

Social Impact Staff Retention 2024

Findings and recommendations from the inaugural survey on nonprofit staff engagement

Launched in late-2023, the inaugural Social Impact Staff Retention (SISR) survey collected data on nonprofit worker engagement. Respondents were asked whether they are seeking new jobs (or will be over the next year), whether they are not, and why. Details were also collected about tenure, scope of work, and whether job seekers plan to stay in the nonprofit sector or look to other fields.

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Social Impact Staff Retention 2024

74%

Are looking for/considering a new job, or will be this year

65%

Are unsure if they will look for/consider a new job within the social sector

Nonprofit workers in the U.S. were asked about satisfaction with their jobs.

This is what they said.

Why are they looking?



- Too much responsibility and not enough support (58%)
- No obvious or clear growth opportunities (58%)
- Inadequate benefits and compensation (57%)



Why are they staying?

- Hybrid or remote flexibility with work (82%)
- Management/leadership are supportive (64%)
- Adequate benefits and compensation (64%)

Social Impact Staff Retention 2024 Findings

Overwhelmingly, nonprofits are dissatisfied

When respondents were asked if they are looking for a new job, or will be this year, 74.2% said yes — compared to an all-industry average of 65%. Only one-third (34.7%) of those who responded “yes” definitively plan to stay working in nonprofits; the remaining 65.3% said “no” or were “unsure.”

Of those with fewer than 10 years of professional experience, 82% are/will be looking for new jobs. For those with more than 10 years of experience, that figure drops to 69%.

REAL TALK TAKEAWAY: If your organization employs 16 people, 12 of them may be looking for a new job this year — especially emerging nonprofits with < 10 years of experience.

Should I stay or should I go?

When respondents were asked why they are/will be looking for a new job, the top-line reasons were: having too much responsibility and not enough support (58%); no obvious/clear growth opportunities (also 58%); and inadequate compensation/benefits (57%).

Top reasons workers plan to stay in their roles include: having hybrid/remote flexibility (82%); supportive management/leadership (64%); and adequate compensation/benefits (also 64%).

REAL TALK TAKEAWAY: If you don't pay attention to your employees' workload and advancement, they may pay attention to a new job in a new industry. Be adaptable with in-office mandates, pay your people as well as you can, and make intentional space to be kind.

Discoveries in the data

Despite industry chatter to the contrary, fewer than half of respondents (48%) suggest they are/will be looking for new jobs because their work environments are poor or toxic.

Similarly, while nonprofit fundraisers are often referenced as having high turnover, it was marketing (81%) and programming (94%) professionals who most suggested they are looking. The industries with the highest projected departures were advocacy & public policy (84%) and arts & culture (93%).

REAL TALK TAKEAWAY: Nonprofit toxicity is high, but it's not the main reason people are leaving jobs. If you manage marketing or programming teams in advocacy or artistic spaces, pay extra attention to those nonprofiteers.



Social Impact Staff Retention 2024 Recommendations

The social sector grapples with complex and intertwined challenges, a situation not new but intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonprofit staff in particular have felt they are ricocheting from one crisis to another. They crave organizations capable of absorbing and responding to these challenges.

The Great Resignation, for example, hit the social sector hard, as SISR uncovered; three-fourths (74.2%) of employees suggest they are, or will be, looking for new jobs this year. Within this wave of turnover we find opportunity — an invitation to shift away from policies and practices that do not serve our missions or the people leading them.

“This doesn’t have to be our story.”

Becky Endicott, co-founder & chief storyteller, We Are For Good

SISR clarified what staff believe are their greatest pain points: they need support, they seek growth, and they deserve fair compensation. The recommendations below correspond to these top challenges.

Staff have too much responsibility and not enough support

However you slice it, too many nonprofiteers have been doing more work than they can (or should) manage. Staff put up with this for decades, but no longer.

Consider this...

- Determine your level of *organizational slack* — the surplus, under-utilized resources within a group that allow for flexibility, innovation, and capacity to respond to opportunities and challenges. Gather team leads to identify areas where staff are overburdened and explore potential for resource reallocation. Engage in discussions with team members to pinpoint opportunities for task redistribution and introduce flexible time for innovation. Encourage teams to set aside dedicated “slack time” for brainstorming and exploring new initiatives aligned with the organization's mission.

- Healthy organizations let things go. One exercise in letting go is *Chopping Block*, which acknowledges we are all doing too much. Chopping Block asks us to consider whether our efforts *right now* are actually *right*. Some will respond by saying, “Yes! Because if we don’t do it, who will? And if it doesn’t happen, our stakeholders will suffer.” But if we don’t pause and pull back, our work won’t get done at all, and then everybody suffers. Review everything, pause what you can, and chop what you must.
- With the growing excitement around artificial intelligence (AI), it's time to consider how it can revolutionize your routine tasks. The array of options might seem daunting, but a good starting point is to explore AI features integrated into the tools you already use, such as Zoom. For those with a paid Zoom account, activating features like meeting transcript notes and summaries can significantly reduce staff workload and smoothly introduce AI into your operations. Microsoft Teams premium offers similar features.
- Explore solutions for supplemental support like Catchafire. Catchafire connects nonprofits with skilled volunteers to address areas like organizational strategy, fundraising, copywriting, operations, and technical assistance. It works best with one-off projects, like logo redesign, but there are opportunities for ongoing support. Catchafire not only alleviates the pressure on staff but also allows for a fresh, external perspective.

Staff lack obvious or clear growth opportunities

Commit to the idea that all staff can grow and reach their full potential, whether that is a steep rise (promotions) or a deep dive (broadening skills). Allow reasonable space for opportunities that may lead to growth — or possibly even modest (and helpful) failure.

Consider this...

- Have independent contributors or entire teams complete a simple “all about me” exercise. Use this information to better understand who your staff are as people, what motivates them, and how you can support their development.
- Staff may seek a new credential or skill. For instance, a fundraiser may seek to become a certified fund raising executive (CFRE), participate in low- or no-cost workshops with their local Association of Fundraising Professionals or United Way chapters, take online courses with Candid.org or the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, or listen to hundreds of free podcasts available — some can be found here. Allow space for these opportunities *during working hours* and make them part of employees’ annual work plans.

- Invite a colleague to join a committee or project that's outside their area of expertise, or allow them to propose and execute an initiative the organization has not attempted. (**Note:** in service of the latter, discuss what projects or tasks can be *chopped* — or temporarily delayed — so this new/additional work can be led manageably.)

Staff have inadequate benefits and compensation

Nonprofits are finally acknowledging the need to provide more equitable pay for staff. Reasonably growing revenue should always be a part of achieving this goal, and there are also practical ways to refashion hard costs while offering benefits that are low- or no-cost to employees and organizations.

Consider this...

- Examine expenses that are part of your organization's ongoing business operations.
 - Review how you use print collateral and postage. For example, if the majority of your donations come online (instead of via mail) perhaps forgo paper acknowledgement letters/tax receipts and move those to electronic communications. Consider the same for costly annual event collateral like save-the-date notices and print invitations.
 - Review operational costs (e.g, your phone or internet provider, communications services, subscriptions) and cut what's being un- or under-used, and look into nonprofit rates through services like [TechSoup.org](https://www.techsoup.org/).
 - If your organization makes "swag" freely available (e.g., shirts, pens, stickers) consider getting rid of those or shifting to selling such items as a revenue source. Supporters of your mission will often pay for such products.
 - If your organization is small enough where HR or administrative staff functions are not feasible — or would be a big strain on the budget — consider partnering with a [professional employer organization](#) (PEO) like ADP or Insperity.
- In line with growing revenue, consider if the following are options for your nonprofit.
 - If you have a physical space you cannot leave, try to lease some of it to other organizations for a reasonable fee. If it *is* possible to depart your physical space, do so — respondents to SISR who were happiest in their jobs suggested hybrid/remote flexibility with their work was the top reason.

- If you have staff with knowledge others will pay for, offer their expertise to other organizations in a fee-for-service model.
- Consider other low-cost options which may be appealing to current or prospective staff, like increasing the number of paid vacation days or providing additional resources for things like childcare or cell phone reimbursements.

Concluding note

Mission matters, but not more than your own staff. In today's work world, job seekers have options. While employees may work for financial security, they do not have to work at *your* organization. Staff seek organizations replete with well-being, balance, and personal growth — and they will go elsewhere to find it. This should be a wake-up call for managers and decision-makers.

About SISR

In the fall of 2023, working through social networks and directly with nonprofit organizations and their employees, the Social Impact Staff Retention (SISR) survey was administered online. Responses were collected from a random sample of nonprofiteers across the United States (n=260). SISR participants were CEO/founders, IT professionals, fundraisers, marketers, and beyond — no one group held a majority. Responses came from a range of experiences as well, from fewer than 5 years working in nonprofits to more than 30. The survey collection was kept anonymous to optimize results.



About the project leads

Michelle Flores Vryn, CFRE

Michelle brings 15+ years of nonprofit experience to the table. Throughout her career, Michelle has raised funds for causes close to her heart including climate change and biodiversity, higher education, and civic engagement. Her expertise spans various aspects of development, from major gifts and institutional giving to capital campaigns and digital fundraising. Michelle considers herself a lifelong learner, disruptor, and community-builder across sectors. She is passionate about the future of fundraising and how we can seamlessly integrate marketing and development. Additionally, Michelle actively promotes community-centric fundraising (CCF).

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Evan is a nonprofiteer with over 20 years of experience in fundraising, strategy, programs, and operations. In addition to his work in social impact, Evan has coached organizations on board development and talent growth, commissioned operas, and created learning initiatives. He contributes regularly to several social impact publications and authored the newly published book, *The Nonprofiteer's Fundraising Field Guide: 30 Practical Ways to Boost Philanthropy Through Servant-Leadership*.

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