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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."

Community-Building Is Important

Vivian Holmes, director of research administration services at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), explained that MIT has some fully remote staff members and some hybrid staff who come in two or three days per week, on average. "This has created some challenges," she acknowledged. "In the Boston-Cambridge area, there are a lot of competing organizations looking for great talent," which has required "a certain amount of flexibility for all of our staff."

Although MIT's leadership had thought the hiring situation would return to pre-pandemic levels, "the normal has become what happened in the second year, where most people have gotten into a groove and started working remotely," Holmes said. Maintaining flexibility is important, she said, but "we also don't want to lose some advantages that we had prior to the pandemic from working in the office. We want to maintain that sense of community and have opportunities to be the same."

It's important to manage, support and evaluate staff consistently, regardless of whether they are working from home or the office, Holmes said. "Some of those challenges have come up for me, as a new director, in meeting with and getting to know people on the team. It's also challenging to have training. Does training for in-person staff differ from training for remote staff?"

To foster a sense of community and enhance communications, MIT organizes in-person staff meetings and training sessions that would occur several times per year, Holmes said, adding, "we hope that will help us build and maintain a sustainable community." Social events, such as remote games, also can help people get to know each other, she said, adding, "We do realize the value, personally and professionally, with gathering. So we've been very deliberate in planning in-person gatherings so that we can communicate with each other in that way. It seems to me that with Zoom meetings, they're very topic-specific, and there's really not a lot of space for conversation, for elaborating on things, or for coming up with new ideas."

Madnick noted that, within her organization, several people work out of state, "so coming in for an in-person right now is not really in the cards. So we have to be a lot more conscious of making sure that we reach out in other ways to our employees, and especially as those employees are also working with our faculty. So in many ways, there's a little bit of overcommunication that needs to happen in order for them to feel like they're engaged with being a part of the campus community. Our directors are engaging their staff a lot more than what they used to do."

Time zone differences come into play with remote staff members, Sedwick said. "At Seattle Children's, we can hire in three states outside of Washington state, and they're all East Coast or Central time zone," she said. "So there's two-hour differences. That's a challenge in and of itself, with finding those core hours" when everyone is working, she said. Other institutions have addressed this issue by mandating that everyone work certain hours in the middle of the day, she said.

Work Hours Haven't Declined

Staff members who work from home avoid a commute, but research shows they may work as many as four extra hours per day, Madnick said. "I don't think anyone should have to be working any more hours than is absolutely necessary," she said. "I think as leaders of our prospective areas, we have to be a lot more intentional of ensuring that folks are not working more than what they should be working, because at the end of the day, it's going to be a balance with their mental health."

Sedwick said managers should emphasize that it's okay to have some boundaries in their day. "I realize I have employees that send emails later at night because they want the flexibility to deal with childcare issues, but that's a balance," she said. "I'm not one that immediately goes, 'Oh, look at how hard she's working,' because she's sending emails at midnight. It's really incumbent upon managers to follow up with their employees and ask what's going on and why are they doing this."

Measuring remote employee performance poses some challenges, and it's important to be cautious and work with human resources if the organization intends to use different metrics and tools for remote workers, Sedwick said. "A lot of that's going to depend on the risk aversion that your institution has, but I think you need to at least have things correlated in a way that it doesn't look like you're treating those that work remotely differently," she explained.

Madnick said that her organization has not made any changes to the tools it uses to evaluate employees.

Flexibility, Adaptability Key

At Seattle Children's, managers use what Sedwick termed "a very robust metrics tracker" to track worker performance. "One of the things that we've seen is it's very hard to balance workload when you're not watching people during the day, because a lot of times it's the body language that tells you someone is overloaded. It's not really a numbers game; it's a qualitative, more complex calculation," she said.

Having hybrid and fully remote staff also affects space use and planning for the future, Holmes said. "A lot of us work in very expensive leased spaces," she said. "So there were a lot of offices throughout institutions all over the country that were abandoning their space, and the institutions were using those funds for other things, and having smaller spaces or no spaces at all. This is an ongoing conversation for a lot of us."

Holmes speculated that "it's probably going to take about a year, at least for us, to figure out what the future is going to look like. Are we going to all be remote? Do we come up with a solution to accommodate both remote and hybrid workers? This is an ongoing conversation."

Madnick added, "We're about two-and-a-half years into this, and I call this the 'great experiment.' We don't know how it's going to shake out, but we have to be incredibly flexible and adaptable, because this is a great experiment that we're going through right now with our labor force."

1 Michele Masucci, Lisa Nichols, Rosemary Madnick, Vivian Holmes, and Susan Sedwick, "May 2022: The Great Resignation and the Impacts on Research Enterprise," Federal Demonstration Partnership virtual meeting, May 16, 2022, https://bit.ly/3z9cIDi.
2 "NCURA Remote Work Survey," National Council of University Research Administrators, accessed July 25, 2022, https://bit.ly/3IX8NOb.
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