

Reflecting on your current working practice, describe your working routine for a day, showing how you prioritise, delegate, and deliver tasks, and how you ensure that they meet the required standards within the time available. How do you manage the need to communicate effectively with different audiences? (20%, 1,500 words or equivalent)

Introduction

In my work as a Post-Excavation Supervisor with an environmental focus, there are many different aspects of my current working practice that must be managed within a day. These aspects can be linked to a variety of tasks, and the management of these has ramifications on future works that I undertake. In order to best plan and complete these tasks, it is important to understand the end result and eventual audience of each, while accounting for incoming material and upcoming deadlines. It can be difficult to define the audience of early environmental works in post-excavation, which are often undertaken to yield further environmental material to be assessed by other colleagues. While my daily practice can vary depending upon the tasks that require completion, there are a limited number of tasks that I may undertake.

Managing environmental bulk samples

There are multiple tasks that are associated with sample management. When they arrive, samples must be logged accurately in an Excel spreadsheet, which is accessible to all members of the post-excavation team. Access to this document is limited to colleagues within this team, and I have occasionally given access to the person (usually a Project Officer or Project Manager) writing the project report to allow them to better understand the post-excavation results before they formally communicate with clients and specialists on further works required. This helps to save time for both parties, particularly as information relating to quantities or dates may be required to be sent to clients or to allocate resources for future work.

Understanding the quantity and type of samples received allows us environmental processors to communicate effectively with the Environmental Manager, who works remotely. Logging in samples provides a quantification of samples per site or area yet also details the different conditions and contexts of these. In being notified of incoming projects, the Environmental Manager can advise on how best to prioritise the processing of such samples in accordance with shifting deadlines, allowing the most urgent ones to be processed and the material resulting from them to be assessed first. While the majority of bulk samples taken can be processed through Siraf-style floatation, some warrant more specialist (and often gentler) processing. Such types are typically taken from waterlogged or burial deposits (see figure one), with both sample types warranting different types of specialist processing. Some of these samples may warrant further subsampling for further analysis by external specialists, particularly for the analysis of insect remains (Carruthers and Smith 2020) or pollen (its decay being inhibited by the waterlogged conditions [Campbell *et al.* 2015, 22]). Communication with the Environmental Manager is thus important to ensure that such samples are not entirely processed through floatation. It is also important to note that some samples may not have been understood to be (and thus not flagged as) waterlogged by the excavator, thus an experienced eye at this early stage is required to ensure that such samples are processed appropriately. Heavy clay samples benefit from soaking in warm water and bicarbonate of soda prior to processing in order to reduced strain on staff and processing time, though it is important to note that bicarbonate of soda cannot always be used (in the case of human remains or marine shell).

Processing environmental samples

Siraf-style floatation is the general method of environmental sample processing undertaken in my workplace, and it is done through alternating days by myself and my colleague (whom I supervise). As a result of this work pattern, we begin by processing bulk samples that are not flagged as waterlogged or as coming from burials. If there are very few samples flagged as heavy

clay, we allocate these towards the end of this block of floatation processing to ensure that strain is minimal. Bulk samples can range from sterile (lacking in material) to being mostly artefactual and ecofactual material. A two-hour threshold has been set for sorting an individual residue, ensuring that time is not wasted in retrieving material that is too small to be assessed. This system also allows for help to be given to those who may be struggling to undertake sorting for different reasons. If the environmental processing workload has been shifting over a number of days, I will take time at the beginning of my day to understand the other tasks which we may undertake. If I am designing a work programme for my colleague, I try to provide other environmental tasks (such as washing, bagging, and labelling animal bone and marine shell) which may be undertaken while sitting down to allow rest from sample processing. This also ensures that material from residues is not sorted and bagged while damp. This delegation assists in forming a general picture of the artefacts in the workspace, allowing me to provide information to other departments who may not work in the space as often.

If work is suitably delegated to my colleague, I am able to undertake specialist sample processing. This must be carefully planned to ensure adequate rest breaks as, unlike the residue sorting that results from floatation, wet-sieving for plant remains does not produce a residue that I can sort. This is instead sent to a mineralised plant remains specialist. As I am the only employee that undertakes this type of processing, I try to disperse this type of wet-sieving throughout my general processing workload. This ensures that sorting is made available to both me and my colleague. Unlike waterlogged deposits, the wet-sieving of burial samples produces a sortable residue. I currently undertake this sorting to ensure that all human remains are treated with appropriate care (Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2022, 1.12). With an incoming project discovering several burials, I am currently training my colleague in this type of sorting. From internal training I received upon becoming a supervisor, I have learned to encourage communication (through an 'open door' policy) and give positive feedback (Maddux

2008, 9).

Sorting environmental heavy residues

Sorting is an important task that must be undertaken when floatation residues are dry. This is the means through which artefacts and ecofacts are separated from geological material using mesh and sieve sizes specified in guidance by Historic England (Campbell *et al.* 2015, 11-2). It is important to use a variety of sieves for sorting to allow for a wide recovery of artefacts and ecofacts, particularly as some types of animal bone (such as fish bone) are only present in smaller increments (Baker and Worley 2019, 16). Sorting residues requires experience to understand how different artefacts and ecofacts may appear, particularly when preservation conditions may alter the appearance of the latter. This can occur with mineralised plant remains, which can be drastically transformed or appear modern due to their unburnt appearance. Accurately selecting and bagging both artefacts and ecofacts ensures that they may be then sent out for assessment to the correct specialist, either externally or internally. Due to the distribution of the offices of Headland Archaeology, some material must be sent out to internal specialists. I usually undertake this task when an area or site is completed to ensure that the specialist may assess the entirety of the relevant assemblage. In keeping this material together, its loss is prevented. We use an internal database to track the locations of such material when sent out to keep a record of the specialist working on the dispatched assemblage. Prioritising the material and site to be sent out often requires communicating with the Environmental Manager and specialist concerned, ensuring that the specialist can receive the material appropriately and has time to undertake its assessment.

Distributing samples

Some samples may need to be sent to another office within the company, dependent upon site location and its proximity to the Silsoe offices. Monolith and Kubiena samples taken for

geoarchaeological analysis often arrive at the Silsoe office for storage yet must eventually be sent out to the Hereford office, where the geoarchaeology team works. Kubiena samples often require refrigeration if in long-term storage, whereas monolith samples benefit from being stored in a dark environment. When they are due for assessment, these samples must be carefully transported and suitably packaged. Bulk samples are also often transported to other Headland offices, usually in sixty bucket lots. The task of sending these out appears simple but requires planning to ensure safe transit. As these sample lots are sent out using pallet transport lorries, the pallet selected must be robust enough. Furthermore, the sample buckets must be secured appropriately with ratchet straps. I perform or closely oversee this process, ensuring that specialist bulk samples (the aforementioned waterlogged or cremation samples) are retained at Silsoe. If these samples are erroneously sent elsewhere, time and money is lost in returning them. Packing pallets correctly is of high importance, which I have imparted to my colleague. After an incident of pallet collapse over a year ago due to the collecting lorry having an insufficient electric tail lift, I have taken to contacting the pallet delivery company on collection days to ensure that the correct vehicle is sent out for collection of heavy sample pallets.

Conclusion

There are many different audiences that can benefit from this type of environmental work. It is only upon publication and dissemination that such data may be further synthesised, thus processing and completing the assessment sites provides the next piece in the jigsaw puzzle of environmental archaeology. While the primary audience of my work is that of my colleagues and any readers of research that I may contribute to, I am sure that there are many interested members of the public (aspiring archaeologists and otherwise) that are interested in such works. The relationship between past peoples and the environment is highly relatable for modern people, allowing us to better discern the daily life of civilisations long passed.

Word count: 1624

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Figures

	coarse-sieved	flotation	specialist
vertebrate (bone also recovered by hand on site)	✓	✓ (small bones in residue from flotation)	✓
molluscs	✓ (large, mainly marine)	–	✓
insects, arachnids, etc	–	–	✓
parasite ova	–	–	✓
plant macrofossils	✓ (large fruit stones etc)	✓ (charred and mineral-replaced)	✓ (waterlogged and mineral-replaced)
wood	–	–	✓
charcoal	–	✓	✓ (radiocarbon dating)
pollen and spores	–	–	✓
phytoliths	–	–	✓
foraminifera	–	–	✓
ostracods	–	–	✓
diatoms	–	–	✓
soils and sediments	–	–	✓

Figure one. A general guide to the different methods used in processing specialist and non-specialist samples according to Campbell (2015, 9).