

## Alison

Senior Secretary, Rolls-Royce UTC and Gordon Laboratory, Department of Material Sciences and Metallurgy

*Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz*

Probably, one of the most un-secretary jobs that Alison has done recently was that of designing a beer mat. As part of a conference, which the UTC is hosting this summer, Alison is organising a beer tasting of local craft beers and ales to take place in conjunction with the usual poster presentations. For that event she designed the beer mats to display notes about the individual beers on one side, while showing sponsorship logos on the other side.

When Alison joined the Rolls-Royce UTC in 2010 it was on a part-time basis, working 17 hours a week. At that time she still had her own recruitment business alongside, which she gradually closed down due to the ongoing changes in the recruitment market. Originally, she was to take care of the financial side of the research group and some administrative tasks. However, with her experience she quickly automated the grants and spending supervision using spreadsheets and macros, such that now they require only minimal efforts in terms of time and maintenance even though she is managing an ever increasing number of grants with a total budget of around £25 million. She is also involved in the administrative side of the grant application and maintenance process, e.g. by preparing quarterly management reports for EU grants and going to kick-off meetings. She furthermore organises several conferences of varying sizes each year, which includes the coordination of venues, food, events and arranging all the other small details – like the beer mats. She manages the attendance records of courses the PhD students have to do as part of the Rolls-Royce Doctoral Training Partnership. Each year, the UTC sends out 200 Christmas cards to recipients all over the world and Alison is responsible for design, printing and logistics. The variability in her responsibilities ensures that every day is different.

Over the past six years she steadily increased her hours to 33 hours per week. She started off working only the occasional day from home, but now her contracted hours include two days of working from home. Although her flexible working arrangement has set start and end hours, she can work very flexibly due to the nature of her work and the people she is working with. If something personal has to be done during the day, she catches up with her responsibilities in the evening or on another day. To facilitate her working arrangements, the group's academics set her up with cloud storage, a work station at home and provided her with a mobile phone. This way she can work in any place at any time, even if that place is the back of the room while her daughter is having a dance class. Flexibility makes her work more efficient. It is based on the trust between her and her academic managers, and on her ability and self-discipline to do her job well. In Alison's opinion any flexible working agreement has to come from both sides. She says, "You have to give flexibility in order to earn flexibility." She cannot just do her job without accommodating the group leaders, when they need her to be flexible and do something in addition to her usual duties.

The flexibility in hours allows Alison to be a single mother to her daughter and working from home also means that she can work longer hours than she could do otherwise because less time is spent on commuting. Her work and responsibilities are very important to her; apart from financial security her job also provides her with a balance in life.