

Sharon Abdullah

Behind the Mask

October 22, 2021

Barr: Good afternoon. Today is October 22, 2021. My name is Gabrielle Barr, and I'm the Archivist at the Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum. Today I have the pleasure of speaking with Sharon Abdullah. Ms. Abdullah is the Lead Management Analyst and the Assistant to the CIT Director at CIT [Center for Information Technology]. Thank you very much for being with me and speaking about your COVID-19 experiences.

Abdullah: Thank you.

Barr: Will you please describe the daily responsibilities associated with your role?

Abdullah: I'm a Management Analyst in CIT, and I manage a team of administrative staff. Mainly Management Analysts and Program Specialists, who provide support to the senior leadership at CIT—so the Deputy Director, the Executive Officer, and the other senior leaders in our Institute. Other than daily support, we manage programs like telework and engagement efforts, IC-wide [Institutes and Centers] events, CFC [Combined Federal Campaign], and, if we were in person, a lot of engagement events. And then just special projects on behalf of the Director and leadership.

Barr: What types of special projects have you worked on in the past, or are you working on currently?

Abdullah: My office plans special projects like the annual award ceremony, which this year is going to be virtual, so it's very different than what we've ever done before. We've always had it in person. There are about 400 to 500 awardees, and we always go to one of the buildings around Fernwood, and we have extra conference rooms and invite all of our staff to attend. This year, it's virtual. It's coordinating from the beginning to the end—requesting the nominations and working with managers to get the nominations, letting the awardees know that they've been awarded, [determining] length of service and nominating 10, 20, 30, and 40 years of service, recognizing those staff, and just making it an engaging event. It's a big part of what we're doing, and we wanted it to also be engaging, because it's different—it's virtual now. We didn't want it to seem like it was not as important as if we were in person.

Barr: What are some of the things that you had to do to transition?

Abdullah: One big thing that we did to transition is to use the e-Heart system through Invision, which is the electronic system for submitting the awards. We used to do a pretty manual process. It was all email. It was very heavily paper-based. We created books of the nominees and the nominations and printed tons and tons of paper preparing for this, with tons of emails going out. This is why we wanted to look into e-Hearts. How could it benefit us? How could staff go in and do everything electronically, and we didn't have to touch it with paper? We wouldn't be able to do that [during COVID]. How would we get the certificates? How would we get the trophies? How would we order those? How would we work with other offices to get everything together to do that? That was a big challenge. Our award ceremony is November 4th. It is coming together very nicely, but it has been challenging. But we like to

say that we are an IT organization, and we have these resources available to us. That is in the works but going very well.

Barr: That's really great. How did the pandemic affect CIT's policies and operating procedures, as well as some aspects of your job in particular?

Abdullah: For us, in particular, in the front office—the Office of the Director—we were a very paper heavy office. We provided meeting folders for the senior leadership. Everything was paper.

Barr: That's so ironic because you're the technology office.

Abdullah: I know. We have SharePoint, and of course we have different systems, but we made folders, and it was just a choice for some of the leadership. That's how we worked. That's how we accepted things for signature because it was a signed copy. We did have some digital signatures, but it wasn't everything, so the transition to 100% electronic was huge for us. How do we get it? How do we not lose documents? How do we track them? How do we make sure that the staff is getting the same level of service as they were in the office? In the office, you can walk up and down the hall and say, "Hey, I need this signed right away" and get it back. Now, we're going through a system. We don't want to delay, and we don't want to impede, but we also want to make sure that we're efficient and also accurate.

Barr: How did you go about doing that so quickly?

Abdullah: We created SharePoint sites. We had staff uploading forms. We sent many things through email and documentation. Mainly SharePoint with the tracking of the packages and the tracking of things that the Director or Deputy Director needed to sign. Who's seen it? Who still needs to see it? Who has it?

Barr: That's a lot to keep track of.

Abdullah: It is, and that was huge for our office. You don't have the opportunity to run next door to the Director and say "Hey, have we seen this package?" No, we have to follow that electronically. It was new for our office. One thing for our office is that when we started out, it was really Webex meetings. We got really, really, really good at learning Webex—what it can do, how it can do it, how you can set up a meeting. Then [Microsoft] Teams was introduced, so we had to learn Teams' different channels and what Teams can do, not just at a meeting, but different ways to collaborate. Then it was a Skype meeting, and then Zoom. It's learning the different platforms, learning the capabilities, and learning which is appropriate for which meeting—like for our all-hands meeting, what platform we use.

Barr: Do you use different systems for different kinds of meetings?

Abdullah: We do. Sometimes it's preference. It's also according to what the meeting is. If it's a large meeting, and if it can handle many people, then UCC [Unified Communications & Collaboration], our technology team tells us which one is available. But day to day, it's mainly preference. Some of the leadership like Teams and some people prefer Webex, but they all have access to everything. We have to know how it works and who we contact for support if there's an issue. How do we get that same level of support as though we were in the office, and how do we make it seamless? Because the meetings have to go on.

Barr: Yes. What was it like getting the leadership access to all these systems? Not everyone had access to Zoom in the beginning of the pandemic.

Abdullah: There was a little back and forth because you weren't sure: Do I put in a ticket and just get access? Or do I call someone who knows what to do? Those processes weren't as clear. Some had to go through authorization by HHS [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services], and you had to be licensed for this. But it has gotten smoother. We learned to utilize the service desk to make sure that everyone has the equipment they need, and that the equipment works. We used to print a lot, now we don't print anything. Transitioning to that and having Adobe to be able to create and send PDFs and sign digital signatures is very important. And [so is] making sure that our equipment is up to date and that we have the latest things at home, like if we need an extra monitor.

Barr: Yeah. Did you develop any sort of tips for yourself, like shared spreadsheets amongst you and your co-workers to track all this?

Abdullah: We do. Even though we have these SharePoint sites, we always rely on our Excel spreadsheets that we keep separately on the SharePoint site. We have an action tracker, and we have a meeting planning tracker—what meetings are coming up, who was requesting a meeting, and what stage it is in. Is the Director taking it? Is it sent to someone else? We have tag up meetings with the Director often. We have tag up meetings administratively often. We found that was very important. It's also different. When we started, we used to do our meetings, and no one really had their cameras on. It took a while for the comfort level to turn on your camera. It's okay to turn on your camera and it feels okay—it's not something like "I gotcha," but it's how we work now. I think it has also increased that sense of engagement with staff, because I could just walk over and see somebody and talk to whoever I wanted in the office. We have a very small office, so seeing that face is sometimes very good. The camera is always optional, but I have noticed that most people are turning it on now for most of our meetings. I would say that's the biggest difference from starting with meetings in 2020 to now.

Barr: You and your colleagues are the ones who are in charge of setting up all the meetings?

Abdullah: We are for the senior leadership, yes. It's a big job. There are a lot of meetings.

Barr: Did you feel like there was an increase of meetings with COVID-19, or has it ebbed and flowed?

Abdullah: I think it's an increase because the hours are longer, right? Some people have early morning meetings, and it's accommodating those schedules. Some people have longer days with split time. It's being flexible with scheduling and understanding that some people have different responsibilities where they're not available, whereas if they were in the office, they would be available. They have an issue with family, or a responsibility to do something, and they had to leave at a certain time. It's being flexible. It's understanding that we are here to get it done, but we have to be flexible.

Barr: Can you speak a little bit about what your experience has been like in helping other CIT staff make working from home possible for so many NIH employees in such a short amount of time? What was involved, and how did you and your office support them?

Abdullah: In my office, the only thing we would do was process requests if we see something. We process it quickly if there was a special request for someone to work or for equipment. We didn't necessarily provide the equipment. But if a request came up, we were ensuring that, yes, this is a valid

request, and yes, this person does need this equipment, so yes, please process—and the Director or Executive Officer has given the approval with acquisitions. We made sure that we go in often and approve those requests quickly, so that we can get the supplies that people need, and not delay and hang on, which could cause further delays.

Barr: What were some of the issues? I was a person who onboarded during the pandemic, as were two other people in my office. What were some of the challenges in getting them the equipment and programs that they needed when they were not allowed to physically come to campus? There was sometimes that lag time.

Abdullah: That's done through our administrative office. That's not done through the front office of the leadership, but I know that they were mailing equipment. Sometimes you go to the office to pick up equipment and schedule a quick meeting with the new staff who were coming on board, just to show them around where they would be in the office. We did that with the senior leadership. Our administrative staff came, and they met the new director of a program and showed him his office, made sure he had a key and knew where it was, and that he had all the equipment. It was up to our office to order it, but another office facilitated getting it to them. But it is a challenge.

Barr: Did CIT have to implement any other new workflows or systems in order to make everything flow?

Abdullah: I'm not sure about any workflows. With maximum telework, we made sure that everyone knew about the telework policy, and everyone uses Skype to have an active presence and to know when someone is available. We encourage that. We encourage flexible scheduling. The supervisors always encourage staff to be flexible. We know it's very different. Some people have to work later, some people have to start earlier, some people have to take breaks during their day. Just maintaining that flexibility and encouraging communication.

Barr: Do you feel the pandemic has provided any opportunities for growth or leverage for CIT?

Abdullah: I think that it has really highlighted the use and number of virtual meetings and the resources available for that. That has absolutely increased. I've seen metrics that so many have constantly been scheduled. Events and all-hands for NIH have been scheduled. It's just knowing what's available and being able to support that in CIT.

Barr: Can you talk about some of the other things that you have continued to do throughout the pandemic as part of your job? You talked about the award ceremony, but I'm sure that you've been involved in so many other things, considering that you work for leadership.

Abdullah: Yes, so many other things—like brown bags. We've had the leadership doing kind of like a social hour, with people just being able to talk to the Director. No appointment needed. Everyone who's available can just login and have open conversations if they have any questions. The Director continues to meet with new staff and with staff who leave for a short conversation. It's just being available and scheduling those. And different fun events during lunch for game hours.

Barr: What were some of the fun events?

Abdullah: There's an engagement group that we have, and they scheduled a "Wheel of Fortune" time. They scheduled scavenger hunts. They scheduled a "Jeopardy" type thing, "Survivor" meetings, and also

wellness events at lunchtime. We try to do it around lunchtime, because we have contractors and federal staff, and we would like everyone to be able to participate and not have to use leave to do it. Just take your lunch hour and take some time and then you're able to get back. We try to keep it within an hour and keep it open, but it really helps. One thing that we do among my particular staff is we have a staff meeting weekly. We always use our cameras for that. We talk about what's going on, what's happening, and what's coming down the pike. But we also say what have we done for fun that week or what we have done personally—what we're watching on TV, any new movies or series—just to help others stay engaged. It's what we would do if we were in the office—get some lunch or we'd walk to take a break—so we're trying to maintain that engagement.

Barr: Was there a feeling at CIT that people were feeling a little overwhelmed, especially in the beginning of the pandemic?

Abdullah: I didn't hear that, but I'm sure there were. I know some people that I've talked to personally were feeling overwhelmed because of the different schedules. Some people work early, and they start sending requests early, and some people work late and are then trying to fit it in. I know personally, it's been like, "When do I stop?" Even though you're home and you're available, and you stop at 5:00 PM, do you keep going? Do you keep working? When is it enough? It's maintaining those work/life balances but still providing customer service and expectations.

Barr: What do you feel like you have learned from the pandemic that you would apply to the way you conduct your job in regular circumstances?

Abdullah: We would allow more telework. We have a very good policy—there was up to four days a pay period. Some people in my office took that and some people didn't. But just the flexibility of it is what stood out for me—understanding that we don't have to be physically present to do our job, and we can be just as creative and as efficient, even though we're not seen.

Barr: Yeah, that makes sense.

Abdullah: And being comfortable with that, right? Being comfortable with the support that we were providing for the leadership.

Barr: In addition to your role helping out the CIT leadership, you're also an individual who's been living through this pandemic like everyone else. What have been some challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 personally has presented for you?

Abdullah: When we started, my daughter was a senior in high school. The transition to 100% remote was very hard although they had remote days at their school. And as far as technology, they were able to transition. But it was hard missing out on prom and graduation and dances and events at school. Senior year is a hard time, making that college decision without actually going to some of them, and then knowing that she couldn't go in the fall. She was home in the fall. She did well, but it was very hard making sure that she was keeping up with her studies and college ready. Then my mom was sick. My mom, a senior, had to go to a rehab, and then for some surgery, and then came home. I stayed with her during the day, and working remotely allowed me to do that. Although she had nurses and care, I was able to be there. If I were at work, I wouldn't be able to work from a different location. It let me see what was going on and oversee her care, and I would not have been able to do that if we were in the office. I probably would have had to take an extended leave to be there during the daytime hours. Even

though she had plenty of support, plenty of nursing help, and plenty of doctors—just being able to have that comfort level of knowing that I am a caregiver and having the opportunity to do that is very encouraging. I like it. I'm very grateful that I'm able to do that and maintain my job.

Barr: Definitely. What are some of the hobbies or pursuits that have helped you cope with COVID-19?

Abdullah: I haven't been able to travel. We were heavy Disney people, and I haven't gone even though they're open. I've just been trying every day to get up and away from my computer—take a break, take a walk. Even if I'm not eating lunch, take a lunch break. Take some time for me to kind of regroup. I noticed that when I do that, I'm better. I'm refreshed. I'm able to continue. Get some water or whatever it is, but just taking that break during the day is very helpful.

Barr: Definitely. Well, is there anything else that you would like to share about your COVID-19 experiences at work or at home?

Abdullah: No, but I would just like to share that I am very happy to work in a place where the work seems seamless, whether in the office or outside of the office, and that level of work didn't diminish. We were able to do our jobs providing the same level of support while not being physically in the office and having the equipment we need. And if we need more equipment, that is available to us. Do we need a bigger monitor to see? Do we need a scanner? Do we need different software to help us succeed? Having the opportunity and knowing how to request support and having it made available is very important. And it's also less stress.

Barr: Yes, definitely. Well, I'm so glad you had a wonderful experience at work and that they were very supportive, and I wish you continued success for you and your family.

Abdullah: Thank you.