







Chapter 2.3



Routes into Research Management and Administration

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Abstract

This chapter presents results from the ‘How I Became a Research Manager and Administrator’ (HIBARMA) section of the 2022 Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP-3) global survey of Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs). Here we focus on routes into the profession, the skills that were useful in gaining that first RMA role and the career satisfaction of individuals. In addition, we look at some of the qualitative feedback from the survey questions to present an overall picture of the variety of backgrounds and routes that can lead people to the field of RMA. Finally, illustrative vignettes highlight the diversity of routes into the profession and some common themes attracting professionals to ‘the best job of all’ (Andreson, 2016) – Research Management and Administration.

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Introduction

Previous surveys (including previous iterations of RAAAP) have provided some information about routes into the profession. There have been a few recent initiatives for collecting testimonials and personal stories that have added colour and context. This chapter will summarise these findings and initiatives and focus on the results of the third iteration of the RAAAP survey which included a section on HIBARMA. We will look at various types of backgrounds and skills that RMAs brought with them to the profession, along with their level of knowledge about what this field entails. We will explore career satisfaction and perceived challenges. Finally, we will present some excerpts from respondents' text, highlighting a few of the fascinating background stories, along with a few of their reasons for entering the profession, frustrations, and passion for the field of research management and administration and the RMA community. Overall, we will see that while there are some common routes into the profession, RMAs can come from just about any conceivable background.

Methodology

RAAAP-3 is the third iteration of the Research Administration as a Profession survey, initially funded by NCURA (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a). The first survey was conducted in 2016, and the second in 2019, but the focus of this chapter is the 2022 survey. Each survey included common elements in relation to RMA demographics as well as a guest section. For this third iteration, the additional questions (Fischer et al., 2022) focused on its routes into the profession, giving RAAAP-3 the subtitle 'HIBARMA' (How I Became a Research Manager and Administrator). As with the previous iteration, the survey was endorsed by the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS). As such, the 20 or so member organisations were committed to disseminating the survey to their members. While exact numbers are difficult to derive due to overlapping memberships, it is estimated that the survey was distributed to around 30,000 individuals.

The survey was constructed with feedback from INORMS members in the latter half of 2021, received ethical/IRB approval from the co-principal investigators' institutions, and then tested before launch in January 2022. It remained open until May 2022, to allow the various associations to schedule reminders into their standard communications schedules.

Following the survey closure a process of data cleansing, anonymising, and limited back coding was undertaken – for example, when a country was not selected but an institution was provided.

Results

In total, there were 5,076 responses (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022), however, only 3,532 provided geographic location from 66 countries (*CountryOfEmployment*). As for previous RAAAP survey iterations, these were grouped into the following *AnalysisRegionofEmployment*: 30.9% (of $n = 3,532$) from the USA; 28.5% from Europe (excluding UK); 13.5% from the UK; 10.8% from Oceania; 5.0% from Canada; and 11.3% from all other areas, aggregated into *Rest of the World*.

The following results focus on the questions related to entrance into the Research Management and Administration Profession, included either in Part A of the survey or Part C, specially dedicated to understanding – How I Became a Research Manager and Administrator (HIBARMA). As mentioned before, this is not a representative sample of the RMAs around the world, but, taking into consideration the high number of completed responses obtained, it is still a useful snapshot of the profession and the only study bringing together data from the different regions of the world. The results presented could then lead to further studies and discussions on the matter.

When asked, see Fig. 2.3.1, ‘17. How did you come to work in research management and administration?’ (*JoinRReason*) across the world (*AnalysisRegionOfEmployment*), more than half (59.2% of $n = 3,523$) reported that they came to the profession because it was a job they *Applied* for (*perhaps one of many when you were looking for a job*), indicating many may not have been seeking out RMA when they applied. The largest proportions of those who just *Applied* were in the *UK* (70.8% of $n = 476$) and in *Canada* (68.9% of $n = 177$). It is worth noting that coming to the profession by intentional *Choice* was the second highest response in general (21.2%) in all the analysed regions except in the *USA*, where *Other reasons* (14.9% of $n = 1,090$) to come into the profession was a little higher than by *Choice* (13.5%). Coming to the profession because of being *Moved by the leadership or supervisor (not by choice)* was the least common reported option overall (8.7%). This observation holds true for each region, except in the *Rest of the World* where almost a quarter of respondents (23.5% of $n = 396$) reported being moved to the profession.

Considering that most of the respondents came to the profession just because a job was available, it is worth trying to understand what made them apply for the position.

With the next question, see Fig. 2.3.2, ‘18. How important were the following factors to move into research management and administration?’, respondents were asked to rank several factors that contributed to their move into RMA. When analysing all the factors, the only one considered by the majority of respondents to be ‘5 Really important/ relevant’ or ‘4’ (5 and 4 on the 5-point Likert-type scale) was ‘*It was a profession I felt my skills would be a good match for*’ (*JoinRASkillsMatch*) (69.1% of $n = 3,436$). Following that, the fact that ‘*A position was available, so I applied and got the job, even though I did not have any experience*’ (*JoinRAJustApplied*) was rated 5 or 4 on the Likert-type scale for almost half of the respondents (47.9% of $n = 1,610$). The next most common

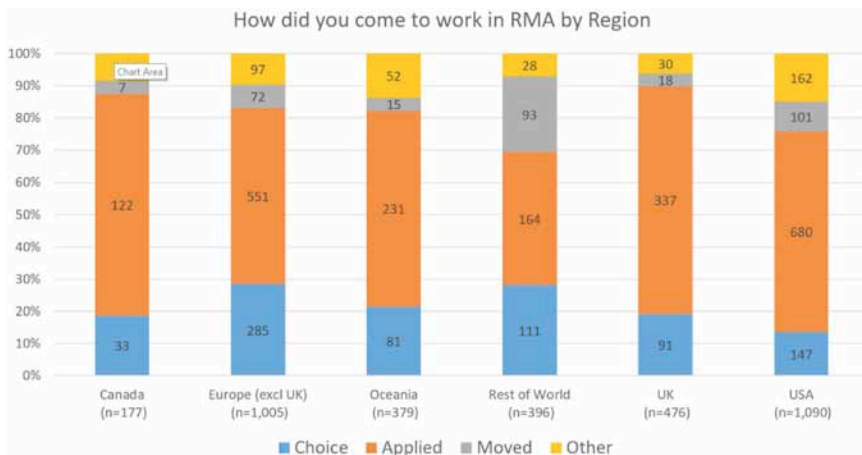


Fig. 2.3.1. Routes into RMA by Region.

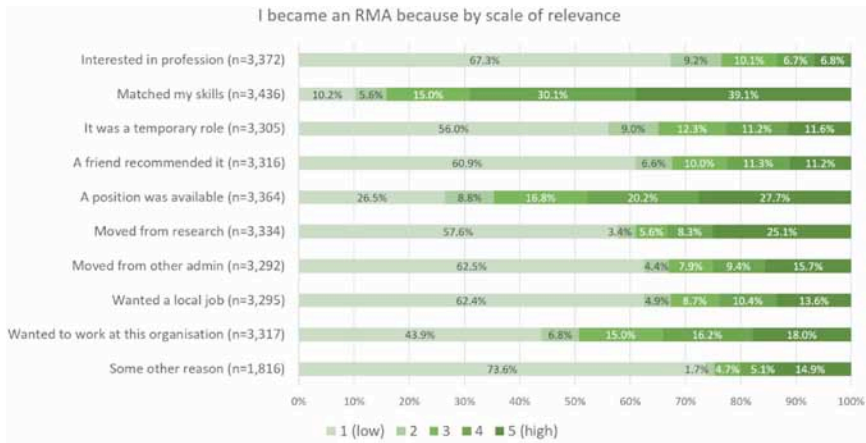


Fig. 2.3.2. Factors to Become an RMA by the Scale of Relevance.

factors were ‘I wanted to work at this particular University/College etc ...’ (**JoinRAUni**) (34.2% of n = 3,317) and ‘I was previously an academic/researcher and moved into research administration’ (**JoinRAResearcher**) (33.4% of n = 3,334). While some factors are highly important, it seems that all these factors were important to some.

When analysing these factors in the different regions of the world (**Analysis-RegionOfEmployment**) and considering the top two responses on the Likert-type scale, we do not see many differences across the world, Table 2.3.1. However, for ‘It was a profession I was interested in while studying’ (**JoinRAInterested**), which was the least important factor overall (13.5%), was one of the top reasons for the *Rest of the World* region (37.6% of n = 370). This suggests, perhaps counterintuitively, that while RMA is a somewhat hidden profession in most of the world, even where it has been around for over 50 years such as in the *USA* and *Canada*, in other parts of the world where it is newer, there is more visibility.

Considering that most of the respondents reported that the matching of skills was relevant or very relevant to their move into the RMA profession, it is then useful to explore what these skills are.

When asked ‘36. What skills/experience do you believe helped you get your first RMA role?’, respondents could select from a list of 15 different skills/experiences, plus ‘Other (please give details)’, Table 2.3.2. The top five skills selected by the respondents across the world were ‘Organisational skills’ (**SkillOrganisational**) (72.1% of 3,465), ‘Communication skills’ (**SkillComms**) (69.7%), ‘Motivation to learn new things’ (**SkillLearning**) (67.8%), ‘Team player/personable’ (**SkillTeam**) (63.3%), and ‘Attention to detail’ (**SkillDetail**) (63.1%). On the other hand, the least selected skill was ‘Training/Certification in some aspect of RMA’ (**SkillTraining**) (8.0%), probably suggesting that very few respondents come to the profession already possessing training or certification in RMA subjects, rather than that those certifications are not valued.

There is not much regional variation in these top-rated skills with the notable exception of *Rest of the World*. There, the top attribute was *Research experience* (**Skill-Research**) (57.3% of n = 391) and the second most useful was *Interest in Research* (**SkillResearchInterest**) (52.7%). Perhaps a greater tradition in moving to the RMA profession from previous research positions may explain that divergence. A noticeable outlier is the importance of ‘Prior experience in international contexts’ (**SkillInternational**) which for *Europe (excluding UK)* at 39.2% (of n = 990) is much higher than the

Table 2.3.1. Factors considered important for becoming an RMA by Region

	Canada (n=82-173)	Europe (excl UK) (n=516-984)	Oceania (n=204-371)	Rest of World (n=235-376)	UK (n=233-469)	USA (n=546-1,063)	Total (n=1,816-3,436)
Interested in profession (a)	9.4%	13.7%	8.9%	37.6%	8.0%	9.3%	13.5%
Matched my skills (b)	71.1%	70.2%	66.6%	63.8%	72.5%	69.0%	69.1%
It was a temporary role (c)	26.8%	25.2%	28.5%	24.9%	21.3%	17.7%	22.7%
A friend recommended it (d)	22.6%	19.3%	25.5%	26.5%	16.0%	26.0%	22.6%
A position was available (e)	49.4%	48.5%	49.7%	40.7%	45.6%	49.7%	47.9%
Moved from research (f)	37.4%	44.5%	33.6%	44.3%	37.7%	16.7%	33.4%
Moved from other admin (g)	24.7%	20.3%	31.7%	27.2%	31.3%	23.8%	25.1%
Wanted a local job (h)	30.4%	19.2%	19.7%	13.0%	31.3%	29.2%	24.0%
Wanted to work at this organisation (i)	36.8%	28.5%	30.0%	35.7%	31.9%	41.1%	34.2%
Some other reason (z)	30.5%	15.5%	20.1%	18.3%	24.9%	21.4%	20.0%

Table 2.3.2. Skills and experiences that helped to get the first RMA role by Region

	Canada (n=176)	Europe (excl UK) (n=990)	Oceania (n=374)	Rest of World (n=391)	UK (n=472)	USA (n=1,062)	Total (n=3,465)
Research experience	59.7%	47.0%	43.0%	57.3%	48.3%	25.2%	41.9%
RMA	42.0%	35.7%	23.3%	33.2%	28.0%	30.7%	31.8%
Training/ Certification	8.5%	9.6%	5.6%	17.6%	2.8%	6.0%	8.0%
Multitasking	65.9%	61.7%	51.1%	46.8%	58.5%	63.7%	59.2%
Attention to detail	77.8%	48.4%	68.7%	44.0%	62.9%	79.6%	63.1%
Organizational skills	76.1%	73.2%	77.0%	47.1%	78.8%	75.0%	72.1%
Interest in Research	71.0%	57.2%	55.1%	52.7%	60.0%	40.2%	52.3%
Research organisation experience	64.8%	52.5%	57.2%	39.9%	55.9%	37.9%	48.2%
Team Player	68.8%	58.4%	66.3%	40.9%	69.1%	71.8%	63.3%
Data interpretation	55.1%	45.8%	53.7%	39.6%	63.3%	57.6%	52.4%
Communication skills	75.6%	60.9%	77.5%	51.4%	77.8%	77.2%	69.7%
Learning new things	64.2%	68.3%	58.8%	51.4%	64.0%	76.2%	67.0%
International skills	14.2%	39.2%	13.9%	17.9%	16.5%	6.8%	19.8%
Problem Solving	63.6%	56.5%	62.8%	41.2%	61.7%	68.4%	60.1%
Integrity	60.2%	45.6%	50.0%	46.8%	44.1%	64.6%	52.6%
Service Culture	44.9%	39.1%	46.3%	27.9%	34.7%	48.8%	41.3%
Other skills	8.0%	6.2%	11.8%	3.3%	7.4%	10.7%	8.1%

other regions. It is also interesting to observe the differences across the world concerning the number of skills highlighted as relevant by at least 50% of its respondents. In *Canada* and in *Oceania*, 11 skills were selected by more than 50% of its respondents, in *UK* this number was 10, in *USA* 9, in *Europe (excluding UK)* 8, but in the *Rest of the World* only 4 skills were selected by more than 50% respondents from this region.

Considering that across the world more than half of respondents (59.2% of $n = 3,523$) came to the profession because ‘*It was a job I applied for (perhaps one of many when you were looking for a job)*’ (*Applied*), we thought it would be interesting to understand what their initial career plan was before becoming an RMA.

When asked ‘*34. What career did you intend to pursue before becoming an RMA?*’ (*CareerPlan*), across the world, more than a quarter (28.4% of $n = 3,288$) wanted to pursue a *13. Scientific* career, the next most popular career area was *16. Education* (16.0%, $n = 525$) and 13.6% ($n = 447$) reported they had *No plan* for their career. Careers in *14. Administration* (9.7%), *17. Health* (6.4%), and *11. Finance* (6.1%) was the next most popular career areas plans for RMAs when they started thinking about possible professions.

Note that, in both Tables 2.3.3 and 2.3.4 where no individual cell in a column exceeded 4.0%, those columns were combined (in order to reduce the number of columns in the table, and hence aid readability) into the first column show (1.9,12,20.21 – Various). Also, note that none of the columns had all 0.0% entries.

Similar results are obtained when comparing the *CareerPlan* in the different regions across the world (*AnalysisRegionOfEmployment*). Pursuing a *13. Scientific* career was the top initial career plan in all regions, followed by a career in *16. Education* was the second most selected career, except in the *UK* where the option *No plan* occupied the second position (24.2% of $n = 454$). It is also worth noting that in the *USA* a career in *11. Financial* had a relatively high proportion of responses (11.6% of $n = 1,033$), coming in third with the same number of responses as *No plan*.

Clearly a large proportion of RMAs did not plan a career in Research Management and Administration. Looking at their most recent career area might shed some light onto how they found their way into the profession. For that, respondents were asked ‘*Thinking about what you did before you became a research manager and administrator, for the (up to 3) most important role/jobs that you had, please indicate the approximate number of years, select the best fit of industry sector for your role (not your employer as a whole), ...*’ and here we look at the responses to ‘*Most Recent pre-RMA role*’ (*PreRMARoleAreaRecent*).

The results are similar to the responses regarding career plans, with almost one-quarter of the respondents working in the *13. Scientific* (23.5% of $n = 2,802$) area before coming to the RMA profession, followed by the area of *16. Education* (22.7%) and with *14. Administration* (20.7%) becoming more prominent. A possible explanation is that a great proportion of RMAs started by working in the University (part of *16. Education*) sector and then moved to Research Management and Administration – worldwide 81.4% (of $n = 3,527$) RMAs work in Universities – see the discussion of *InstitutionCharacter2* in Chapter 2.2, Oliveira, Fischer, et al. (2023).

We do see that RMAs can come from any sector into the profession. Considering this diversity, it can be important to understand ‘*35. What were the top challenges in your initial role in RMA?*’. For this question, respondents were asked to select from a list of nine challenges, with the option to identify *Other* challenges and to register that *No challenges* were faced.

Table 2.3.3. Career planned before being an RMA by Region

	Canada (n=172)	Europe (excl UK) (n=909)	Oceania (n=354)	Rest of World (n=366)	UK (n=454)	USA (n=1,033)	Total (n=3,288)
1. Agriculture	3.5%	2.0%	1.4%	2.2%	0.4%	0.6%	1.4%
2. Mining	0.0%	0.1%	0.3%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
3. Manufacturing	0.0%	0.6%	0.6%	2.7%	1.1%	0.5%	0.8%
4. Electricity	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
5. Water supply	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	2.5%	0.4%	0.0%	0.5%
6. Construction	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	1.1%	0.7%	0.0%	0.3%
7. Retail	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%
8. Transportation	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%
9. Accommodation	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%	0.2%
10. Information	0.6%	4.1%	3.7%	7.1%	3.3%	3.1%	3.8%
11. Financial	4.7%	4.2%	3.7%	3.6%	1.8%	11.6%	6.1%
12. Real estate	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.1%
13. Scientific	27.9%	35.3%	33.3%	29.0%	28.9%	20.3%	28.4%
14. Administration	8.7%	9.8%	11.6%	6.6%	8.1%	10.8%	9.7%
15. Public administration	4.1%	4.6%	2.5%	4.9%	1.5%	2.6%	3.3%
16. Education	25.6%	12.0%	14.1%	18.3%	16.5%	17.4%	16.0%
17. Health	6.4%	3.3%	7.3%	6.6%	4.6%	9.5%	6.4%
18. Arts	2.3%	2.3%	4.8%	0.8%	4.6%	5.4%	3.7%
19. Other services	3.5%	3.6%	3.7%	3.8%	2.9%	5.0%	4.0%
20. Homeworking	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
21. Overseas	1.2%	2.5%	0.0%	0.8%	0.4%	0.3%	1.0%
No plan	11.6%	14.1%	12.1%	7.1%	24.2%	11.6%	13.6%

Table 2.3.4. Area of most recent job before RMA by Region

	Canada (n=172)	Europe (excl UK) (n=909)	Oceania (n=354)	Rest of World (n=366)	UK (n=454)	USA (n=1,033)	Total (n=3,288)
1..9,12,20..21 - Various	4.7%	6.7%	3.1%	12.3%	3.5%	2.5%	5.1%
10. Information	0.6%	4.1%	3.7%	7.1%	3.3%	3.1%	3.8%
11. Financial	4.7%	4.2%	3.7%	3.6%	1.8%	11.6%	6.1%
13. Scientific	27.9%	35.3%	33.3%	29.0%	28.9%	20.3%	28.4%
14. Administration	8.7%	9.8%	11.6%	6.6%	8.1%	10.8%	9.7%
15. Public administration	4.1%	4.6%	2.5%	4.9%	1.5%	2.6%	3.3%
16. Education	25.6%	12.0%	14.1%	18.3%	16.5%	17.4%	16.0%
17. Health	6.4%	3.3%	7.3%	6.6%	4.6%	9.5%	6.4%
18. Arts	2.3%	2.3%	4.8%	0.8%	4.6%	5.4%	3.7%
19. Other services	3.5%	3.6%	3.7%	3.8%	2.9%	5.0%	4.0%
No plan	11.6%	14.1%	12.1%	7.1%	24.2%	11.6%	13.6%

Across the world, the top challenges reported by the respondents were the ‘Lack of knowledge, expertise’ (**ChallengeLackOfKnowledge**) (59.9% of $n = 3,446$), the ‘Lack of training’ (**ChallengeLackOfTraining**) (43.1%), the ‘Unclear career framework/job architecture at the institution’ (**ChallengeCareer**) (34.3%), and ‘Not having a professional network for support’ (**ChallengeNoNetwork**) (30.5%). The selection of these as top challenges can be related to the fact that most of the respondents came to the profession without a previous experience or knowledge about it, or specialised training. The absence of a clear career framework, and many times clarification about the profession and its roles, is also an added difficulty, intrinsically related to the ‘Lack of professional recognition/lack of respect’ (**ChallengeRecognition**) (21.3%, $n = 735$). A very low number of respondents (4.8%) reported ‘I had no challenges’ (**ChallengeNone**) in their first role as RMA.

Across the world (**AnalysisRegionOfEmployment**), similar challenges are faced by RMA professionals (Table 2.3.5). It is particularly interesting to observe that, even in regions where the profession exists for a longer period, such as in the *USA* and *Canada*, the ‘Unclear career framework/job architecture at the institution’ is reported by the respondents to be in the top three challenges. One notable regional difference is for the challenge ‘Not a permanent position’ (**ChallengePermanent**) (23.3%) which is much lower in the *USA* (6.8% of $n = 1,048$). This could be related to the mainstreaming of RMAs due to the age of the profession in the US, but this is not reflected in *Canada* (33.0% of 176) where permanency is a sizeable issue for those joining the ranks of RMA.

Regardless of the challenges mentioned above, and when asked ‘37. Are you satisfied with your career choice in RMA?’, most of the respondents are satisfied with their career choice ‘Yes’ (56.3% of $n = 3,474$) or ‘Mainly’ (34.3%). Combining these two responses gives an overall career satisfaction of 90.6%, as compared to the responses for ‘A little’ (5.0%), ‘No’ (1.2%), and ‘Not Applicable – this is just a job, not a career’ (3.2%).

Taking this metric of RMA career satisfaction (**Career Satisfaction** = *Yes* or *Mainly*), then satisfaction ranges from 94.1% (of $n = 1,002$) in the *USA* to 86.5% (of $n = 385$) in the *Rest of the World*, as shown in Fig. 2.3.3.

Case Studies

Through the RAAAP-3 survey, not only did we obtain rich quantitative data as above, but also insights from real-life experiences of RMAs reflecting some of their interesting background stories, biggest challenges, and enthusiasm for this profession.

For instance, when participants were asked to provide detailed information on their previous roles before they became an RMA, there was a free text box ‘33a. Please give details’. We received some responses that reflected traditional career paths of higher education, doctoral study, and research. However, we also obtained responses from those arriving from very different sectors, for example, journalists, national park rangers, the retail industry, theatre artists, etc. This supports the premise that RMA is an area where transferable skills are important. Below are some quotes from RMAs, together with their personal context. Note that **emphasis** has been added by the authors.

Table 2.3.5. Top challenges in the initial role in RMA by Region

	Canada (n=176)	Europe (excl UK) (n=980)	Oceania (n=371)	Rest of World (n=391)	UK (n=470)	USA (n=1,058)	Total (n=3,446)
No Network	27.3%	34.1%	25.9%	36.6%	28.5%	27.9%	30.5%
Lack of Knowledge	58.0%	56.7%	55.3%	54.0%	53.8%	69.8%	59.9%
Lack of training	44.3%	41.9%	36.9%	48.8%	33.8%	48.2%	43.1%
Understanding the culture	21.6%	17.2%	27.5%	24.8%	25.5%	25.6%	23.1%
New profession	20.5%	27.3%	12.9%	23.3%	20.9%	16.3%	20.7%
Lack of professional recognition	22.2%	26.0%	17.5%	19.4%	21.7%	18.7%	21.3%
No permanent position	33.0%	31.1%	31.8%	25.8%	31.5%	6.8%	23.3%
Unclear Career Framework	35.2%	36.3%	31.0%	35.0%	38.3%	31.3%	34.3%
Lack of institutional policies	21.0%	28.6%	14.0%	28.4%	17.7%	16.4%	21.4%
Other Challenge	18.2%	10.4%	17.3%	6.1%	16.4%	13.7%	12.9%
No challenge	5.7%	5.0%	8.4%	2.6%	3.8%	4.5%	4.8%

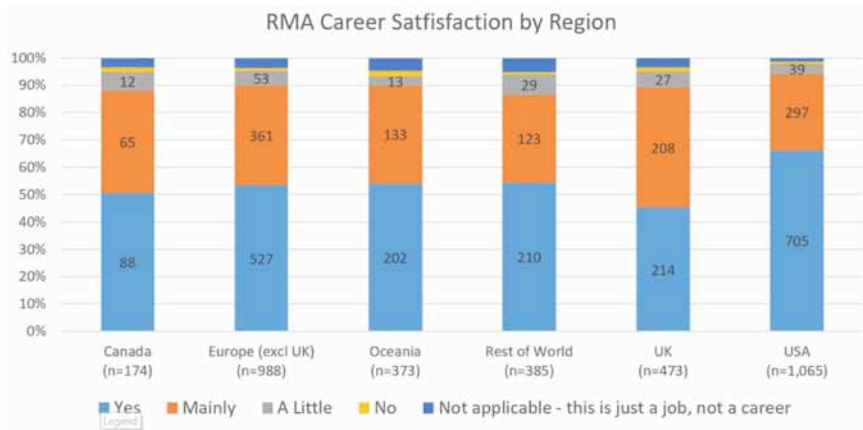


Fig. 2.3.3. RMA Career Satisfaction by Region.

*'I was working as a consultant with The Economist Intelligence Unit (**Economist Impact** today) prior to my current RMA, and before that as a **public servant** in the city hall of the largest city in Latin America'.*

This professional has been employed in an operational role for less than 5 years. They started as a Research Assistant, developed an impact framework, and presently work as a Research Impact Officer.

*'Most recent pre-RMA role: **Interpreter** (in the sense of resource education) at a historic site. Other pre-RMA role: Various one-off projects for state parks. Longest-ago pre-RMA role: **Trail work and similar duties in federal parks and forests**'.*

This RMA is in an operational role for 10–14 years. Within the RMA profession, they started as a Principal Investigator of a USAID-funded project in the peace corps. Now they work in export compliance.

*'I have worked in Mental Health since 1995. I was a **psychotherapist** in private practice for the past 8 years. I was a **home based therapist** with court involved youth for the 8 years before that. I was in graduate school before that. I was a **substance abuse counselor** for 8 years before that'.*

This professional has recently started their career as an RMA, supporting pre- and post-award duties.

*'TVIFilm editor, previously **swimming teacher** and **swim programme manager**'.*

As an RMA for the past 5 years, this professional is now working in a permanent position as a Research Manager in a clinical trials unit within a higher education organisation.

*'In New Jersey, I had been a **certified Probation Officer** within the Cumberland County's community service program with a caseload of adults and juveniles that I placed in positions to complete their court mandated hours, handled compliance, reports, and closing cases. Prior to that I was a certified **Probation Investigator** within the IV-D (Child Support Unit) where I worked a caseload of 600–700 orders. ...*

For 4-years, I worked **international exports** of veneer logs to Italy, Germany, Japan, Taiwan etc. I handled the financial end of the business (the books, payroll, insurance, and contracts). During the summer, when the sap ran, I worked part time and attended college to finish BA. This was a fascinating job, where I dealt with business men primarily, and included instances of death, theft and murder’.

A seasoned RMA for the past 30 years, this professional is a Research Administrator II and in a managerial role in their organisation.

When asked to provide ‘17a. Please give details’ following the question ‘17. How did you come to work in research management and administration?’, the responses were equally insightful. Some mentioned that it happened accidentally, some joined simply due to the availability of a position or a stable salary; still others felt that RMA offered better work life balance.

‘Fell into RMA somewhat **accidentally** – I was sessionally teaching and took a short fixed term opportunity in RMA over the summer. Ended up thoroughly enjoying it and before I knew it, I was in deep’.

An RMA for the past 9 years, this professional initially started as grants development support and is now a functional and programmatic lead for all library-delivered research support at their organisation.

‘I had a rich experience with **project management outside academia**, I also worked as a project management lecturer at university for a while (before maternity leave), and I had experience of working in a Tech. startup. I was looking for a **stable enough work environment** where I could use and further develop my skills and combine them with my family duties (work-life balance). I had no idea RMAs were a “Thing”, but I’m very excited about the whole movement now. I also started studying my second Masters in Research Management. I love this course’.

This RMA has been a Project Administrator for the past 3 years.

‘I moved into this after having children – I found research administration more **family friendly**. I was able to find a part time job (almost impossible in other research roles) and it seemed **less dog eat dog competitive** – I knew I didn’t have the time or stamina to compete with those without children. I actually discovered I **enjoyed it more than research** so I stayed’.

As a Project Manager for an NIHR-sponsored project, this RMA has been in this profession for the past 3 years.

‘I was just an administrative assistant. Until we had a researcher panicking and yelling in the hallway one day because they **had a proposal due that day** and his admin didn’t know what to do how to help. I **stepped in, calmed him down**, and helped get the **proposal submitted. It hasn’t stopped since**’.

This RMA started as an Administrative Assistant in the department of Chemistry in their organisation 15–19 years ago. Currently, in a leadership position, they work as Manager for Training & Development in Sponsored Projects Services.

‘I applied for the role of Impact Officer when I finished a fixed-term lectureship (which came straight after my PhD). I felt my expertise in **participation in theatre** would translate well to impact work, but it has been even more fitting a role that I thought when I first applied to it. When I applied I didn’t consider it as a longer term career, but now that my **role has broadened** in terms of responsibility and includes research it has become my **preferred career path**’.

This RMA started as an Impact Officer 4 years back. This is their first RMA role and they manage and support research impact for their university.

We were also interested to find out why some RMAs remained in their career of service for a long time '19b. *If you would like to provide more information (on why you stayed or why you are planning on leaving/have left research administration) please do so*'. What makes them stick to this profession? Some were in this sector for their love of research and new learning, some with the ability to be supportive to others, and a few liked the salary this profession offered. Some also provided their perceptions, positive and negative, on how researchers and faculty members view RMAs.

'I don't think I'm naturally inclined towards a service role but I like that I get to exercise creativity, autonomy, critical thinking, writing skills and don't think many non-research professions would offer the intellectual and collegial advantages of this one. I also appreciate the role's flexibility – there's always room to innovative, propose new initiatives, etc. (at least where I am, with supportive management). Finally, having built a portfolio career across pre- and post-award, I feel there are decent opportunities to continue to seek interesting work'.

This professional has been an RMA for the past 9 years. They work in a senior pre-award research support role providing capacity building and proposal development support to collaborative projects, mostly European Union.

'I'm excited about this profession, enjoyed all research projects I have been working on so far, and I still see a lot of unexplored potential in the research infrastructures in our geographical region, these are my reasons to stay'.

A seasoned RMA for more than 10 years, this professional started as an administrative support to certain scientific committees and currently is managing an EU-funded project as consortium coordinator.

'NCURA has become like a family to me. At one point I lost my job and was looking outside research administration. The thought of losing my NCURA friends was very depressing. Thank goodness I found another job!'

An RMA for more than 30 years, this professional started as an accountant in a central university office and is currently providing broad administrative support to a large, well-funded Principal Investigator's lab.

'Working in research administration seems to have changed in ways that now are making me reconsider staying in the field. Despite the major role research administration plays in supporting faculty and other university research, as well as enabling funding for universities, it seems research administration staff are treated generally poorly – a high, unrelenting work demand partnered with lack of respect from faculty and administrators. This plays out in office space, salaries, insufficient funding and other support, lack of support by higher administration to deal with faculty behaviour, and so on. Sadly, a younger women in this field (who recently also completed her PhD) commented to me that it seemed increasing like a female ghetto. Are men choosing this field? What roles/levels are they working in research administration, and how long do they stay before moving on and/or up? Why does the field appear to largely attract women? I've enjoyed my career in the field, particularly the problem solving and variety, but the opportunity to work remotely and have time to think during COVID has made me reconsider continuing'.

An RMA for more than 20 years, this professional has been Director of the Research Office for over a decade. Initially starting their career as a Research Associate, they moved onto an Assistant Director's role before their current position.

*'I feel that the **job matches my strengths and experience** and I love the conviviality of my team. There is always something **new to learn**. Going fully digital has been a great learning experience and our systems will be updated shortly. I'm looking forward to being part of the team implementing the new system'*.

This professional has been an RMA for the past 9 years. They support grants management as a full-time RMA in their university. They are also involved in training and capacity building new team members.

It is hoped that analyses of these inputs could inform institutional/university leaderships, allowing them to design systems that make RMAs feel more valued in their profession.

Conclusions

RMAs come from every different kind of background imaginable. Skill sets and paths into the profession are noticeably varied. Looking back at the various topics covered, though, some themes do begin to emerge. Only just over a fifth (21.2% of 3,523) intentionally joined the RMA profession, with nearly three times as many (59.2%) happening upon it. The profession is in some ways hidden and unknown.

Over a quarter (25.1% of 3,334) reported that they had moved from research into research administration, finding it to be family friendly and having more job stability than a series of research contracts.

Certainly some of the skills would be transferable from a research background, but also from many other fields. Over two thirds (69.1% of $n = 3,436$) of respondents said they entered RMA because they believed '18. ... *It was a profession I felt my skills would be a good match for*' (4+5 on the 5-point Likert-type scale). Without exception this was the top reason across regions, ranging from 72.5% (of $n = 469$) of UK respondents believing their skills would transfer well, to 63.8% (of $n = 376$) in the *Rest of the World*.

When asked about these skills, it is not surprising that the following skills were selected as the most relevant by most regions: '*Organisational skills*', '*Communication skills*', '*Motivation to learn new things*', '*Team player/personable*', and '*Attention to detail*'. In contrast with these soft/transferable skills being important, the '*Lack of knowledge, expertise*' was the biggest challenge for new RMAs (59.9% of 3,446). In an ever-changing ecosystem, full of rapidly evolving technologies and policies, this may be a persistent issue. Even with the initial learning curve, 9 out of 10 RMAs were satisfied (*Yes* – 56.3% (of 3,458) or *Mainly* 34.3%) with their career choice.

Reviewing the quotes from some of the responses, the breadth of the collective backgrounds and identities of RMAs becomes apparent. There is no one clear path to the profession, but many, and a multitude of experiences to be gained along the way and shared with the broader RMA community. The passion many feel for their profession and community resonates in these excerpts.

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