

Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Digital Preservation Community

2023 Survey Findings Report Executive Summary



DigitalPreservationCoalition

Full report:

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1. About the Digital Preservation Coalition

The DPC is an international charitable foundation which supports digital preservation, helping its members, and the wider community, around the world to deliver resilient long-term access to digital content and services through community engagement, targeted advocacy work, training and workforce development, capacity building, good practice and standards, and through good management and governance. Its vision is to build a welcoming and inclusive global community, working together to bring about a sustainable future for our digital assets.

The Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) is a registered company (Registered no: 4492292) and charity (Charity no: SC051077).

2. Acknowledgements

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3. Findings Report Executive Summary

Anecdotal evidence alongside the outcomes from the 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey¹ and the research described by the 2020 article “What’s Wrong with Digital Stewardship”² suggests there are a number of interrelated factors that, particularly when combined, not only impede digital preservation work but can also place a particularly heavy burden on digital preservation practitioners. These issues, in turn, can have a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing. The research represented by this report was initiated as a first step towards gathering data on these contributory factors, the issues caused, and the resulting impacts. It looked to address a broad range of mental health and wellbeing experiences and the factors and issues that may influence them. The Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) has undertaken this work as part of its commitment to supporting the development of a competent and responsive workforce that is ready to address the challenges of digital preservation.

Development of the investigation involved a robust research and review phase before the resulting survey was open to responses from the digital preservation community in March-April 2023. Analysis was then undertaken in various phases, looking at responses to individual questions as well as examining crosstabulations to identify where significant correlations could be observed. The results of this analysis are presented in this report.

The survey received 261 complete responses, with incomplete responses removed from the data set. The demographic data collected showed the make-up of the respondents was reasonably representative of the community when compared with other previous research endeavours such as the aforementioned NDSA survey. This included expected representation of gender identities, organization types, roles, and career lengths. Geographical representation was, however, skewed towards respondents from North America, Europe, and Australasia, likely due to the fact it was shared primarily through channels associated with organizations that operate largely in the global north.

Overall, the main themes that emerged from the research can be summarized as follows:

1. The evidence suggests that the issues experienced are having a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of members of the digital preservation community;
2. Organizational culture is an important factor, and if proactive steps are not taken to foster positive organizational culture, issues arise that impact employees’ mental health and wellbeing;
3. The lack of support for and engagement with digital preservation, despite substantial time and effort investments in ongoing advocacy, is having a substantial impact on the workforce; and
4. Issues relating to unclear roles and responsibilities and unmanageable workloads are impacting on mental health and wellbeing.

Around half of respondents reported that their organization has policy in place relating to mental health and wellbeing, although this is significantly lower compared with the existence of other relevant human resources policies on topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, flexible working, sexual harassment, and discrimination, which all available in more than 75% of organizations. It was also reported that while organizations generally took the positive step to provide support for professional development, the large majority did not offer opportunities for advancement and often continued to hire employees on

¹ 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey, <https://osf.io/emwy4/>

² Blumenthal et al, “What’s Wrong with Digital Stewardship: Evaluating the Organization of Digital Preservation Programs’ from Practitioners’ Perspectives” - <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol7/iss1/13>

contingent contracts. Organizations were also less likely to provide paid leave for those experiencing mental health problems than for physical health.

Nearly all respondents (98%) reported having encountered at least issue in the workplace that has impacted their mental health and wellbeing. Survey results also show that a significant portion of digital preservation practitioners experience difficulties in relation to the clarity of their role and responsibilities, as well as having to manage unrealistic expectations and workloads. These were reported in the following proportions:

- 70% state they have to work to unrealistic expectations
- 63% feel overwhelmed by the burden of advocating for digital preservation
- 62% lack clarity on their responsibilities
- 60% manage an unrealistic workload
- 58% feel unsupported by their organization

Generally, however, these issues occurred less frequently at organizations which have and implement mental health and wellbeing policies.

In relation to the impact of these issues and/or their digital preservation work specifically, the following percentages of respondents reported that their digital preservation work had caused or contributed to experiencing:

- Stress – 88%
- Anxiety – 69%
- Fatigue – 67%
- Difficulty focusing – 61%
- Burnout – 57%

These represent incidence levels at the high end of or above averages reported for the general global population. In particular, published statistics suggest the incidence of stress in the general working population is around 60%, 28% lower than for those responding to this survey. There were also clear links between whether or not a respondent felt supported, the clarity of their role, their workload, and feelings of stress and fatigue.

There was a near-even split among respondents on the suitability of physical work environments. Only 49% of respondents felt that their physical work environment met their needs. The remaining 51% indicated that improvements were needed to their physical working environment to be suitable for their needs, with these including but not limited to furniture, equipment, lighting, sound, and privacy.

The written responses received for qualitative elements of the survey further point to practitioners experiencing issues in relation to:

- A lack of support from executives/managers and colleagues
 - Which is further compounded by difficult relationships
- Resourcing shortages, including financial, technological/infrastructure, and staffing resources
- Feeling isolated and that their work is undervalued

These responses offer a picture familiar to many digital preservation practitioners, of environments where they find it difficult to establish robust and sustainable digital preservation programs, facing resistance to and a lack of understanding of digital preservation from both superiors and colleagues. This then leads to the work being substantially under resourced, with many trying to solve their organization's numerous digital preservation challenges on their own or with only a small staff

complement, completely mismatched to the scale of the problem. Indeed, there were several responses to these questions that spoke of a lack of hope, a feeling of surrender, and the need to emotionally disconnect from their work for the sake of their mental health.

In regard to how these issues and their impacts could be addressed, respondents suggestions included the following: the provision of spaces where they could discuss the issues faced and their impacts; a greater emphasis at an organizational level on the importance of maintaining a good work/life balance; and a greater willingness amongst executives, managers, and colleagues to engage with, understand, and support digital preservation.

These findings carry with them the standard strengths and limitations of quantitative and qualitative analysis, but also strengths and limitations specific to the methodology and context of this research. These include a lack of available data on analogous professions that would allow direct comparisons. There is also the likelihood that those who have experienced issues are more likely to have replied, although, equally, researchers were made aware of community members who had not completed the survey for fear of exposure. Additionally, there are both benefits and disadvantages brought to the work by the researchers' position within the digital preservation community and their own experiences with mental health and wellbeing, these were consciously considered throughout the project. Finally, a robust methodology and review process has been implemented that should allow the results to be reproduceable, and the conclusions are consistent with the anecdotal evidence available and previous publications that examined these issues with a lighter touch.

This research represents only a first step in investigating and tackling the issues identified and their impacts on mental health and wellbeing. The next step will be around the communication of the findings presented here, but further research into specific issues and causation is needed, capture of longitudinal data, and comparison with those in analogous professions such as other information management practitioners. Proactive steps will also need to be taken to encourage organizations to acknowledge and address the issues, the factors causing them and the impacts they have. Collective action by those working in digital preservation will likely be needed to make this happen, and the DPC will have a role in facilitating this.

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