



MWACOP News Notes

Midwest Area Council for Office Professionals

June 2020 Issue

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Message from the Co-Chairs

We, as Office Professionals, are facing some challenging work situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are learning to support our SYs, Technicians, AOs, and RLS in ways we did not expect to. Telework was a mere thought in the past. Some may have teleworked a day here or there, now we find ourselves in a max telework situation. We are all finding ways to keep things going for our Units, for the Area, and for ARS. Zoom has become a way to have meetings and still have the face-to-face interaction. Teams is another platform to use for such interactions. The work you, the Office Professional, do is important and you are doing a great job!

We would like to welcome the new PSAs who have come to the MWA since December. The New PSA training that was supposed to be held in person has found its way to a series of webinars. For some it is difficult to learn by webinar but know that the MWACOP members are here for you. Reach out to your mentors or any member of the Council. Even during the max teleworking, we are here to help.

Our Annual Meeting was scheduled for April 27th in conjunction with the New PSA training. It is on hold for now until we see how the travel restrictions unfold. We have welcomed 2 new members this year. Brian Brusky is a PSA in with the Dairy Forage Research Center located in Madison, WI, and Tracy Durre is the Administrative Support Assistant in the Area Office located in Peoria, IL. Brittney Jones, Executive Assistant, MWA Director's Office, joins us as the Technical Advisor. Sherri Buxton will remain as the Sponsor for the MWA Director's Office. Look for our Annual Meeting update in our next issue of the News Notes.

This is my last message as the Senior Co-Chair. I pass the baton to Jessica as Senior Co-Chair and Amy McNamara will be the Junior Co-Chair. I am excited to see what they come up with. I have enjoyed my time with the MWACOP and have made some great friends and have expanded my network of resources.

As always, we are here as a Council to help you, the Office Professional. If you have a question or just need some support, do not hesitate to contact any one of us.

Stay safe and healthy,
Kelli Adkins, Senior Co-Chair and Jessica Boyer, Junior Co-Chair

Members of the council include:

Kelli Adkins (Kelli.Adkins@usda.gov) - Sr. Co-Chair
Jessica Boyer (Jessica.Boyer@usda.gov) - Jr. Co-Chair
Marc Bushman (Marc.Bushman@usda.gov) - News Notes Editor
Kerri Bentley (Kerri.Bentley@usda.gov) - SOP/Web Editorial Team
Ann Kessler (Ann.Champion@usda.gov) - SOP/Web Editorial Team
Amy McNamara (Amy.McNamara@usda.gov) - Recorder
Brian Brusky (Brian.Brusky@usda.gov) - Member
Tracy Durre (Tracy.Durre@usda.gov) - Member
Beth Burmeister (Beth.Burmeister@usda.gov) - Technical Advisor/NACOP Representative
Deborah Schaefer (Deborah.Schaefer@usda.gov) - Technical Advisor/NACOP Representative
Brittney Jones (Brittney.Jonyes@usda.gov) - Technical Advisor
Sherri Buxton (Sherri.Buxton@usda.gov) - Sponsor



MWACOP members attending annual meeting. Front row from left: Marci Bushman, Ann Kessler, Deborah Schaefer, and Kelli Adkins. Back row: Amy McNamara, Sherri Buxton, and Jessica Boyer. Kerri Bentley, Brian Brusky, Tracy Durre, Beth Burmeister, and Brittney Jones not pictured.



MWACOP Website: <https://axon.ars.usda.gov/MWA/Pages/MWACOP.aspx>

MWACOP SOP Website: <https://www.ars.usda.gov/midwest-area/docs/sop-manual/>



NACOP Website: <https://axon.ars.usda.gov/Inside%20ARS/NACOP/Pages/NACOP.aspx>

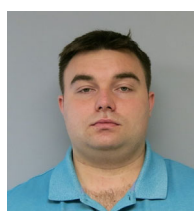
Welcoming New Office Professionals to MWA

Lauren Browning started on October 21, 2019, with the Livestock Behavior Research Unit (LBRU) in West Lafayette, Indiana. She graduated from the University of Washington with an Environmental Studies degree in June 2019. Prior to joining the USDA Lauren was a supervisor and bartender at a fine dining restaurant for 13 years in Olympia, Washington. She, along with her children, decided that she would accept this position and move from Washington State. She is happy to finally be able to enjoy weekends and holidays with her family now! She loves hiking, kayaking and playing with the kiddos in her spare time. Her advice is to work hard and be nice.



Erika Stoltz joined the Vegetable Crops Research Unit (VCRU) in Madison, Wisconsin, on December 23, 2019. She previously worked with the Department of Defense for 18 years. She was in the United States Marine Corps and United States Army, both active duty and reserve for 34 years. Erika was deployed to Afghanistan twice and Iraq twice. She also worked as a service writer for auto shops in the Madison, Wisconsin area. After retiring from the military, she decided transferring to the USDA was the best choice. In her spare time, she enjoys being a beekeeper, beer maker, gardener, and ultra-runner. Her favorite motto is "Fortis Fortuna Adiuvat" and her advice is to always be on time.

Marwa Alsarraf started on March 16, 2020, with the Virus and Prion Research Unit (VPRU) in Ames, Iowa. She came to the ARS from the USDA Forest Service in Flagstaff, Arizona, in order to be closer to family. Marwa's hobbies include hiking, traveling and gardening. Her advice is to not be intimidated to ask questions and ask for help.



Adam Spencer joined the Plant Introduction Research Unit (PIRU) in Ames, Iowa, on March 16, 2020. He served in the United States Marine Corps for four years. Following his military service, he worked as a Produce Clerk, then worked part-time installing cabinetry while also being self-employed staining and finishing cabinetry. Adam joined ARS for the opportunity to have a long-lasting, stable work environment. Adam enjoys reading and weightlifting outside of work. His advice is to be adaptable (or at least try to be).

Horesa Young started on May 17, 2020, with the Food Animal Environmental Systems Research Unit (FAESRU) in Bowling Green, Kentucky. She worked as Project Management in the banking industry in Dallas, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana. After over 20 years in Corporate America, Horesa transitioned to federal service employment. She joined ARS to stay within the federal services and be closer to family in Nashville. Outside of work, Horesa enjoys reading and traveling with her husband.



Shelby Nepple joined the Corn Insects and Crop Genetics Research Unit (CICGRU) in Ames, Iowa, on May 26, 2020. She was previously employed with Iowa State University as an Assistant Manager with ISU Dining. Shelby accepted this position with ARS in hopes of furthering her professional development while also having a schedule that allows for more time with family in the evenings. Her hobbies include crafting, canning, gardening, and spending time with family. Shelby's advice is to work hard and be grateful.

WELCOME!

Midwest Area Office Professional of the Year Award



Beth Burmeister with the North Central Soil Conservation Research Laboratory in Morris, Minnesota, received the Midwest Area Office Professional of the Year Award for achieving phenomenal Person-to-Person Relationships. She set an example for others by establishing exceptional inter-unit and intra-unit working relationships that assist a unit in accomplishing its mission, by training co-workers and others, and by promoting teamwork. Demonstrating these achievements well beyond normal job duties in the past year. Her “Can do and I’m in” attitude, exceptionally high quality work, and consistent commitment for improving the operations at the Morris unit, Wisconsin units, the MWA and Agency as a whole supported each entity's efforts to exceed in at accomplishing their respective mission.

Congratulations

NACOP Update

Submitted by: Beth Burmeister & Deborah Schaefer

The goal of the National Advisory Council for Office Professionals (NACOP) is to ensure that ARS has highly skilled and informed professionals working in partnership with management to meet the needs of the Agency. To keep office professionals informed, NACOP provides resources throughout the year.

Recently, NACOP distributed **OP Assets**. Debi and I are proud that the Midwest Area Council for Office Professionals' Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) Manual was highlighted as a resource for all ARS office professionals. If you missed it, the OP Assets is now posted in Axon: <https://axon.ars.usda.gov/Inside%20ARS/NACOP/Pages/NACOP-Links-Resources.aspx>.

Each year, each Area Council prepares and submits a report to NACOP for inclusion in the **NACOP Annual Report for 2018-2019**. This report is now posted in Axon: <https://axon.ars.usda.gov/Inside%20ARS/NACOP/Pages/NACOP-Annual-Reports.aspx>. This is a great way to look at the MWACOP's accomplishments and check out the initiatives of other councils.

If you are interested in serving on NACOP, one of the requirements is to be a present or former member of the local Council. The call for volunteers to serve on the MWACOP is usually sent in early spring. Be on the lookout for future chances to serve on the MWACOP.

These are just the highlights of things that are happening with NACOP. If you have a question or concern for the NACOP, please reach out to either Beth or Debi. We are here to represent you!

ARMP: The PSA Role

Submitted by: Amy McNamara & Beth Burmeister

On March 5th, Administrative Officers (AO) Pam Groth, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Jim Hampton, Wooster, Ohio, gave an overview of the Annual Resource Management Plan (ARMP) process in a webinar. While Pam and Jim covered the whole process, we would like to focus on the role of the PSA in this process. Please keep in mind that the PSA responsibilities will vary by unit/location. The key is to work closely with your AO and RL.

ARMP vs. ARMPS

The process is called **ARMP**.

The ARIS program is called **Area Resource Management Plan System (ARMPS)**.

Before you even open the ARMPS program, there is information to compile. The following can be a useful guide to what information you will need to collect from each fund holder in the research unit.

Talking Points

Enclosure 5 of the FY2021 Annual Resource Management Plan Guidance gives the specific information for the Management Unit (MU) talking points which is included in both the D project and Soft Funds packages. It is helpful to download or copy/paste the talking points (narratives) from the previous fiscal year. This is good information to provide to your RL as a reference.

Footnotes

After the AO pulls the employee information from the salary program (SAMS) into ARMPS, your AO may ask you to assign the footnotes. This information can be found in Enclosure 8 of the FY2021 Annual Resource Management Plan Guidance.

RSA

The Research Support Agreement (RSA) proposed funding is included in both the appropriated funds package and the outside/soft funds package depending on what project is funding the RSA. For RSAs you will need to include the funding source, D project or outside funds, the cooperator, salary information (including fringe), tuition remission, and a description of each item to be paid. This could include greenhouse fees, sequencing, growth chambers, etc. You will also include any overhead for the agreement.

Anticipated travel

Once the threat of COVID-19 has passed, we can only hope that conference travel will be allowed as in the past. As shared in the webinar, there is a travel spreadsheet to help you collect the meeting name, attendees, dates of travel, purpose, meeting location, registration fee and estimated cost. You can solicit this information from your scientists. Often there are professional scientific meetings that your scientists may attend each year. The meeting or professional society websites are a good source of information for upcoming meetings such as dates, locations and registration fees. Although the travel spreadsheet is not required to be submitted this year, it is a helpful tool in collecting this information.

Here are some sites that are helpful when you are estimating travel costs outside of Concur:

[GSA City Pair](#)

[Per Diem Rate Look-up](#)

[Foreign Per Diem Rates by Location](#)

ARMP: The PSA Role (continued)

Submitted by: Amy McNamara & Beth Burmeister

Outside/soft funds

Outside or soft funds are received through the agreement process. Since this is not part of the appropriated funds (D projects), a separate package is submitted in ARMPS. The package is similar to the appropriated funds and includes MU Talking Points. Some may find it helpful to prepare a draft spreadsheet with the salary, supplies, RSA and travel and make sure that it equals the funding amount for the fiscal year for each project. One resource when working on this section should be the budgets submitted with the Incoming Funds Requests (IFR). The Status of Funds (SOF) budget year does not always match the fiscal year, but it will give you a rough idea if the numbers provided are on track and how the funds are allocated. It is also helpful to break out the salary by position for the Position Staffing Plan (PSP). This is a great tool to cross check all the figures ensuring they match before you enter the information into ARMPS.

Checklist

After the information is compiled and entered in ARMPS, the final step is to go through the checklist provided in the Area Administrative Office Supplemental Instructions in Enclosure 9 of the FY2021 Annual Resource Management Plan Guidance.

SY time in ARIS

After the ARMPS is complete and approved, [ensure the SY time per research project listed in the ARMPS matches the D projects in ARIS. If the SY time does not match, enter the updated SY time percentage in ARIS.](#)

The PSA plays an important role in the ARMP process. It begins with collecting and compiling information before the program is even opened. Then the PSA provides a second set of eyes to review information and to ensure that each item on the checklist is completed. As always, if you have questions you can always reach out to any one of the council members or other PSAs in the area.

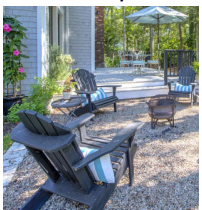


Time-out!

Submitted by: Jessica Boyer

Working from home has become a new “normal.” After many weeks of teleworking, finding ways to decompress from work, family, and being quarantined can be a challenge. It is important to take a time-out every day to decompress to release tensions and irritability. Here are some helpful tips for decompressing:

- Grow a garden. For most this can seem daunting as not everyone is blessed with a green thumb. If a garden isn't possible, take it back to kindergarten by growing a seed in a disposable cup. Follow instructions for planting and watering. Small accomplishments can be refreshing to the soul and train your black thumb to be a green one.
- Build something. Yes, build! Find simple, easy projects at your local hardware stores or online. There are many sites that have the very basic building ideas for the beginner to expert. DIY projects are very rewarding.
- Take a long drive. Sometimes changing the scenery is needed. Be sure to take the scenic routes and discover local places you've always wanted to go but just never knew where they were. This way, you will have an idea of what places you'd like to visit when everything re-opens.
- Relax in the yard. “Puerto Backyardo” is a nice place to sit and enjoy the weather. Read a book out there, take a nap, or gather ideas of how you'd like to landscape your new stay-cation location.
- Bike rides and long walks are great ways to exercise and to relieve stress.



Simple changes to the daily normal can relieve stress and keep the mind focusing on the positive. Now is a good time to do things that work commutes and days in the office made challenging.

Becoming the Right Hand of your Supervisor

Submitted by: Beth Burmeister

How do you become the right hand of your supervisor? Three years ago, I would have answered this question differently. I would have rattled off a long list of things that I did for my supervisor as his right-hand assistant. Then my work life was turned upside down. My relationship with my supervisor went from a good working relationship where I knew exactly what to do next and planned future projects with confidence to a rotating Acting RL assignment. This meant a new supervisor with a different working style, expectations and personality every 90 days. This situation shattered my perspective of what a good assistant is and does. I found that “one size does not fit all” when it comes to becoming the right hand of your supervisor. The good news is that the Acting RLs and I survived. I learned a few things along the way. Instead of a list of tips of how to become the right hand of your supervisor, I am going to share some overarching principles as you develop a supervisor and right-hand assistant relationship.

Show respect. In ARS or at least our lab, we call our scientists by their first names in general conversations. What I learned early on from a respected mentor is to show respect by referring to them with their doctor title when communicating outside the unit especially on the phone and in written correspondence.

Earn trust. The best way to earn trust is to do your job well and keep your promises. When something happens and you can't keep a deadline you set with your supervisor, explain the delay and your plan to meet a new deadline. When you make a mistake (not if, but when), confess it right away. I have found that it is best to tell your supervisor as soon as possible that you goofed and your plan to rectify the situation.

Keep confidences confidential. My supervisor knows that she can use me as a sounding board for ideas. She also knows that I will keep these conversations confidential and not spread them down the hall.

Develop open and effective communication. Communication is a two-way street. Sometimes written or verbal communication can be misunderstood or interpreted incorrectly. If there is any question, I either restate what I heard or draft an email with what I understood and ask, “Is this what you wanted?” Sometimes I am way off. Then we have a good laugh about it. The tension is broken, and the communication is restored.

Learning someone's communication style takes time. One scientist explained “As a general rule, most scientists are introverts and focused on what they do. Sometimes it takes a little prodding to get them to open up and communicate.”

Watch your supervisor's back. Help your supervisor and all your scientists put forward a good image of themselves and the Agency. The best example is to review written communication. As an office professional, official communication should come through you before it is sent. Make sure that your supervisor or scientist uses the correct letterhead and follows the guidelines in the correspondence manual. Check spelling and grammar. For example, several years ago I heard about a scientist who was in a hurry to send a document in overnight mail. The Program Support Assistant asked to check the document. The scientist refused and demanded that the document be put directly in overnight mail. Unfortunately, the scientist used a program that converted his verbal dictation into text. The scientist failed to proofread it. The document detailed the scientist's recent trip to Moscow, Russia. The software incorrectly transcribed Moscow as “Ma's cow” throughout the document.

Another way to support your supervisor is to be your supervisor's ears and eyes. A situation can't be changed if the supervisor is unaware of it. If there is rumbling of discontent in the ranks, let your supervisor know in a way to protect the confidentiality of the party making the comment.

Becoming the Right Hand of your Supervisor (continued)

Submitted by: Beth Burmeister

Ask what a right-hand assistant means to them. This information is especially helpful when you are working with a supervisor whose working style is different from yours. For example, my supervisor asked me to add deadlines and reminders as appointments on the Outlook calendar. Then she doesn't need to worry that she will forget an important deadline. The deadline/reminder is also an appointment on my calendar, so she doesn't need to remind me. My supervisor's simple suggestion is a win-win situation that helps us avoid frustrating each other.

Weather difficult situations together. The principles I mentioned above were foundational to establish a good working relationship with my supervisor. What solidified our supervisor and right-hand assistant relationship was going through difficult situations together as a team. We experienced more than our share of dark days. When I look back, I can't believe all the challenging things that we have been through in a relatively short time. It hasn't been pretty, but I can say with assurance that we are both stronger individually and as a team because of these experiences.

Right now, we are all weathering a difficult situation together. We have had to transition to a telework environment with little time to prepare. Aside from work, our personal lives have been turned upside down in the wake of efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19. Office professionals, this is your time to shine! Show your supervisor that you are a dependable right-hand assistant.

How do you become the right-hand of your supervisor? The bottom line is the relationship that you develop through showing respect, earning trust and learning to work together. In this season of a global pandemic, this is your time to shine as the right hand of your supervisor.