



Stress in Research Administration: Looking back to set a better path going forward *By Jennifer Shambrook*

Is Research Administration a stressful profession?

The Health and Safety Executive in Great Britain performed a broad study of more than 17,000 workers in an effort to determine which occupations should be considered stressful professions. They found that 20% of all workers reported that they felt their work-related stress was either high or extremely high. Using that metric, any given occupational group that had 20% or more of its members reporting their work-related stress was high or extremely high, would be considered a high stress profession (Smith A., 2000; Smith A., et al., 2000).

Identifying high stress occupations was important to The Health and Safety Executive because of the higher risk for poor health in those under high stress. Medical experts have repeatedly warned that high levels of stress can increase risk for many physical and mental health problems, such as heart disease, digestive problems, sleep problems, anxiety, depression, weight gain, diabetes, and digestive system problems. Stress can also have a negative impact on memory, concentration, and decision-making functions.

Chronic workplace stress can result in *burnout*. Burnout is characterized by feelings of exhaustion and depleted energy; negative feelings and distancing from one's job; and reduced professional efficacy. Lower productivity and motivation, mistakes, lack of employee engagement, lower interest in professional development, and increased mistakes can be the results of burnout (Tabakakis, et al., 2020).

Stress can also take a toll on personal relationships, further eroding social support systems that are vital to healthy communities.

It is in the best interest of every individual, supervisor, business, and government to actively seek ways to lower work place stress to promote the overall well-being of those affected by high stress and reduce the outward ripples of increased healthcare costs, errors, accidents, and life-threatening disease.

The Research Administrators Stress Perception Surveys (RASPerS) asked over 3,000 research administrators (RAs) in four surveys over the past 13 years about their perceived levels of stress. Surveys were conducted in 2007, 2010, 2015, and 2020. The responses from RAs reporting their

Survey Year	Number of responses	Percent RAs reporting high or extremely high work-related stress
2007 RASPerS	624	58.33%
2010 RASPerS	1089	56.02%
2015 RASPerS	652	51.23%
2020 RASPerS	786	52.42%

Table1: Any occupational group with more than 20% reporting high or extremely high work-related stress is considered a high stress occupation. More than 50% of research administrators report having high or extremely high stress making research administration a high stress occupation.

work-related stress was either high or extremely high was over 50% each time, thus two and a half times greater than what was required for an occupation to be considered a high stress occupation (Shambrook, J., 2010, 2012 and 2015). We can say with confidence, supported by data, that research administration is indeed a high stress occupation.

What are some common factors that make an occupation high stress?

Factors that can contribute to work-related stress coexist in abundance in the varying roles that make up research administration. The competing demands placed on research administrators from never-ending deadlines, governmental regulations, and severe consequences for failing to meet those requirements, contribute to the high stress environment. This is coupled with low control over the amount of work a single RA may be given, and the expectation that the work be flawless despite the workload. Add to that the fact that many offices of research are understaffed as a result of budget restraints and a shortage of trained RA personnel. Frequently, personnel are hired without prior experience. Thus, even when there are additional human resources, they come with the added burden of training the new staff member in very intricate activities that have long and steep learning curves.

Stress is also compounded when there is disparity between effort and reward in the forms of appreciation or recognition for a job well done. Often the RA is in a remote office (long before COVID was a factor), where they play a role that is crucial at the time of a particular transaction in the life-cycle of an award, but that contribution may be forgotten, or even resented, by the person for whom that action is being performed. It takes a person with a lot of self-efficacy to manage some of the social dynamics of research administration.

Some may be surprised to see that the 2020 RASPerS, conducted while many were working from home and juggling both work and family demands, did not show a significant increase in the already high levels of work-related stress from previous RASPerS data. However, it is less surprising when one considers what was going on in each of the previous survey periods. There seems to always be something happening in the research administration space that brings a little something extra during the RASPerS survey collection periods.

During the 2007 RASPerS survey collection period, economic factors caused budget cuts, resulting in job losses that spanned both research investigators and RAs. The end of the NIH budget doubling coinciding with competing demands for the defense budgets created a significant strain on many research programs across the country.

During the 2010 RASPerS, there was an avalanche of funding opportunities as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Many of those ARRA opportunities required very short turn-around times for proposals. Then came the very time-consuming tasks associated with ARRA reporting.

The 2015 RASPerS collection period coincided with the implementation of the OMB Circulars being replaced with the Uniform Guidance. This was



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Recommendations

You cannot eliminate the factors that lead to increased stress in research administration – deadlines and sponsor guidelines are not going away – but you can do things to build your resilience to the stress that comes with our high stress occupation. I encourage you to take an assessment of your own health and social behavior. Only you can set healthy boundaries for yourself to build your own resilience to stress.

If you are willing to work 50 hours a week and operate on four hours of sleep, your employer will likely not do anything to prevent that. More than likely, those long marathons will become the expected norm, rather than being acknowledged as going over and beyond a reasonable workload. Moreover, your fatigue may lead you to feeling greater stress, making more mistakes, having more frequent illnesses, and finding that the demands of work interfere with home and family life.

Glance back to see what you have done well and where you may need to make adjustments. Be intentional about making a plan with respect to self-care, stress, and intentionally setting your priorities for the future. Look for the appropriate balance and decide for yourself what is reasonable and healthy. Write down your goals and make the changes you need to make to take care of yourself. Also, look for ways to do your part to establish healthy peer and supervisor relationships. All of these things together may lead to lower stress in yourself, your colleagues, and your families.

Lower stress equals better health and a better life. ■

Reference and Further Reading

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accompanied by a lot of uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety. There were some portions of the regulation that needed fine tuning to smoothly transition into the realities of management of large academic research institutions. Considerable additional hours of labor and effort were invested by RAs across the nation as they worked through the Federal Demonstration Partnership and Council on Government Relations to have some of those more onerous regulations adjusted. Complete re-writes of institutional policies and procedures, along with revisions to training programs, were added to the already overloaded RA chore lists.

Therefore, the 2020 RASPerS, which was administered during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the chaos of vacating offices, extending deadlines, determining who could or could not remain on a sponsored program’s payroll, and responding to rapid solicitations to fight the disease, found this already over-stressed occupational group managing just one more thing.

What factors can mitigate extreme stress?

Of course, if a little more than half of our RA work force is reporting stress that is high or extremely high, that does mean that a little less than half is reporting moderate to low stress. Those colleagues are coexisting in this same high stress/high demand environment, but are somehow able to have more resilience to stress. As has been previously reported in earlier RASPerS findings, those RAs reporting lower perceived levels of stress are also reporting some positive health-related behaviors that may contribute to their resilience.

We don’t know if lower stress affords the luxury of these positive behaviors, or if these behaviors reward the individual with lower stress. You can try these things for yourself to see if it helps with your own feelings of better resilience to stress.

- Working no more than forty hours in a typical week
- Getting seven or more hours of sleep most nights
- Maintaining good physical and mental health habits
- Appropriately prioritizing family and social relationships
- Having an optimistic outlook
- Working in an environment where there is both supervisor and peer support
- Engaging in regular physical exercise several days a week
- Taking time off when sick



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