Research Admins Report Few Issues With Telework; Adopt Strategies to Ensure 'Balance'

By Theresa Defino

When Kris Wolff, director of the Office of Sponsored Programs at Fordham University, came down with COVID-19, she didn't hide it from her staff. "I was really open when I got sick and let them know things to look out for" should they also become ill, Wolff said.

Wolff started showing symptoms shortly after her last day in the Bronx office, which, "ominously," was Friday, March 13; her husband also got it. These were the early days of the pandemic, and Wolff remembered thinking—as did others—that maybe she'd be back on campus in a few weeks.

At about the same time, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Maura Gilmartin was saying goodbye to the large screen computer and scanner that helped her do her job as the lead sponsored programs officer at The Rockefeller University assisting more than a dozen research labs. Lacey Rhea, meanwhile, had gathered her belongings from the University of Florida (UF) Department of Physics where she is the research administration manager, bringing home her ergonomic mouse, office chair and wireless keyboard.

When the pandemic hit and research administrators and others were told to work off-campus, some were more prepared—at least when it came to technology—than others.[1] Some, like Wolff, actually contracted the virus; all have had to settle in, at home, for the longer haul. (Some do not want to go back—ever. See related story.)[2]

The candor that Wolff expressed to her colleagues is but one strategy that she, Gilmartin, Rhea and John Baumann, Indiana University (IU) associate vice president who leads the Office of Research Compliance, shared with *RRC* that have helped them maintain the level of service they and their staffs provided their institutions before the pandemic. Setting personal limits, offering options (not mandates) for socializing and allowing some to return to work are among the other steps designed to keep both research administrators and their coworkers healthy while teleworking during the pandemic.

Meeting Basic Needs First

The level of ease with which the research officials were able to quickly move to fully remote operations was based, at least in part, on how much telecommuting an institution previously allowed. Research administrators, by and large, are expected to be on campus; this meant that work cell phones and laptops weren't universal.

Initially, Wolff tried using her nine-year-old personal laptop, but it "started cracking under the strain." Quickly ordering laptops and having the Fordham information technology (IT) staff update them became the first order of business, a process Wolff said went fairly smoothly.

At IU, all 45 individuals on Baumann's staff had IU laptops that they used in the office with a docking station and two monitors. But knowing workers might not have brought home everything, "when we realized it wasn't going to be short-term," they were invited to go back to their offices and get anything else they thought they might need, said Baumann, including chairs and monitors. Phone calls can be made from the laptops, he added.

Adapting to a smaller screen has involved some creativity. "I set my laptop atop a tower of books to get the best height," Gilmartin said, adding, "I also miss having the opportunity to print things out on occasion, which afforded me a chance to take a break from the screen."

As far as the technology used to enable connectivity and communication, most, if not all, who spoke to *RRC* had experience using Zoom, but not to the level they now rely on it. Workers also stay connected via Skype for Business, Google Chat and Microsoft Teams.

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