

Coping Skills for Surviving INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

In the Beginning

Obtaining a new job is usually a cause for celebration, but even the best career move can produce feelings of stress and anxiety. In a short period of time, you are faced with a number of different challenges:

- How to cope with new co-workers who all have different work-styles.
- How to de-code the expectations of your new boss.
- Where are the data that I need? Is it accurate? Does it really mean what I think it means?
- What language is this that everyone else appears to understand? IPEDS is not in the French or Spanish dictionary....

When you entered into the world of Institutional Research (IR), you entered into one of the most interesting and fascinating fields in higher education. At first, you will understandably be overwhelmed by the medley of new languages that you will have to learn and comprehend. You'll ask yourself, over and over again, "Just what is IPEDS, AAUP, CUPA, etc.?" As IR professionals, we have data everywhere which must become information to be useful to others. And many times, a request that seems straight forward quickly becomes confusing because there are many idiosyncrasies to the data.

Adjustment Timeline

This is not a field in which you become trained quickly, so don't get discouraged with yourself or your job. Here's a realistic timeline for adjusting to an IR position:

- In the first month you will be contributing to your office, but it will probably take 6 months to learn your job.
- In your first year you will see all of the data requests that come in and reports that need to be done, but it will actually take two years to feel comfortable in the position.

- The first year you're doing everything blindly, but during the second year, things come more naturally and you retain what you've learned.

One thing to realize is that "I don't know" by itself is not a good answer. However, "I don't know, but I will check and get back with you" is acceptable. Nobody knows all of the answers, but everybody can search for the answers. As you work through the data and become more familiar with it, your expertise increases. Education and background can be helpful, but a successful career in IR develops with time, experience, and a willingness to ask questions and learn.

Coping with the Workload

Some projects are short requests that might only take a few minutes. Other projects might take months. And the complicated part is that you will have several different types of projects on your "to do" list at one time.

- Realize that there is no such thing as being "caught up" in this profession.
- Prioritize tasks and manage your time effectively.
- Know your due dates.
- Minimize interruptions when faced with a deadline or overwhelming project.

One way to ease your transition into this career is by making a point of familiarizing yourself with the office and your institution. Although it is time consuming, it will help you in the long run to know where your requests are coming from, the best sources of information, who to call/ask if you have a question or problem, and what data are readily available already.

Introducing yourself to key people at your institution and striving to develop a favorable relationship with them will also be mutually advantageous.

Write Things Down

Another important tool in managing time and workload is documentation. Many tasks are cyclical – only done once a semester or once a year. Making notes on how you accomplished a task this year will speed things up next year. Be specific: What files did you use; where are they located; what approach did you use. Formalize the process with a complete notebook or just hand write notes in a project folder so you can find them next time. If there was little or no documentation when you walked into the job, make sure there will be some when you leave. The one to benefit the most will be you.

Confidentiality

One of the biggest issues a new employee faces is whether or not to give out information. First of all, you have to ascertain that the data have been checked and re-checked for errors. It is easy to lose perspective when looking at the same data over an extended period of time. Even senior research analysts should have someone else review reports before they are released.

In addition, ascertain that the information given is not considered confidential. As workers in Institutional Research, we generally have access to more data than anyone else on campus. Thus, we need to exert extra caution when asked for information. Just because we have access to the data does not mean that it is acceptable to share it with other people! Even data that are considered public information may need to be approved by the institution's public relations office. *It never hurts to ask someone more experienced when in doubt!*

Networking

Institutional Research provides many opportunities to increase personal knowledge outside the office. Through seminars, professional meetings, workshops, and webinars, we have many opportunities to learn. Remember, any question asked to increase one's knowledge is not a "stupid" question. Sometimes we wonder whom to ask. Some IR offices are not very large, containing only one or two people. In this case, you need a network of IR colleagues to garner information from.

Often, when we identify a source of information or a procedure that is beneficial to us, we get really excited and want to share our momentous find with a co-worker. Sometimes that person isn't someone on our campus, though. In today's world, a colleague isn't just the person in the next office. A colleague is the person in the next county, or another state. Our colleagues are just an email or phone call away! Be sure to utilize the NEAIR online community (www.neair.org) and its multiple networking features to reach out to your colleagues in the profession.

By developing a network of IR newcomers, we can share the excitement of IR, and develop long-term friendships. Through sharing questions, experiences, or ideas, we help newcomers to IR. It is the responsibility of senior IR members to share their knowledge and help newcomers. Members of the IR community with just a few years of experience should also be accountable for guiding newcomers since they have just passed through this stage and benefited from more experienced team members. Probably **the best recommendation that we can make to new IR professionals is to utilize NEAIR and the regional and national organizations to foster these relationships.**

Self-Care

Guard yourself against stress by allowing some humor into your life. Laugh! It causes relaxation! Researchers say that real belly laughter can relax the muscles more than a vigorous massage. Find things like cartoons or jokes that provide enjoyment and make you laugh. Be playful - get a yo-yo or a Slinky for your office! Sometimes, a well-deserved play break, or a brisk walk around campus or your building, can help you to re-focus and finish that project that seems impossible.

(Adapted from material from Ronnie Chrestman, Nancy James, and Jessica Pierce of Clemson University.)