Workload Measurements

A More Realistic Approach to Staffing Our Offices

By Lacey Rhea

We've all heard the joke about how no one dreamed of being a research administrator when they grew up. Most of us had never even heard of the profession before being thrown into it (Lucas et al., 2022). Humorous as this shared origin story may be while chatting with colleagues, the reality of the situation is much more grim. Inevitably, these same groups of people have the shared experience of extreme stress, fueled by high workloads caused by high turnover. In its 2022 industry benchmarking report, Cayuse (2022) found that "84% of participants confirmed an increase in workload, with 57% stating it has been a significant increase" since the previous year (p. 35). Even more egregious, 69% of respondents cited a lack of staffing resources as a significant issue. To compound this problem, the baby boomer generation within research administration is reaching retirement age and leaving large gaps in our talent pool (Smith & Shambrook, 2015). We're kept up at night because our work has spilled into our personal lives; the volume is so high it cannot be contained within the confines of a scheduled workday.

In a September 2022 Research Administration Discussion List (RESADM-L) post, a colleague shared an article about companies requiring their employees to take paid time off, which launched a discussion that engaged dozens of research administrators over the next four days, only to resurface five months later (Haralson, 2022). The common theme of these posts centered around the feeling that taking time off work added to stress levels because of a lack of sufficient coverage while away. Some reported taking time off so they could work uninterrupted, while others admitted to working while vacationing with families.

Why is it that even when supposedly fully staffed, the workloads are still so overwhelming? Simply put, because fully staffed is not the same thing as being adequately staffed. If there are no vacancies and the employees are still overwhelmed, the problem is rooted in a miscalculation of the number of positions needed to handle the workload in the current environment. Though many institutions may use a similar set of workload metrics to determine staffing needs, these often do not consistently or adequately account for the complexities of the work we do, and there is no industry standard by which we can compare institutions (Wolfe, 2017).

Traditional methods of measuring the staffing needs of a department often neglect significant realities around the cognitive nature of the work we do, the amount of non-transactional activities we engage in, and most importantly, the high variability of knowledge and experience within the workforce (O'Brien & Rhea, 2022). A more robust and sustainable model of staffing is possible when we start thinking and talking about our profession and the workforce in a more comprehensive, reality-based way.

The Reality of How We Spend Our Time

The first step to any decent workload assessment is to list all tasks performed by the unit and the average time to complete each of those tasks. The typical shortcoming of this step is its exclusive focus on transactional duties such as proposals submitted, awards negotiated, protocols reviewed, etc. There are several non-transactional truths that get left out of this step but are nevertheless present in every research administration office.

Vacancies are a normal part of the lifecycle of human resources, and in larger offices, they are likely to exist at all times. Over-staffing with an assumption of X vacancies, where X is scaled for the size of the unit, will ensure adequate coverage even when recruiting.

Holidays, vacations, and health breaks are not only necessary for the well-being of staff, they are part of an overall compensation package. The total capacity per full-time equivalent (FTE) must factor these in so that staff can utilize their benefits without negatively impacting themselves, their colleagues, or the work.

Meetings are a regular part of most days for a research administrator. These are often mandatory and take time away from transactional productivity. For remote offices, meetings are a necessary part of maintaining a cohesive unit and in some cases happen more frequently than when those offices were in-person. For in-person offices, meetings are often spontaneous with colleagues and faculty stopping by to discuss issues in real time. They are a reality of all office types and total capacity per FTE must account for this time spent.

Continuing education is necessary for every research administrator in order to be successful. In some institutions, it is even a requirement for continued employment. Research administrators are also frequently engaged in the continuing education of their colleagues. No amount of formalized training will fully eliminate the need for peer-to-peer training. The time invested in the mentoring of others is a cornerstone of the profession and must be considered in total capacity per FTE.

Time for critical thinking and reflection of concepts learned is a necessary part of the learning and retention process for adults (Helyer, 2015). Research administration is a highly specialized and complex profession, and much of our time is spent in the cognitive space–thinking about and discussing policies, regulations, concepts, and potential solutions to problems. The time spent on these activities must be protected and therefore must be considered in total capacity per FTE.

The Reality of Our Individual Experiences and Abilities

A more realistic accounting of how our time is spent is only half of the solution. Perhaps the most frequently neglected component of assessing staffing needs is measuring the capacity of the individuals themselves, and their impact on the capacity of others. It is not enough to say 1 FTE equals 1 individual (O'Brien & Rhea, 2022). A team filled with new research administrators (RAs) will have a much different output than a team filled with experienced RAs. Units should assess each individual on staff and/or in candidate pools and assign a weighted FTE based on what their capabilities are.

What is the experience level of the individual? A new research administrator will not have the same capacity as a seasoned research administrator. There is great variability even amongst seasoned RAs if they've only recently been hired into the position, unit, or institution. This is the most important factor to consider when measuring the capacity of a team as it contributes to the greatest variability of output over time, especially on teams with frequent turnover of positions.

What is the individual's professional involvement? As research administration becomes more and more professionalized, membership in professional organizations such as NCURA and SRAI is common. Especially for individuals who are well into their careers, these professional organizations occupy time both inside and outside of the standard workday. Considering that this type of service to the profession is beneficial to both the individual and their employer, time spent on these activities should be considered when measuring the individual's capacity.

Do they contribute to institutional improvements? Individuals who are actively involved in leadership or strategic planning activities at the unit or institution level do not have as much bandwidth to perform transactional-level activities. Serving on departmental or institutional committees, beta-testing new systems or processes, leading institutional training, and other such services to the organization are all valuable contributions that are not part of the transactional productivity formula that staffing needs are traditionally measured by. These must be considered.

The traditional workload assessment methods are not working, as evidenced by the widespread problems in burnout among our colleagues. An updated method is needed to move our profession, and the research missions of our organizations, forward. Research administrators are critical pieces of the research enterprise. Adequately staffing our existing offices, including research administration infrastructure as a strategic priority, and scaling those offices as an organization grows are all necessary steps in increasing the attractiveness of our profession, supporting research, and reducing research misconduct. N

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