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Institutions Turn to New Workforce Strategies To Counter Effects of Great Resignation

By Jane Anderson

Research institutions, struggling with pandemic-induced employee retention and recruitment challenges, are turning to strategies designed to keep adequate staff levels, including remote and hybrid work and methods of developing a pipeline of talent, according to research administrators.

The administrators, speaking at a recent meeting of the Federal Demonstration Partnership,[1] noted the rapid changes that have taken place in the workforce since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and explained that adjusting to the post-pandemic landscape will take plenty of trial and error.

Economists and analysts are tracking what has become known as the "great resignation," said Michele Masucci, co-chair of the Federal Demonstration Partnership and vice president for research and director of the Information Technology and Society Research Group at Temple University. "I sometimes refer to it as 'the four Rs,' which are: retirement, renegotiation of job terms, remote work and resignation," she said. "I think there's still a lot of adjustment to take place in the economy."

There are "a couple of trends happening at the same time" driving what Masucci termed an "exodus" from offices, including a generational shift within the workforce.

"Research administration has not been immune from the high turnover, rising salaries, calls for greater flexibility and telework that followed full telework during the pandemic and shortages of skilled applicants," said Lisa Nichols, senior director of sponsored research programs at the University of Pennsylvania.

These trends have had a significant impact on research and operations, along with personnel who support research, particularly where demand and funding for research continue to increase, Nichols said. Since the start of the pandemic, she said, university research administrations—both centrally and in schools and departments—are experiencing challenges with retention, recruitment and understaffing in what is often an already lean environment.

With this, she said, comes a loss of institutional knowledge; delays and backlogs; and increased costs for recruiting, retention and consultants. The situation also leads to possible challenges addressing functions outside of day-to-day necessities, such as implementing new systems and processes.

Support, Compensation Key in Retention

One study identified the top four motivating factors for staff remaining with current employers, Nichols explained. These include: supervisor and upper management support, adequate compensation and benefits, a good work/life balance, and a positive relationship with co-workers, she said.

Other motivating factors can include tuition benefits, location and the need to relocate or change a commute when taking another position, she said.

Conversely, Nichols said, the top factors motivating staff to leave a current employer include a lack of support

from supervisors and upper management, and feeling undervalued. Other factors leading to resignation, she said, include opportunities for career growth, professional development, work-life balance and flexible work schedules.

Nichols noted that the study was conducted just as the pandemic was starting, so it doesn't account for trends that were accelerated by or resulted from the pandemic. "The hiring pools are smaller and the candidates are generally less qualified," Nichols said.

Specific to the research community, in July 2021, the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) conducted a survey focused on remote work, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic.[2] The survey also covered expectations for post-pandemic remote and flexible work, and attitudes toward remote and flexible work.

Rosemary Madnick, vice president for research administration at the Lundquist Institute for Biomedical Research Innovation, described the results of the survey for meeting attendees. The survey included more than 1,600 respondents, with a majority representing public institutions, more than one-third representing private institutions, and around 8% representing governmental entities. Specialty areas included both pre-award and post-award activities, life cycle activities and compliance, Madnick said, while institutional settings were largely urban environments.

When respondents were asked whether they would consider changing their jobs for an arrangement that offered more flexibility, around 58% said they would consider it, while another 21% were unsure, Madnick said, noting that those who answered "no" often had reasons such as retirement arrangements or obligations that precluded switching jobs. The desire for flexibility was highest at the staff level and lowest at the senior leadership level, she said.

Respondents also were asked to consider how telework has affected their organizations' productivity, well-being and employee satisfaction, Madnick said, and more than 82% said telework had a positive impact. Still, she noted, directors and senior leadership-level respondents were less likely than manager- and staff-level personnel to say telework has had a positive impact.

NCURA plans follow-up research to look at additional issues, such as how factors such as age, child care and retirement are affecting the great resignation trends, Madnick said.

Anecdotally, the bulk of those who have resigned during the pandemic appear to be those ages 55 and older, said Susan Sedwick, consulting associate for Attain LLC and interim vice president for center business operations at Seattle Children's Research Institute.

This has affected the research workforce substantially, Sedwick said. "You cannot replace someone with that level of experience and knowledge at your institution with a simple backfill. That's what we're running into at Seattle Children's. I have about 75 current positions, and of those, there's 40 who are frontline grant and contract administrators. Of those [frontline grant and contract administrators], four have been with the institution more than three years. Of my five directors, only one has been with the institution more than one year. It has been a tremendous loss of knowledge and skills. That's what we have been struggling with; we can't replace those individuals with a single replacement."

To create a pipeline of workers who can advance in the organization, Seattle Children's created new entry-level positions for candidates with just a college degree, Sedwick said, adding, "We will grow our own. I think we're all going to have to get to that point. So our goal is that we're going to teach people what they need to know to move into a GCA [grants and contracts administrator] position. We built this around the research administrator

certification so that we can help people accelerate the promotion. We want to grow our own supervisors, managers and directors."

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