Spotlight on Promoting Diversity in Research Administration: Pay Attention to the Lessons Your Colleagues Bring to the Table

By “All of Us”

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind when discussing “diversity” is that we are all innately the same. We’re all human, with the same needs, worries, and cares. Our sameness brings us together … and our diversity/differences enable us to expand the knowledge and viewpoint of the group. If we were all the same – we would have nothing to learn from each other, nor could we grow by sharing each other’s experiences!

One of the more unique — and inspiring — stories in research administration I’ve come across is that of our Director, Kathy Marengo Hixenbaugh, CRA (Director, University of Pittsburgh, Department of Medicine Research Administration), and my two colleagues, Todd Langer, and Kevin Tucker. Both Kevin and Todd are deaf. . . . “Profoundly so”, as they’d both described it. I’d also happened upon the information regarding Kathy’s degree in Deaf Education purely by chance one day, when the topic of where we’d all attended college happened to come up. Up until that point, I’d never really given much thought to the fact that we have two deaf colleagues working within our department — or to the fact that, previously, I had never actually worked with anyone that I could not readily communicate with.

Given my recently acquired knowledge of the facts above, and that this month’s theme is “Diversity of Research Administration”, I’d felt almost compelled to do a piece on Kathy, Todd, and Kevin, and how each of us can learn from them. Todd and Kevin have many perspectives that we can learn from – this article touches on only a few of the most notable. Kudos to Kathy for already understanding and utilizing these unique perspectives for the good of the group!

Kathy Marengo Hixenbaugh, CRA
Her college major. Kathy has a degree from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania in Deaf Education. When asked how she had chosen her major, she’d explained, “When I first went to IUP, I was in the business school. Shortly after taking a few classes, I’d realized that business did not interest me. I had made some new friends, and one of them was in the Deaf Education program, so I’d changed majors. Interestingly, I was one of the first nine students that graduated with a major in Deaf Education!”

Why research administration? Of course, I’d then asked the universal question — “Why Research Administration?” Kathy stated, “After I graduated from IUP, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. My sister-in-law was working at CMU (1984) and got me a job as a secretary in the Department of Biology. Shortly after that, I accepted a job at CMU in the Department of Psychology and began working with an investigator on grants. This was the beginning of my career in Research Administration! Later, I’d accepted a job at Western Psychiatric and Clinic of UPMC (WPIC) with another investigator and then moved into WPIC’s central grants office.”

How did you recruit Todd and Kevin? Kathy went on to reveal, “They’d both applied for positions in which I was recruiting and I’d hired them! I’d met and interviewed Kevin in 1994 — when I’d left WPIC, I hired him in Medicine (University of Pittsburgh).”

Kevin Tucker, Sponsored Projects Administrator (20 years)
When asked if he has any ability to hear at all Kevin replied, “I am profoundly deaf — I can hear with my hearing aid.”

Q: Why research administration?
A: “Research Administration is fun. I handle various tasks such as monthly level reconciliations, preparing monthly expense reports for Principal Investigators, and data entry.”

Q: What issue(s) do you wish more people in the workplace were aware of regarding deaf individuals, if anything?
A: “I wish the University of Pittsburgh would recruit more deaf people.”

Q: You’ve worked with Kathy in various departments. What is it that you value about her as an employer?
A: “Kathy is professional, well-mannered, and generous. I think her employees are satisfied with her and so am I.”

Q: Are there any special considerations in the workplace needed in order to accommodate deaf individuals?
A: “A sign language interpreter is needed in the workplace. Also — Sorenson Video Relay Service (Videophone).”

Q: How would an interested person learn sign language?
A: “Take a basic sign language course at Community College.”

Q: How long does it take to learn?
A: “It takes about one month.”

Q: Is it difficult?
A: “No.”

Q: You have the alphabet — but you don’t spell out every word. Does each word have its own sign?
A: “Yes, each word does have its own sign.”

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Todd Langer, Sponsored Projects Administrator (9 years)

When asked if he has any ability to hear at all, Todd replied, “No – I’ve been profoundly deaf since birth. I did try to use a hearing aid, but it didn’t help me at all – I’d only heard noises.”

Q: Why research administration?
A: “I’d worked at Mellon Financial Corp for nine years and was laid off. I then decided to look for any job positions for which I was qualified and applied for various positions online – at which point Kathy contacted me. Right now, I am working as a Sponsored Projects Administrator, and have been for nine years!”

Q: What issues do you wish more people in the workplace were aware of regarding employees with hearing impairments, if anything?
A: “Hearing and deaf people are human beings. Deaf people can do anything except hear. Most hearing people think that deaf people can’t work and can’t do anything. We have to show that we CAN do anything. I would need an interpreter for meetings or workshops so I can understand what is being said. Also – I’d rather use the term ‘Deaf’, not hearing impairment, because people think my hearing isn’t working or broken.”

Q: You’ve worked with Kathy for quite a while. What is it that you value about her as an employer?
A: “I’m glad she hired me to work here. She always listens to my concerns. She always gets me an interpreter for all meetings and workshops. I have all accommodations that I need. I have videophone on my desk for me to be able to make any phone calls.”

Q: How would an interested person learn sign language? How long does it take to learn? Is it difficult? You have the alphabet – but you don’t spell out every word. Does each word have its own sign? That seems like it would be difficult to learn…
A: American Sign Language – it isn’t difficult to learn. You need to practice ASL every day and communicate and socialize with deaf people then you would be fluent. Sometimes, we do spell out the words. Most of the time, we sign many words with body language and facial expressions. Many people think it is very difficult to learn and practice ASL, but then they fall in love with ASL because of our beautiful language.”

Q: What would be your advice be to other employers seeking out employees such as yourself?
A: “You need to have open mind with minority people. You might overlook their knowledge and skills that can help you and your workplace.”

Takeaway. Adding different perspectives expands the knowledge base of any group. We also need to keep in mind that all people are universally the same and that we all have boundaries, feelings, and expectations. ASL is another perspective on life — another language — and being deaf is not a “disability” but rather a different way of viewing the world. We could be more helpful and understanding to colleagues by looking at differences as blessings… and ways to branch out with our friendships and knowledge bases. The world is open and beautiful — with so much to learn… why not explore new options by learning a different language and a new perspective on life! I’m up for it! Please check out the LifePrint.com website – this does make learning sound like tons of fun! There are many puzzles and games as well to solidify what you learn.

References

JUST FOR FUN! Decode the message below using the American Sign Language Alphabet.

Kathy Marengo Hixenbaugh, CRA is the Director, Department of Social Work Research Administration at the University of Pittsburgh. She has been in the field of Research Administration for 31 years. Her degree is in Deaf Education from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She can be reached at kmh@pitt.edu

Todd Langer is a Sponsored Projects Administrator at the University of Pittsburgh, Department of Medicine. He has been in the field of Research Administration for 9 years. He is a graduate of the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf in Pittsburgh, PA. Todd is also a 1996 graduate of Gallaudet University in Washington DC, with a degree in Business Administration. He can be reached at tal49@pitt.edu

Kevin Tucker is a Sponsored Projects Administrator at the University of Pittsburgh, Department of Medicine. He has been in the field of Research Administration for 20 years. Kevin has an Associate's Degree in Applied Science in Accounting Technology from Rochester Institute of Technology (through the National Technical Institute for the Deaf) at Rochester, New York (1994). He can be reached at kmk4@pitt.edu

Angela A. Yost, MBA, CRA is a Research Administrator at the University of Pittsburgh, Department of Medicine. She has been in the field of Research Administration for 16 years, working in various roles such as pre and post award, central and departmental administration, and various supervisory roles. She is a two-year member of NCURA, and an enthusiastic supporter of NCURA Collaborate. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Business (Accounting concentration) from the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown in 1999, and Masters in Business Administration (Finance concentration) from the University of Pittsburgh at Pittsburgh in 2004. She can be reached at ayost@pitt.edu

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