

## SickLeaveCashOut\_HamptonRoads\_UPLinkStory

Notebook: CAR

Created: 6/11/2012 3:14 PM

Updated: 6/14/2012 9:28 AM

URL: <http://ire.org/blog/uplink/2012/01/23/taking-boot-camp-skills-home/>

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# Taking boot camp skills home

By Deirdre Fernandes, The Boston Globe | 01.23.2012



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During the weeklong IRE and NICAR Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp you wake up thinking about spreadsheet pivot tables and practice so many database queries that you never want to ask another question that requires a “WHERE” statement. But the most important lesson that gets drilled into your head is a simple one: practice, practice, practice.

After I left the January 2011 boot camp, I tested out my skills on some smaller stories. I took a look at the public and private colleges that received Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, which was primarily an exercise in cleaning up a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The federal government’s data listed colleges separately under different campuses, so I spent a lot of my time running a find and replace in Excel to standardize the names.

I also helped a colleague work on salary data, which required joining tables in Microsoft Access database manager as we tried to identify city employees who had received the biggest raises.

I initially spent about an hour a week after the boot camp working on some sort of Excel or Access data. I also often found myself frequently turning to the boot camp training manual, mostly the section on joining tables and separating cell data in Excel.

This initial work helped me keep my skills up to date, so I could tackle my own data story in September. If I hadn't practiced throughout the year, I imagine I would have been that reporter who had to repeat the class (I think the instructors use that story to scare every CAR group).

My [story on vacation and sick leave cash outs](#) by local city employees started on a very different track.

I had initially asked the city of Virginia Beach for the pay that employees took home the previous year. Our paper routinely asks for base salary data, but it doesn't necessarily reflect the actual payment workers receive. There are bonuses, overtime and other supplementary income that can boost government pay.

The year-to-date earnings report came in an Excel file. As I scanned the data and sorted it by amount, I noticed that the former sheriff had received more than \$42,000 in 2010. That was strange because his term had ended the previous Dec. 31.

When I called the city's human resources director about the payment, she explained that it was the sheriff's accumulated sick and vacation time payment. She also mentioned that when employees leave the city, they're given a lump-sum check for sick and vacation time.

I then realized that this was a payment that the city could isolate pretty easily, since it's a separate check from an employee's bi-monthly salary payment. So I asked for vacation and sick leave payouts for all employees for the past year and a half.

And since our coverage area includes five cities, I decided to get the information from all of them.

The results were mixed, but we fortunately didn't have to pay for any of the data. The city of Norfolk had two departments run the request, so the employees names on the sick-leave list weren't necessarily the same as on the vacation-leave list.

The city of Chesapeake initially refused to provide me any information, arguing that

under the state's Freedom of Information Act they had discretion to supply this information. The state requires governments to provide employee salary information, but Chesapeake's attorney argued that this was retiree information and FOIA allowed them a lot more discretion.

I went back and forth with city officials for several days. When I requested more aggregate information, they argued that the city's old computer system couldn't pull that data and that it would cost the paper to have an employee do the search by hand.

Chesapeake finally agreed to provide the information since April 2011 without the employee names.

I was disappointed that we were missing Chesapeake's data, but my editor and I didn't want the city's refusal to slow down the story. And the partial data that Chesapeake provided gave me a sense that their payouts weren't all that different from those of the neighboring cities.

Norfolk officials provided me with incomplete data. For example, some employees on the sick-leave list weren't on the vacation-leave list. And for weeks I had trouble understanding why the lists didn't match and learning the number of employees who were on one list but not the other. The city spokeswoman initially insisted it was only one or two employees, but I knew there were more missing and I had to be able to show them.

I decided to create a spreadsheet to determine who might be missing. I knew this would require a join in Access, but first I needed to clean up the data in Excel. The sick-leave data had employee names all in one cell and some had middle initials. The vacation-leave list was more neatly organized with columns for first and last names. I had to make sure they were structured in the same way.

I wasted a lot of time trying to separate the sick-leave names using the "TRIM()" function. But our paper's data editor pointed me to the "text-to-columns" function in Excel that helped me pull apart the names more easily and quickly. Next time, I'm trying that first.

Then I imported the sick-leave and vacation-leave data into Access. I joined them by the names and asked the program to show me all names in the sick-leave spreadsheet that didn't appear on the vacation-leave spreadsheet. This is a really nifty and helpful feature in Access that helps answer a sometimes-critical question: What records are missing from the join?

I did this in the query design view by right-clicking on the line that connects the joined fields in the two tables. Right-click on the highlighted line and it opens up a "Join Properties" option. I chose to display all of the records from the sick-leave table and only those that matched from the vacation-leave table. That gave me 114 hits.

I sent that list to Norfolk officials and asked for an explanation.

Having something in hand to show officials the discrepancies in their data really helped. Within a few days, city officials sent me explanations of why the two lists were different. In some cases employees had resigned before 2010, but started drawing vacation or sick leave only when they retired. In other cases, the city had just left them off the list.

Based on the data, we were able to report the following:

Since January 2010, South Hampton Roads cities collectively made more than \$7.7 million in such payments to departing employees, mostly for unused vacation and sick time.

Nearly a quarter of Virginia Beach's 675 departing employees walked away with \$10,000 or more in unused leave time.

In the other cities, at least 108 workers got checks of more than \$10,000 in unused leave time. The employees who retired also received taxpayer-funded pensions.

The payouts cost Suffolk, with a workforce of about 1,400 people, \$456,629. Virginia Beach, which employs nearly 5,500 people, paid out nearly \$3.9 million.

And that sheriff who first caught my eye – he received one of the highest payouts and ended up being the lede of the story. He wasn't alone though. A former city manager was scheduled to receive a payout of more than \$80,300.

The story generated plenty of comments, a column and an editorial. And separately,

state officials are also considering changing their employee-leave policies.

The training I received at Boot Camp definitely provided me with a good foundation.

But as I work on these data stories, I'm also surprised by how much I don't know and still need to learn.

Is there a Boot Camp Part 2?

*Deirdre Fernandes was a city hall reporter for The Virginian-Pilot and is now a reporter for The Boston Globe.*

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