From the Insiders Guide to a Coop with: Environment and Climate Change Canada

Zoe Westerby
Integration Assistant, Regional Director General's Office - West & North Strategic Policy Branch, Environment and Climate Change Canada

THE POSITION:
My coop was spent as an Integration Assistant in the Regional Director General Office (RDGO) - West and North of the Strategic Policy Branch in Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC). The RDGO’s primary function is to support the Regional Director General (RDG) in their role as the institutional representative in the West and North Region, which encompasses Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and all three territories. The Vancouver office, where I worked out of, is mandated to serve the Pacific (i.e. British Columbia) and Yukon Region (PYR) within the West & North.

MY ROLE:
My work focused on four areas: (1) horizontal work across and within departments to provide policy advice and strategy regarding the Indigenous Issues and Issues Committee; (2) corporate processes and internal branch management including document preparation for internal meetings, minute and note taking at internal and interdepartmental meetings, supporting corporate reporting and event planning for building wide events such as the C2WCC Amazing Race Charitable Event; (3) information gathering, analysis, and dissemination around the 2017 BC Wildfires via the Federal Coordination Working Group; (4) other tasks as they appear.

Organizational chart of the Strategic Policy Branch / 17th floor. Work in this branch involves collaboration and overlap between units.

REGIONAL DIRECTOR GENERAL

REGIONAL DIRECTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE

STRATEGIC RELATIONS

TRANSBUILDARY WATER MANAGEMENT

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

FUNDING PROGRAMS

REGIONAL ANALYSIS AND RELATIONSHIPS

COMPETENCIES FOR WORKING IN THE PUBLIC

COMMUNICATION
Working for the federal government involves a lot of oral (meetings) and written (emails, documents, etc) communication. My position involved collaboration with multiple stakeholders, including internal (ECCC), interdepartmental (other federal departments) and multi-governmental (provincial, First Nations) integration. For example, my role involved working on a multi-departmental committee. As support for the co-chair of this committee, I regularly communicated with colleagues (including senior executive level employees) outside of ECCC via email, in-person meetings and phone meetings.

How did I practice my communications skills?
- Weekly meetings with my supervisor
- End of the day work summary
- Visiting colleagues office rather than emailing them
- Volunteering for internal or interdepartmental events

MANAGING INFORMATION
Working with the federal government involves the creation of documents to summarize, analyze and share information. Documents I commonly created to manage information include work plans, Excel spreadsheets, status trackers, and gantt charts. These were then turned into concept papers, status reports, and emails to share the information with a broader audience. Working for a high-level decision maker, I often managed and summarized information to keep her briefed on issues of high importance in the region (e.g. 2017 BC wildfires).

How did I practice my information management skills?
- Organized folders in a share drive
- Training courses on Excel
- Work plans, Excel spreadsheets, status trackers, gantt charts

TEAMWORK
Working in the federal government involves demonstrated ability to work collaboratively in a team setting to share information and develop documents. Internally, I worked closely with my supervisor to develop documents where I produce a draft and she provides edits or comments as needed. These documents were often produced for consultation with high level senior officials. Interdepartmentally, I supported the RDG’s role on a multi-department committee, requiring me to work with a number of colleagues outside my own department.

How did I practice my teamwork skills?
- In person and phone meetings
- Member of multiple committees and working groups
- Working alongside other co-op students
- Attending branch get-togethers/team building events

COMMITMENT TO QUALITY
I was committed to high quality work because I knew a lot was at stake working on files for a high-level decision maker. One file I worked on required me to attend meetings and work closely with high level senior officials, requiring a higher commitment to quality due to high expectations.

How did I practice my commitment to quality?
- Be responsive to my supervisor's feedback and adjust my work to reflect accordingly.
- Understand what kind of learner someone is (e.g., visual learner) and present information to them in that way
- Take initiative (e.g., my supervisor asked me to create a template for a concept paper and I took the initiative to start populating it with information and it resulted in my supervisor asking me to complete the paper)

REFLECTIONS
Overall, this has been a very positive experience. The biggest factor that made this so positive was having a mutually beneficial relationship with my supervisor. She constantly assured me that I was helpful to her by supporting and praising my work. She trusted me and let me be creative with the tasks she asked of me. Because of our positive relationship, I felt comfortable asking a lot questions and was more committed to quality, resulting in building my confidence and knowledge and working more efficiently.

This coop has reinforced my interest in working for the federal government. Working on a large, on-going file (unlike my other coop where I completed small tasks) has been rewarding because I gained a strong sense of accomplishment witnessing the files progress and milestones. I would look forward to a career in the federal government where I can continue to work on large, progressive files. There are also benefits like high mobility (room to grow up and out to other departments), a work-life balance (which barely exists in an academic world) and an extensive network connecting employees to many interesting people, places and files.

I think this job will be extremely beneficial in my job search after I graduate from the University of Victoria. I greatly improved my professionalism working for a high-level decision maker and attending high level meetings. I greatly improved a lot of key competencies such as teamwork, information management, communication and commitment to quality that can apply to any job. I had plenty of opportunity to take initiative to use as examples in future interviews.