just to drop into my office, so I feel pressure to be in-person to be responsive.

I [sic] joined this team after the pandemic, when they were transitioning back to hybrid. It's the first time I have taken a job where I feel like I was not able to integrate into the team, and it's because there is no concerted effort to create a work culture in a hybrid (some people are fully remote) environment.

I started a remote-only position in early 2023. I had multiple rounds of interviews for three different great positions, and ultimately, I chose the one with the strongest record of integrating remote-only workers into the team, because I needed to change jobs without relocating my family. I would prefer to be able to work in person with colleagues at least sometimes, so I don't see this position as one that I will hold for many years, but until my family matures enough that I am more open to relocating, working for a team that fully embraces remote-only workers has enabled me to continue advancing my career and stay in the RD field. Win-win-win.

Table 1. Comments Survey Respondents added (Verbatim)

Attitudes evolved over time since March 2020. At first, the organization was in a panic about productivity and communication. Frequent mandatory written accounts of work activities gave way to a more relaxed attitude as it gradually became obvious that productivity was greatly increased. After 2 years and counting of sustained successes, an open-ended commitment was made at the highest level to a hybrid work environment (at least 2 days in the office) wherever work functions made that possible. This even seems to work well for the many new hires over the last couple of years.

The 2 days in the office are often same for a given group - for example, my group of ~20 people is in the office on Monday and Tuesday, whereas a nearby group is Tuesday, Wednesday. Some groups have a single coordinated day with variable second day. The system is however very flexible for individuals from week to week, depending on other circumstances such as occasional need to be present on campus on a particular day or the need to be at home on a particular day. Very much a silver lining from a dark cloud.

Hybrid and remote are big improvements overall.

My increase in productivity cannot be understated. And I'm less exhausted at the end of the day.

I wish it had continued into the "post" pandemic period. Productivity was a constant, happiness and balance were dramatically improved.

I love the flexibility to be at home when I want to and in-person when I want to. I typically spend half-days in person, which works for my lifestyle/personal commitments. This is even better for me than spending some days fully in-person, some days fully at-home. This kind of increased flexibility is valuable and does not impact my productivity at all.

My feelings about this are very mixed and it was difficult to answer these questions. There are members of my team (including those above me) who are fully remote, although they have special dispensations. My feeling overall is that it marginalizes our office, even though flexible scheduling has been helpful to me (I have a 40-minute commute, parking and gas are expensive, and I still have a child at home; I work in a cube.) However, I'd be willing to come in full-time for a more dynamic position.

I enjoy working in the office, but it can get really busy and i feel like I'm more able to be productive at home. Fewer interruptions by drop-ins. Chats are easy and if someone is going to call even a video call they will schedule it first which I think is just polite. Phone calls seem so invasive now!

I am convinced that hybrid allows me to build trust with faculty that would be difficult to do if I was fully remote.

The flexibility is most helpful. While I keep a regular hybrid schedule most weeks it is incredibly helpful for my work/life balance and for being available for in-person events and as needed on campus when I want to or have to be.

Aside from me (as director), my team was hybrid prior to the pandemic. Because of the nature of our work, people were able to have flexible schedules (with clear expectations about responsiveness related to proposal deadlines and to work where they were most productive/comfortable.

Before covid, I asked most team members to come in at least 1-2 days per week (with exceptions for those farther away or those for whom travel was difficult due to disability, family responsibilities, etc.). Since the pandemic, no one is required to be in person in the office unless there is a specific reason (in-person event or

Table 1. Comments Survey Respondents added (Verbatim)

meeting), though some choose to come in 1-2 times per month to create connections with co-workers, have visibility with leadership, etc.

Remote has been absolutely transformative for both productivity and well being. I will never consider a reduction or change that makes it so my work doesn't dictate where I work and location is arbitrarily mandated.

Discussion and Conclusion

While flexible work arrangements within higher education existed prior to March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a radical restructuring of offices around the world. As we have moved further from the required initial redistribution of workforce, institutions and workers are faced with difficult decisions about what mode is 'right' for each at this moment and into the future.

To help address this question, we have focused on the profession of research development (RD) as a proxy for understanding the complex dynamics at play in these decisions from the workforce perspective. First, RD professionals are found in colleges and universities across the country and in rural/urban/suburban settings, providing interesting insights into local/regional factors. Second, RD professionals support a range of activities within colleges and universities in roles that often require both transactional and relational activities, suggesting a complexity in approaching this question. Third, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most RD positions were predominantly in-person, requiring professionals to be co-located with their employer. Since the pandemic redistributed the RD workforce in March 2020, there has now been sufficient time for employers and employees to adapt and evolve their structures and expectations.

Overall, this survey had 197 unique respondents representing all NORDP regions and approximately 15-20% of all NORDP membership. As expected, 70% of respondents work at R1 universities, reflecting an overall higher number of RD positions within these institutions. Recognizing that all surveys are a snapshot in time, we feel that the number and distribution of responses is adequate to identifying broad themes, discussed below.

The rise of hybrid and remote positions within the RD profession. Rare prior to COVID, hybrid positions - defined here as one to four days per week in the office - have emerged as the most prevalent work mode option for RD professionals. Further, fully remote options have now equaled or eclipsed positions that are solely in-person. In general, remote respondents largely see personal benefits to their positions in terms of productivity, flexibility, and well-being. They are confident that they are connected institutionally and recognized by their leadership and not interested in seeking future in-person positions. On the other hand, RD professionals that are in-person are far more likely to seek in-person jobs in the future, do not perceive that they are connected institutionally when working remotely, and are less positive about the impact of remote work on unit and institutional level output. Hybrid workers, in nearly all cases, find themselves somewhere in between, almost as a compromise to the options of in-person or remote. They align more closely with remote workers in perceiving the personal benefits of working off campus but agree with in-person workers in seeing challenges in terms of team dynamics and communication. Our findings within the RD field are consistent with the rapid rise of remote

and hybrid work across higher education professions (Chan et al., 2023).

The changing use of on-campus space. Given the need to accommodate multiple modes of work, and in-person/hybrid/remote work modes, the use of space on campuses is changing. This might be in terms of a person having a designated office or workspace vs hoteling, sharing space among multiple units, or having fewer private spaces to meet/work (Adikesavan et al., 2023; Migliore et al., 2024). One theme that arose from the text answers was people not seeing the value of going to the office in-person, when there were few others around in that space, either because of conflicting schedules in the office, or because there isn't enough space for everyone on the team to use it at the same time. This was aligned with feelings of disconnection/isolation, either with their team or with the faculty they serve.

The role of personal preference. Perceptions and attitudes on work mode seem to map directly to the individual's current situation. When institutions provided options for employees to work in-person, hybrid, or remote, a key contributor to that decision was simply personal choice (Alexander et al., 2021). We hypothesize that RD professionals simply sorted into groups based on their individual calculus, informed by numerous factors, including personality traits, family dynamics (e.g., caregiving), financial considerations, transportation options, etc.

Work/life balance considerations. What is consistent is that survey participants cite their work/life balance as an important outcome of a change in work mode. Respondents reported higher job satisfaction, improved mental health and increased productivity when they are given the option to choose the work mode that suits them best, consistent with what has been reported for other professions (Alexander et al., 2021; Wontorczyk et al., 2022; Chan et al, 2023).

Flexibility is critical. RD professionals are broadly appreciative of the flexibility in work arrangement leading to improved well-being and work-life balance. Reduction in travel time was at the top choice for the advantages of hybrid work. Availability of remote and hybrid options is considered a positive to attract strong talent, and respondents noted they are likely to remain with employers that offer flexibility in work mode. Since work mode has been found to have no significant effect on work engagement (Wontorczyk et al., 2022), flexibility should be an important institutional consideration for the RD workforce.

Onboarding and communication strategies more important than ever. The top challenges identified in workplace mode relate to building personal connections. Respondents noted that it is harder to have good intra-team communication, and inter-unit communication, in a remote or hybrid environment. This should be intentionally addressed and enhanced at the unit level, regardless of the unit work mode (Koehne, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2023). Likewise, our responses included anecdotal evidence that new employees might feel it harder to integrate into a team in a remote work environment, and therefore employers should be more cognizant and intentional about onboarding and integrating new staff.

The visibility parameter is complex and requires further examination as the results here are counterintuitive to the

traditional notion of in-person workers having more visibility, and are more likely to get promoted (Chen, 2024). Furthermore, the trend here also warrants long term examination of promotion and outcomes of remote personnel. **Some in-person time (with team or faculty) is critical to fostering trust and relationships.** Many respondents valued in-person time, especially to build relationships with team members or with their faculty colleagues. Indeed, regardless of work modes, in-person interaction, even if rare, was seen as valuable. This finding is in line with studies on the highly productive remote teams (Gilson et al., 2021).

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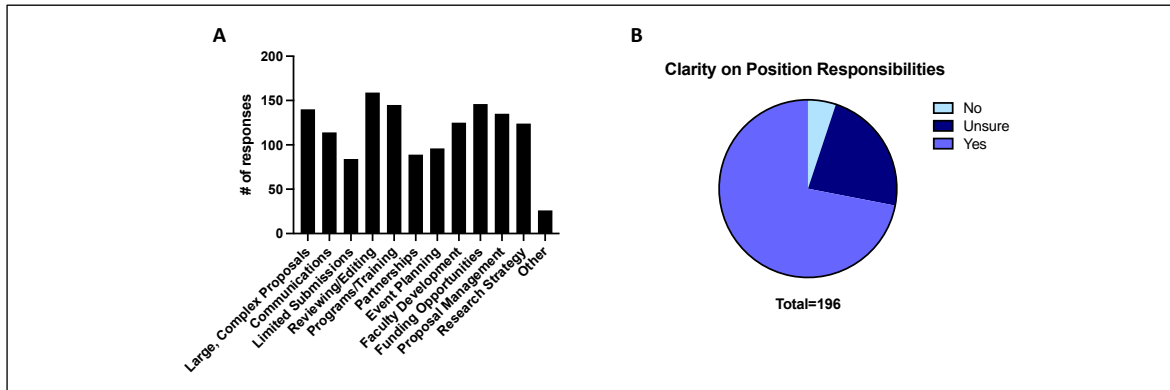
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Appendix. Supplemental Figure



Supplemental Figure 1. Additional work mode survey collected demographics. (A) Research Development categorical activities selected by the respondents. Y-axis shows number of responses. (B) Clarity on position responsibilities (n = 196).