

# REVOLUTIONISE

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# What Makes Fundraisers Tick?

**Executive Summary**

A Study of Identity, Motivation, and Well-being

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# Introduction

The fundraising sector has long recognised the challenges associated with donor retention and loyalty, yet significantly less effort appears to have been applied to securing the loyalty of those who will steward the relationships with those donors.

Recent polls have found that around 50% of fundraisers expect to leave their jobs within the next two years, but perhaps most worryingly, around 30% have said that they would be leaving the fundraising field altogether in the same period.

This haemorrhaging of talent is not sustainable, not least because we are awash with fundraising vacancies on both sides of the Atlantic. In the marketplace for fundraiser talent, demand currently outstrips supply with vacancies at smaller nonprofits proving particularly problematic to fill. The churn costs associated with replacing those fundraisers who leave their post also have a significant consequence. Recent studies by Penelope Burk have calculated the direct and indirect costs for replacing fundraising staff at around 117% of their annual salary. That includes vacation pay out, fees for posting the position or hiring a recruiter, potential head-hunting expenses and productivity losses. Other commentators have placed the number significantly higher at around 250% of their annual compensation for the focal individual.

The purpose of this report is to focus specifically on what motivates fundraisers at work and thus how nonprofits can foster their retention. The full report reviews the existing research on the motivation of professional employees and parses how fundraisers might be different from the other professional groups that typically comprise nonprofits. It then introduces the results of our own primary study of fundraiser motivation conducted in May/June 2022.

# Study Objectives and Methodology

The objectives of the current study are to build on the extant research and to determine:

- 1) Why fundraisers joined the profession and their current/most recent employers.
- 2) Who they are as a person (their self identity) and who they are as a fundraiser for the focal organisation (professional identity).
- 3) The extent to which their well-being needs are currently being met.
- 4) The activities that 'charge' that well-being and, conversely, the activities and/or conflicts that drain it.
- 5) The role of leadership in fundraiser retention.
- 6) Intentions to leave/remain with the employer (organisational commitment) and intentions to leave/remain with the profession.
- 7) The impact of demographic variables such as age and gender.

To address these questions, we developed a digital questionnaire and circulated it through a variety of social media channels (including Linked-In, Facebook and Twitter) and with the support of many National Fundraising Associations. A total of 2,674 individuals participated in our survey with 687 respondents answering every question we posed.

# Profile of Survey Respondents

Out of those respondents, 82% identified as female. The average age of respondents was 45.0 years (standard deviation 11.0), and the median age was also found to be 45. Respondents ranged from 21 to 81 years of age.

85.0% of respondents were employed full-time, the balance being employed part-time.

46% of our respondents indicated that they intended to leave their current employer within 2 years.

9% indicated that they planned to leave the field of fundraising/development within 2 years.

# Fundraiser Identity

Fundraisers were asked to provide five adjectives to describe who they are as a person and five words to describe who they are as a fundraiser. The word clouds created by our analysis of this data are produced below

Figure 1: Self Identities



Figure 2: Professional Fundraising Identities



The degree of overlap is interesting. As fundraisers, our respondents were able to reflect the moral and driven/passionate components of who they are.

The picture that emerges of professional fundraisers is a group of people who are highly passionate and committed to the causes they align with. The level of dedication, commitment, and resilience is striking. So too, is the notion of being “strategic.” This reflects many of the qualitative comments we received, where respondents highlighted the significance of the big picture, particularly where senior management and/or the Board lack that perspective on the fundraising function as a whole.

# So What Makes These Fundraisers Tick?

Consistent with anecdotal evidence we find that many fundraisers join the profession accidentally, or because they are driven by a desire to make a difference for a cause they are passionate about. Salary and the overall benefit package are much lower considerations, although they will become an issue in the selection of where individuals choose to be working next. Interestingly, our regression analysis revealed those that are motivated by salary/benefits are significantly less committed to their employer. Passion, emotional attachment, and a genuinely love for the cause appear key to loyalty and retention.

As can be noted from the word clouds above, moral identity is very much relevant to both people's sense of who they are and their sense of being a fundraiser. The highest frequency moral traits that people used to describe their fundraising identity are: caring, empathetic, hardworking and compassionate. The moral traits that are present in their sense of who they are, but not in their sense of being a fundraiser include: kind, friendly, loyal, honest and generous. The discrepancy between the two is interesting. We think it is important for us to reflect on why being a fundraiser can affirm aspects of a moral identity, but not others. What is it about the fundraising profession that diminishes the sense that people have about being a kind, loyal and honest person? It would also be interesting to reflect on the passion, creativity, drive, ambition, and curiosity that the fundraising profession provided people with the opportunity to fulfil.

Our list of key motivating factors is dominated by items that relate to well-being and notably, competence, autonomy, and connection. Aspects of work that deliver on these dimensions were regarded as 'charging' by participants. Notable here is the ability to be able to make a difference to a cause that they are passionate about. In aggregate this suggests that in looking to build fundraiser well-being, organisations should invest in staff relationships in much the same way that they do for donors, taking time to determine the specific interests that fundraisers might have and who or what they might need to be connected to. Opportunities for enhancing individual well-being can then be highlighted and implemented.

Other notable charging factors were being treated with respect as a professional and receiving the support of colleagues in leadership or Board positions. There was a high level of agreement within our sample that these factors are important.

Although well-being variables were still highlighted in our analysis of factors with the capacity to drain or demotivate, it was interesting to note that there was much less agreement in the sample about what was important. Our data also suggests that it may be helpful to think about factors that motivate and factors that demotivate separately. Connectedness, for example, when present, was a powerful motivator,

but the lack of connectedness appears to have much less impact on feelings of demotivation or draining.

Noteworthy draining factors include perceptions of a lack of professional growth. Lack of autonomy and a lack of Board support. All were found in our regression analyses to be associated with lower organisational commitment. Lack of professional growth was also an indicator of intention to quit the employer. It therefore seems clear that to boost retention organisations need to do more to provide significant development opportunities. In general, as was highlighted in our initial review, professionals crave being allowed to develop within their chosen profession.

A related factor came through in our qualitative comments, where the lack of a career trajectory was flagged by a number of respondents. They could see individuals from other organisational functions being promoted to leadership positions, but there appeared to be no comparable route for them to do likewise. Many fundraisers appear to have to move on to move up.

Our data in respect of harassment and discrimination also make for depressing reading, given that 26.5% of our respondents indicated they had experienced one, or both, of these. Although shocking these figures are in line with the results of other recent surveys of fundraisers. Of the two, experiences of harassment are more common, with harassment from one's colleagues and peers being most common. Only around half of cases are reported, although it is worth noting that significantly fewer cases of abuse at the hands of more senior staff or donors are reported. It was clear from the associated comments that where more senior staff or donors were implicated, many organisations defaulted to inaction and failed to adequately support the fundraiser as they should. In aggregate, the voices in our study paint a grim picture of the lived experience of a quarter of our colleagues, friends, and peers. The impact of these experiences would cause considerable hurt and pain in any setting, but it stings particularly in a sector that is clearly the focus of so much sacrifice, passion, and love. To be treated with a modicum of decency, care, and respect feels like very little to ask in return.

In respect of conflicts, disagreements with others about how fundraising should be practiced and particularly in relation to the case for support, are the most common and both are linked to a decline in organisational commitment. It was interesting to note that disagreements within the fundraising team were perceived as healthy and heightened loyalty to the employer. When we examined intentions to leave, interpersonal conflicts with a leader and conflicts with other teams over how fundraising should be practiced, were highlighted as lowering loyalty.

Given the earlier findings of our literature review, we expected that the leadership styles practiced by one's line manager would be an issue in fundraiser retention and our data confirmed this hypothesis. Servant and transformational leaders are more likely to sustain and motivate their teams. It was also interesting to note that those working for servant leaders were significantly less likely to indicate that they were seeking to leave the profession. There is thus a clear need for nonprofits to invest in leadership training and development for managers/senior managers or those who

desire a promotion to these positions. The quality of leadership was also found to be a huge factor in the qualitative comments supplied by our respondents.

Overall, our findings paint a picture of a profession passionate about driving change in our society. Passion rather than financial gain is at the root of what motivates and fundraisers will seemingly put up with a lot that is not right about a given job role while in service of that passion. In seeking to motivate and retain, employers are therefore advised to think through the implications of what it means to be a professional fundraiser and the degree to which team members are presently treated as such. Is there a focus on well-being for this very particular type of person? Could strategies to retain be better aligned with a fundraiser's sense of true self and the morality at the core of that concept? Treating fundraisers the same as we might treat other categories of employee does not appear to be optimal. Some degree of tailoring will reduce turnover and the very real financial and relationship costs that are associated with that churn.



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