The Intangible Effects of "Going Paperless": IRB Staff Outcomes One Year after Implementing an Electronic Work Management System
Elicia D Preslan, MS; Dawn Anderson
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Background: Implementing an electronic work management system has been demonstrated, in a variety of office settings, to reduce administrative costs and turn-around time while increasing efficiency and productivity. However, little is known about how an electronic conversion impacts the qualitative measures of office management, including individual job roles and functions, time management, stress levels, and job satisfaction. Thus, the goal of this project was to describe and explain the experiences of an academic medical center IRB during the implementation of a new electronic work management system, and to estimate the qualitative outcomes of this electronic conversion in staff, reviewers, and the academic community.

Methods: The work presented here is part of a prospective, observational study using mixed social-science methods, and the IRB staff comprised one arm of this protocol. This group completed web surveys at the time the electronic system was rolled out (baseline) and then at multiple time points during the implementation and conversion process. This study is ongoing, and surveys will continue to be administered for another year until the conversion process has been completed.

Findings: Interim results from the first year of electronic implementation showed that there was little change in the experiences of IRB staff during the first few months after rollout. Between months four and six, a difference became apparent as more electronic submissions were received, and the staff began to respond to new demands and adapt their individual procedures. Staff are now spending more time on screening and review (problem prevention/solution) activities and less time on administrative (operational) responsibilities. Subjective opinions of office efficiency were unchanged, but office productivity was estimated to decrease as more queries were received from the academic community. Staff satisfaction with the implementation process also decreased over the first few months as problems were encountered. The electronic system had little effect on general job satisfaction, but there were more frequent reports of feeling role ambiguity and role conflicts. General levels job stress remained unchanged, but the staff reported an increased experience of job stressors and more symptoms of job strain.

Conclusions: Results of this study are not generalizable due to the small study population available and the subjectivity of this institutional experience. However, future research could replicate this study at other institutions or compare outcomes across institutions. It is hoped that our outcomes and experiences will help other institutions to anticipate and address staff needs when planning to “go paperless.”