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Speaker 2: You're listening to Further Together, the ORAU podcast. Join Michael Holtz and his guests, for conversations about all things ORAU. They'll talk about ORAU story history, our impact on an ever-changing world, our innovative scientific and technical solutions for our customers and our commitment to the communities where we do business. Welcome to Further Together, the ORAU podcast.

Michael Holtz: Happy Wednesday and welcome to Further Together, the ORAU podcast. I'm your host, Michael Holtz and I'm excited as ever, to talk to regular and returning guest Chief Research Officer Ken Tobin, who is here to talk about some new developments, in the world of research at ORAU.

And Ken, we've doing these research podcasts now, for about a year, which has been great, to shed some light on the work that our researchers are doing across the organization and what research means to us. And there are some new developments, so let's talk about the research podcast in general and then talk about some new things happening, in the research enterprise.

Ken Tobin: Sure, that sounds great. And I'm glad to be back, I thank you for inviting me to come back. So, the research podcast, as part of your Further Together podcast series, I feel like it's been a really great way, to communicate our research activities and opportunities, for our staff, who follow or have interest in research. I believe we kicked off the research series with podcast number 72, which a year ago, which was me, discussing the research series that we were going to try and do, which is good. And I think, all together we're up to number 90 now, something like that.

Michael Holtz: Yep, we are.

Ken Tobin: So, I guess they haven't all been research podcast, but we've sprinkled them all the way, along the way and so it's been great. For the research series, we've really tried to focus on a broad range of topics, such as the impact of the COVID pandemic on limited science, health risk disparities related to air pollution exposure, computer simulations for rural disaster response, and things like the impact of our ODRD program, on the company. ORAU, just to name a few topics.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely.

Ken Tobin: I think as we're moving forward with the series, we are planning to focus on several of our federal programs. I haven't spoken to you all about this on the podcast yet, but I've been looking into what we do in research, within the company and in really how deep our research goes. And so, we have a lot of our federal contracted program activities, that have research components to them, that we are now taking credit for. I think we do about, I'd say it'll be about 10 to 12 million dollars a year, of research within the company.

So, as we move forward in this series, we're really planning on focusing on several of these federal programs, that have research elements in areas like atmospheric science, or radiation science and dosimetry, health science and health communications, epidemiology and human research protection. There's a lot more to come and so I'm really looking forward to seeing how the series progresses.

And speaking of things, that are somewhat new today, I'm excited to talk a little bit about the ORAU research scientist job family, and our first new hire, into this role for the company. So, this is something that I've been able to touch on here and there over the last couple of years, as we've made a little progress, on getting the word out on what this research scientist job family is about and how to participate in it. But we're now starting to make a little bit of progress. And so yeah, I'm excited to bring that up and talk about it today, as well.

Michael Holtz: It's really exciting, as we have talked over the past year, anyone at ORAU can be a researcher. I mean, we have said that really from the beginning. And as you said, we're doing research, in places that we don't always take credit for, but this research scientist job family, really kind of formalizes research scientist positions throughout the organization. So, what's the purpose and why now? Why create this role at ORAU now?

Ken Tobin: Yeah. Well, actually it's been around for a couple of years. I believe Eric Abelquist, when he was the senior or Chief Research Officer, I guess, senior VP with the company, he had actually started the process of trying to work with HR and our researchers, to create a position, but we never really, got this off the ground. So, I guess he started this pre COVID and because of the, I'll call it the COVID hiatus, not much happened in the last two years. It really moved things along in a lot of ways. We did well. And really also, as a function of our very conservative company culture, around research, we've really not had a chance to move the idea forward.

So, the research scientist job category's intended to help us expand our research capacity, by attracting and positioning high caliber scientists, or growing scientists from within the company. So, the goal is to enable ORAU to improve, not only our research capacity, but increase collaboration with our federal sponsors, with our universities and other research institutions, through our research scientist relationships and collaborations.

So, not only is this good for ORAU business, I think it's good for professional career development for our staff, who want to pursue creative research opportunities and who want to have impact on federal policy and investment, publish and share their work, their research, create intellectual property, and otherwise build an impressive and marketable resume for themselves and for the company.

Michael Holtz: It's really exciting, that we have this opportunity, again, across the organization. If I'm interested in becoming a research scientist, what are the requirements, to be part of the research scientist job family?

Ken Tobin: Yeah, a great question. Really, a minimum of a bachelor's degree in a science or engineering field is required, with an advanced degree, or the equivalent of an advanced degree, being desired. When I talk about equivalence, I mean, for example, being a function of years of experience and a demonstration of research productivity, in terms of research participation, or publications and presentations, service on boards and committees, with professional societies, or maybe even society elevation, for example, becoming a senior member or a fellow of a society and other activities that demonstrate your ability to collaborate with others and to achieve lasting impact, in your areas of expertise.

And the research scientist track, provides a process for advancing to higher grades, in your career path, without necessarily requiring increased management responsibility. Some people don't have any problem with that, some people want to focus on the research. Some people like the idea of supervising others, but so, really what I'm saying, is that the career growth, is determined based on research accomplishments, not how many direct reports you have.

Also, advancement to higher grades, within the research scientist job family, is not based on time in the previous grade, but rather on demonstrated excellence and productivity and research.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Have there been barriers, to making this progress? I know as an organization we support research, but has it been, you talked about the COVID hiatus, but have there been barriers, to making this a reality?

Ken Tobin: Yeah, it's been an interesting challenge, coming to ORAU from my previous job, at the National Laboratory, which had a lot of different categories of researchers and in different fields and things like that, that was just the way they operated. But here, it's a little bit different.

We do have a strong, but subtle research capability and program, over a broad swath of areas where we do work. But interestingly enough, one of the biggest confusions about the role, from a compensation perspective, relates to how we pay different types of staff. So, for example, a biologist and an information technology person, at the same grade, may be paid at different levels, based on pay scale variations, that you see in the national labor market. So, when the research scientist position was first created, there's only the one category. So, if we were going to hire an epidemiologist, or a nuclear scientist, or a health studies person, a research scientist, level three, came in at a grade 11, which could have caused equity issues among workers, in any particular field of the company, because the pay scales would not match with the people that are were working in their peer group or their compensation group.

So, it wasn't until I met with HR, to discuss some of these barriers, that we determined that it was perfectly to create different categories of research scientists, not just different grades or levels. And so, this opened up the door to creating, for example, a research scientist, level two, in health studies, or a research scientist, level three, in environmental science. So, the category now really defining, what the pay family is for that job. So, what that means now, is that no matter what area of the company you're engaged in, or working in, you now have the opportunity to create a research scientist, in some particular field and get the pays right and get the work right and the career development right. So, that's what has really made a big difference, at this point.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. And how did this help? We have a recent, in our first official research scientist at ORAU. How was this beneficial in that process?

Ken Tobin: Yeah, we certainly do. So, Dr. DaVita Hammond, who leads the epidemiology and exposure science group at OGS, wanted to open a position for someone to support health studies. The purpose of the position, was to provide support for research and analysis projects for OGS, in culture evaluations, epidemiological studies, diversity and inclusion projects, and other related studies. She felt that the position would be best filled by a research scientist, and she asked me to serve on the selection committee and to work with the team and HR, as they went through the process.

So, there were a variety of job functions in this position, that made it stand out as an appropriate research scientist role, such as, for example, the need for this person to develop new survey instruments, or perform literature reviews or interpret scientific data, or collect and manage and analyze data and be responsible for individual research, as well.

And so, we selected as part of that process, four excellent candidates, to interview for the role. And in fact, the pool was so strong, that DaVita opted to offer the position to two of our candidates and one of those two, excepted her offer.

Michael Holtz: That's awesome. So, who accepted the offer?

Ken Tobin: Yeah, so Dr. Eva Odoya accepted our offer, and I believe she started working with us at the end of May. So, Eva has her PhD in comparative and experimental medicine from the University of Tennessee. She has formal training in epidemiology and statistics from the University of Tennessee and in environmental science, from the universities of Gulf in Ontario, Canada and the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

She's done significant research in conducting quantitative and qualitative research, focused on eliminating inequities in society and improving the human conditions. So, an outstanding candidate, it was an outstanding group of candidates, that we had the opportunity to interview, and it was just a wonderful day, to see us actually put someone into the research scientist job family, and kind of get the ball rolling officially, here at ORAU.

Michael Holtz: That sounds great. Dr. Odoya, sounds like the perfect first official hire, from a very amazing pool of candidates. So, what happens next?

Ken Tobin: So, that's a great question. In fact, I'm hoping that having our first research scientist on staff, will lead to other positions being created, by our project managers and group leaders and such, who are building up capabilities in their areas. And I'd like to see more of our staff, interviewing for these positions, once they're posted. And if we have staff, who believe they're currently working in areas that support the research scientists job family, and they would like the opportunity to move into one of these roles, there's also the possibility of working with HR, to use the job development planning process, along with their manager, to work out and figure out, how to do a transition path from the job or position they're in now, into the research job family.

So, it's not just hiring people off the street, it's also looking at how we develop people, that we have internally. And so, I'm looking forward to being able to help support that process and really, through things like the podcast today, getting the word out, that hat possibility exists and we'd love to see people take advantage of it.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Big picture wise, in your role as Chief Research Officer, why is this important for ORAU?

Ken Tobin: That's a good question, as well. So, in my role as Chief Research Office, in part, that role is to help create a positive and productive culture, for research across the company and to create mechanisms, maybe as many mechanisms as possible, that will engage more staff and programs and research activities. And I do this, because a strong research portfolio, across all of our areas of technical expertise, results in the development of new capabilities and facilities, that build our reputation and make us more competitive, and that provide professional development opportunities, for our staff.

I talk about this all the time. Anytime I get a chance on Take Three or Andy Page's webinar or these podcasts, I just try to really push the idea, that research is good for our company. And so, really, that's the bottom line. In short, it's better. Better research equals better performance, as a company.

Michael Holtz: Well, and I love talking about our research and about the enterprise. So, much more to come in those areas, along with the new round of ODRD projects. The folks who are listening to ORAU directed research and development projects, the ODRD Light projects, which is a little bit of a new area for us. And then just other work, that's going on around the organization. So much, much more on research, coming down the road.

Ken Tobin: Absolutely.

Michael Holtz: So, I'm looking forward to talking about all of that. So Ken, thank you so much, as ever, for coming on and talking about the latest developments in the research enterprise. We look to having you back again soon, hopefully before the next year, but soon enough, to talk about things that are developing. So, thank you so much for your time today.

Ken Tobin: Yeah, thank you very much, and I am happy to come back and talk about research, anytime you'll have me.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Thank you so much. Have a great day, everyone.

Speaker 2: Thank you, for listening to Further Together, the ORAU podcast. To learn more, about any of the topics discussed by our experts, visit www.orau.org. You can also find us on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn at ORAU and on Instagram @orautogether. If you like Further Together, the ORAU podcast, we would appreciate you giving us a review on your favorite podcast platform. Your reviews will help more people find the podcast.