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Retaining fundraisers is a perpetual problem for charities, and bad management might be the main reason why, as **Frances Hurst finds**

What is bad management costing your charity? The latest survey in Professional Fundraising investigating the state of fundraising management in the UK reveals that it could be more than you think. Studies such as the NCVO's Voluntary Sector Almanac have shown that the voluntary sector has higher staff turnover than either the public or private sectors – but why should this be so? Are working conditions in charities really that dreadful, or the pay so abysmal?

If we are to believe some of the things we hear bandied about in the sector about why fundraisers leave their jobs, one would have to conclude that they are just a bunch of money-grabbing individuals who ruthlessly jump from one charity to another to further their careers and increase their salaries. Their priority is themselves and old-fashioned values like loyalty are a thing of the past, and while managers do their best to retain staff, there is little they can do to stop this perpetual outward flow of talent.

We wanted to find out what the fundraisers themselves had to say, and so asked Professional Fundraising readers to tell us exactly what had prompted them to leave their last fundraising job. We were not interested in what they said at their exit interviews, but why they really left. This is what they told us.

Reasons for leaving

The survey revealed that 25 per cent of fundraisers did indeed leave their last fundraising job to pursue their careers, with another 8 per cent attracted by the better salary or benefits on offer. However, for 26 per cent of respondents the primary reason for their decision to resign was because they were unhappy with the management in their fundraising department (see the *Reasons for Leaving* chart).

A further 16 per cent left because of wider management and organisational reasons. Job security issues, such as redundancy or threat of redundancy, or the end of a short-term contract, accounted for eight per cent of resignations and another 15 per cent of fundraisers left for personal reasons. These included factors such as change of location, taking time out to travel, and stress. Only one per cent were primarily motivated to move by a cause-related issue.

Respondents to the survey ranged from fundraising directors to fundraising assistants and some interesting differences emerged when the results were analysed by 'manager' and 'non-manager' segments.



The data showed that managers (our definition is fundraisers that manage other people) were almost twice as likely – at 30 per cent – to leave their current job for career reasons as non-managerial fundraisers, where the comparable figure is only 18 per cent. Non-managers, on the other hand, are four times as likely – at 12 per cent – to quote salary as the reason for their departure. These respondents are likely to be at the lower end of the salary scale, so perhaps this should not be surprising.

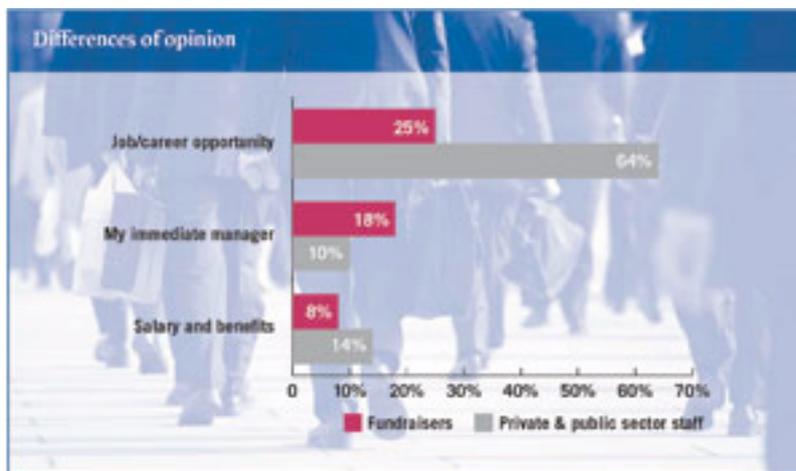
Exploring the dissatisfaction with management a little more deeply, it is interesting to note that this is a much more significant factor for non-managers than it is for managers – with a total of 28 per cent of non-managerial departures blamed on fundraisers' immediate managers. The equivalent figure for managers is only 16 per cent. A similar variance can be observed in the departures blamed more broadly on the quality of fundraising management as a whole.

What should we read into these results? Is the level of conflict between managers and staff indicated by this research inevitable? Is it no more than should be expected as we all become more discerning about the quality of our lives at work? Employee expectations are increasing all the time and the media plays its part, regularly encouraging us to reconsider our work-life balance. High levels of growth in some charities, as well as the increased prevalence of home working, are creating more complex working arrangements and inevitably putting a greater strain on staff-manager relationships.

To explore these questions a little further, it is useful to compare some of these findings with those from a recent survey by Reed Consulting conducted across the private and public sectors (see above).

In that survey, new job or career opportunities accounted for a massive 64 per cent of the departures from private and public sector posts. At 25 per cent, the score for fundraisers is far lower. Similarly, leaving a job for salary and benefit reasons is also more prevalent outside the voluntary and community sector.

Conversely, a fundraiser's immediate manager is almost twice as likely to be the reason for a fundraiser's departure, than a manager in other sectors – 18 per cent versus 10 per cent. So are fundraising managers that much more difficult to work with? And, if there are issues with particular managers, are charity HR departments able to identify them?



Lies, damn lies and exit interviews

If you are reading this and thinking, "Well, this doesn't apply to our charity. We carry out exit interviews so we know why our fundraisers leave", it might be wise to begin questioning the reliability of those interviews. While they are now commonplace in the sector and are the main mechanism used to identify the reasons why employees leave an organisation, it is important to remember that staff can sometimes be economical with the truth.

A recent independent survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) into exit interviews within the public sector discovered that interviewees often provided misleading information, typically downplaying employee dissatisfaction with their current job. In the survey, nearly 90 per cent changed their reasons for leaving from what they said at their exit interview –

from what could be categorised as 'pull' factors (ie. the attraction of a new job), to those that were essentially 'push' factors (eg. dissatisfaction with aspects of the current job). The remaining respondents gave 'push' reasons in both interviews, but interestingly only included concerns about management in the anonymous follow-up survey. The CIPD concluded in its review of the research that the data exit interviews provide "gives a highly misleading impression of the real reasons for resignation. It significantly downplays the extent to which issues such as ineffective supervision and dissatisfaction with management are a major cause of employee turnover".

These findings are not that surprising when you take just a moment to think about them. A successful move to a new organisation usually depends on a good reference from the very person you might have a problem with. But it is clear that continuing to manage an organisation based on the information exit interviews provide is a bit like keeping your head firmly buried in the sand, when you know that a herd of buffalo is heading straight towards you.

Analysing the fundraisers' survey data in the same way as this public sector research shows that 44 per cent of managers leave their jobs for reasons that could be classified as 'push' factors, with the figure rising to 61 per cent for non-managers.

Many of these 'push' factors are things charities can do something about. Indeed, many are issues that charities have a responsibility to do something about. Perhaps if the cost of these preventable losses was actually measured, it would spur more charities into taking action to improve the quality of their management. The CIPD estimates that the cost of replacing a single employee averages more than £4,600. And this figure doesn't include any consideration of loss of expertise – or indeed any impact on staff morale. We have all seen the effect that a steady departure of respected staff has on those that remain. The impact of a lack of continuity or the missed opportunities that result from an unnecessary exodus are, however, largely invisible. One thing is for sure, with a typical fundraiser staying in post for just 18 months, staff turnover represents a substantial additional cost to charity employers – and their fundraising departments.



The *Professional Fundraising* survey also begs a further question: Are charities investing enough in developing and supporting their managers? It's certainly not the case that all fundraising managers are incapable of having good relationships

with their staff. Far from it, there are lots of excellent people managers out there. But even the good ones are often under pressure and over-stretched – and when they are, what do think is the easiest aspect of their job to neglect? Does anyone you know have a Key Performance Indicator for retaining and motivating their staff?

The message is clear: It's time for management to wake up – you are losing your charity money!

Of course, this is just a simple quantitative survey and no fundraiser is going to respond to it by admitting that they left their last job because it was beyond their capabilities, or that they had behavioural problems that drove their colleagues mad! (And, if we are honest, we have all met fundraisers like that). Nevertheless, the benefits of improving staff retention by just a few percentage points are undeniable. Valuable knowledge and experience is retained within the charity – and significant expenditure saved.

So if exit interviews cannot be relied upon to provide the full picture of why fundraisers choose to leave their jobs, perhaps fundraising directors need to ask themselves an uncomfortable question: "If the real reasons that fundraisers leave our department are similar to those revealed in this survey – what are we going to do about it?" Our donors deserve at least that.

'Why fundraisers really quit' is part of wider survey by Frances Hurst into the quality of management in UK fundraising. The full report of the survey results, including examples of best fundraising management practice, will be published in the July 2006 issue of Professional Fundraising.

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