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Lab relocations: Why you need an experienced project mgr.?

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In 2007, after months of planning, we prepared to move a laboratory containing eleven so-called "-80 freezers," all of which contained experiments amounting to years of work and research. The move was across town, to a new building...with elevators that were too small.

Moving a lab requires all of the resourcefulness of an experienced relocation project manager. At Fox RPM Corp., despite our 20 years in business, we are still encountering new challenges, such as the Boston-area case mentioned above. But we overcome these challenges by fully understanding client needs, anticipating potential setbacks and continuously developing creative solutions for minimizing operational downtime.

When it comes to relocating or managing the construction of new lab space, there is always another layer of complexity to the project, including understanding R&D culture; "talking the talk" with the scientific community; communicating the equipment and chemical requirements to vendors and contractors; and being able to solve problems quickly. The value of an experienced project manager with appropriate skills for lab relocations can save hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours by getting it done right the first time.

The inherent challenges in handling a lab move include managing the specialty vendors involved, transferring the unique products - be they fruit flies or biological experiments, as well managing the interaction with the scientific staff, which is understandably more intense than with most clients.

A lab relocation discussion between the lab staff and project manager involves far more than just where the staff will be sitting - a project manager must know where nearly every piece of equipment is going, where the chemicals will be placed, and what consumable materials are relocating. There needs to be a mutual understanding of what type of equipment is moving, how long the equipment will be offline, and which experiments are in process and when they can be shut down. For this process to go smoothly and safely, a project manager must be able to interface with the lab community to extract and distill critical information. The project manager must also cultivate a solid relationship with the engineering and construction teams to properly translate the lab community's requirements into a physical space.

A lab's physical move involves people, of course, but the lab equipment and any chemicals, biological materials and/or experiments are of equal importance. Putting these items in transit requires a project manager with a deep understanding of the risks and costs of damage and loss, as well as an understanding of the vendors that make up the team handling the transition and what steps they take to avert such risk, such as hiring a chemical mover. The specialists are essential to assisting a smooth process, possessing the knowledge from how items must be packed to the proper licenses to transport them over the roads.

This exhaustive preparation is necessary during the move process, as any delays by any party (lab staff or vendor) can negatively impact research, clinical trials or getting a product to market.

Following this preparation process, the lab is fully equipped and ready for the physical move itself. The project manager's role is to maintain critical communication between the scientists, vendors, and construction team over the course of the move. With the proper prep work and our continued communication efforts, we anticipate potential problems and delays, develop contingency plans and resolve issues with the skilled professionalism that comes from having 20 years of experience in relocating lab spaces.

As for that too small elevator? We determined in advance that a rigger and mover were needed, and arranged for the experiment contents to be taken off site as the freezers were transported into the building via a second story window that was just big enough.

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