

Retaining Library Employees

What Works?

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education has been grappling with the “Great Resignation” as employees leave jobs at higher rates than the industry has seen in years.¹ Although turnover rates seem to be slowing, they still exceed pre-pandemic levels, with 33% of employees indicating they would be looking for new jobs within the next year.² Employees that do stay may suffer from the “Great Detachment,” or generalized feelings of burnout.³ From search expenses and productivity decreases to loss of institutional knowledge and impacts on institutional culture, these resignations pose real costs to academic libraries and their institutions.

Against these headwinds, we wanted to know: What should our libraries do to retain employees? What does research (from within library literature and beyond) tell us about employee retention and today’s library workforce?

While there are many unknowns, there is some consensus about what makes a difference from an employee’s perspective. We summarize some of the best practices in employee retention and provide ideas about ways to make your library the kind of place where people want to stay.

Our recommendations vary as to who has the power of implementation. For example, all employees contribute to a colleague’s sense of belonging or can offer praise for a job well done. Other strategies are for managers or would require institutional policy change. We encourage you to consider how you might advocate “up” for some of these changes even when you aren’t in the position to implement them.

As you read through these suggestions, we offer several caveats. First, some turnover is good. People grow and want new challenges. Sometimes that means leaving for a new position. And new colleagues often bring fresh perspectives and ideas. Our recommendations aim to prevent environments and conditions that result in unnecessary turnover.

Second, as a companion to our suggestions, we recommend reading about toxicity in library culture and how underrepresented groups leave higher education at higher rates.⁴ Employees of color are significantly more likely to look for new employment in the next year compared to their white colleagues.⁵ Also, “not all staying is the same;” some retention may not be an indicator of a healthy workplace but rather “involuntary retention” for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) colleagues who would like to leave but don’t see an alternative.⁶

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Finally, there are some essential items missing from our list. Better compensation is the top factor valued by employees, full stop.⁷ If employees don't feel they are being paid a fair salary or receiving quality benefits, then other retention strategies will be limited in their success. Advocating for better benefits could include pushing for improved childcare policies, support for eldercare, higher employer retirement contributions, or more affordable health insurance. Improving compensation is a big lift that requires institutional change. In this article, we are focusing on smaller changes that may be easier to implement in your library, but that does not mean that you should ignore compensation.

With those caveats in mind, we grouped our recommendations into four broad categories: Ask Questions (and Act on the Answers), Institutionalize Work-Life Harmony, Invest in Your Staff, and Nurture a Positive Work Environment.

Ask Questions (and Act on the Answers)

Every context is different, so understanding the underlying conditions that are leading to turnover will help you figure out the next steps to take. Furthermore, having these conversations can itself build trust and strengthen communication between managers and employees. A word of warning, though: If you are going to ask questions, be responsive to the answers you receive. Otherwise, rather than gaining trust, you stand to lose it.

- **Stay interviews** – The point of stay interviews is to focus on what each employee needs to be happy and productive at work and to uncover what motivates them to stay.⁸ Unlike exit interviews (see below), stay interviews allow you to gather this information while you still have the opportunity to act on it to benefit the employee who provided it. Sample questions can be found in the ACRL Library Worker Retention Toolkit.⁹
- **Exit interviews** – Consider doing exit interviews internally to supplement those conducted by your institution. If departing employees are willing to share honest feedback about the challenges they experienced, that information can help you implement changes that will benefit remaining and future employees.¹⁰
- **Climate surveys** – Organizational climate plays a key role in employee satisfaction.¹¹ While stay and exit interviews provide important data from the perspective of individual employees, a climate survey can help you identify broader trends in your library—both strengths and areas for improvement. Furthermore, making them anonymous can encourage employees to be fully honest in a way they may not feel comfortable doing in a one-on-one conversation. Combat survey fatigue by making sure the survey is well designed and by sharing the results—and next steps—as promptly as possible.¹²

Institutionalize Work-Life Harmony

Rather than work-life *balance*, which assumes a split between the “work” self and the rest of one's identity and places the two in opposition, we use former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's framing of work-life *harmony*, which emphasizes the integration of work and nonwork demands through flexibility and autonomy.¹³

- **Boundaries** – Encourage regular breaks during the day, and normalize the use of vacation and sick time. Expecting engagement outside of work hours should be an exception, not a rule. When the need arises for employees to work beyond their normal schedule, make sure it is clearly communicated and understood.

- **Remote work** – There's a clear disconnect here between what employees want and what employers want to offer. One study found this was the second most common reason employees stated for wanting to seek new opportunities, with 54% of those who worked mostly on-site indicating dissatisfaction with their employer's remote work policies.¹⁴
- **Flexible schedules** – Allow employees to adjust their working hours to best suit their needs and preferences, and be flexible within that framework when events pop up that impact normal schedules. An emphasis on autonomy and respect has been shown to increase employee satisfaction and productivity.¹⁵

Invest in Your Staff

Investment includes things that have clear price tags, such as funding for conferences or workshops, but also includes broader strategies that help employees grow and feel engaged.

- **Professional development** – Often this gets cut when budgets shrink, but this is a key way to help employees feel valued and continue developing. A recent Gallup survey found employees who strongly believe they have support for professional growth are significantly more likely to stay at their employer.¹⁶ Beyond just providing funding for conferences, consider lobbying for training within the institution or promoting free webinars. Make sure employees feel they can take the time to support their professional growth.
- **... and make sure that includes training for managers** – Managers have a large impact on employees' sense of satisfaction and belonging. Encourage your institution to offer leadership training for managers, or support attendance in external programs.
- **Mentorship programs** – Consider how you help employees build their sense of belonging at an institution and who can help them grow. Larger schools may be able to build a mentorship structure within the library, whereas smaller schools may be able to look to other networks in the region or in a consortium. The three-volume set *Academic Library Mentoring: Fostering Growth and Renewal* can help institutions seeking ideas as to how to structure such a program.¹⁷

Nurture a Positive Work Environment

Just as students need to feel respected, valued, and safe in their campus' culture, these same factors are key to employee retention. Many of the strategies in this category should be led from the top. That said, a truly positive and welcoming environment can only be achieved through the intentions and actions of all employees.

- **Meeting culture** – Meetings are an essential part of our workday, but too many meetings are poorly planned, go off topic, run over, or just should have been an email. These meetings are a drag on morale, motivation, and productivity.¹⁸ Well-run and productive meetings in which all attendees' contributions are valued can go a long way in creating a positive environment. Effective meeting practices include sharing a well-planned agenda well in advance of the meeting; sharing notetaking, timekeeping, and scoping responsibilities; and designated no-meeting days.
- **Job duties** – Ensuring that employees have opportunities to work on projects that they are interested in and excited about is essential. Too often, as staff numbers shrink and workloads increase, library employees find themselves overworked and unable to focus on the part of their jobs they value the most. Regularly reviewing an employee's position to ensure that they can do the work they are truly interested in will give them a reason to stay.¹⁹

- **Culture of trust** – Trust is fundamental to all relationships, so it makes sense that it plays a critical role in the workplace. Studies have shown that retention is linked to whether employees trust their managers.²⁰ Many of the strategies discussed in other sections of this article, particularly the “Ask Questions” section, when done well, will improve trust between employees and library leadership. Additionally, making transparency and open communication a central part of your interactions with your employees is key. This means ensuring that employees understand administrative goals and priorities and are given opportunities to contribute to the decision-making process.²¹
- **Physical space** – One study found 79% of academic library employees agree that their physical work environment—comfortable workstations, well-regulated temperature, adequate lighting, a sensible layout, etc.—has a significant impact on their job satisfaction.²² Neglected employee spaces can be a drain on employee physical and mental well-being. Small changes, such as a fresh coat of paint, replacing broken or uncomfortable desk chairs, making workstations more ergonomic, a refresh to the employee break room, etc., can have a positive impact on employee satisfaction and productivity.
- **Feeling valued by colleagues** – There are many reasons employees may not feel appreciated and respected in their libraries. A significant barrier to all library employees feeling valued is the librarian/library staff divide. One study cited this as the biggest drain on library staff morale.²³ This divide is often institutionalized through library policies and practices. It is imperative that library leadership review both for unnecessary gate-keeping and work toward including library staff in planning and decision-making processes. Additionally, all of us with a library degree need to recognize the critical work done by library staff and treat them as truly equal colleagues. Another significant barrier is the reality that emotional and invisible labor is often disproportionately shouldered by some staff. BIPOC colleagues, for example, are often unofficial mentors to students of color. Other employees may routinely volunteer (or are voluntold) to do the thankless jobs—like clearing up after parties—that keep a library running smoothly, while others never volunteer. We should all be conscientious about stepping up to take on our fair share of that work and acknowledging our colleagues’ emotional and invisible work.
- **Positive feedback** – One study found almost 40% of higher education employees reported *not* receiving regular positive feedback even though this is strongly linked to retention.²⁴ Managers often focus on giving employees feedback on what they need to improve, but giving positive feedback is equally important. This feedback makes employees feel that their hard work is seen and valued. Positive feedback should be a significant part of the performance management process. It should also be given routinely throughout the year in both formal and informal interactions. This is another area in which all library employees have a role to play. Recognizing our colleagues’ ideas, hard work, and accomplishments can go a long way to creating a supportive work environment.
- **Social time** – Creating opportunities for employees to socialize can be a boon for creating a positive work environment and team building.²⁵ Enabling employees to connect with one another on a personal level helps create a foundation for collaboration and collegial working relationships. Gathering around food—particularly when subsidized by the library—promotes community and a shared feeling of value.²⁶ Social activities could include weekly coffee time, birthday celebrations, shared lunch hour, and field trips to campus events and spaces.

Closing Comments

These strategies must be contextualized by your unique library and your role within it. The larger ecosystem and culture of the institution will influence the scope of what is possible. No one person can apply everything, but the hope is that you will take a moment for honest introspection to discover what can be done to improve the workplace for current and future colleagues. Yes, some turnover is healthy and is not necessarily an indicator of institutional disfunction. However, working to improve the employee experience will help attract and keep top talent. We hope this list provides you with clear steps forward to improving the work environment within your library.

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Notes

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