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MOVING ON

Why Fundraisers Leave, and How to Keep Them

SPECIAL REPORT

Think fundraisers leave just to chase bigger salaries? A Chronicle survey says you're wrong. By HEATHER JOSLYN

51% of fundraisers say they will leave their current nonprofit within 2 years.
30% of fundraisers say they plan to leave fundraising altogether.

34% of fundraisers say they've seen a decline in gifts in the past 2 years.
21% agree that the negatives of their jobs outweigh the benefits.



COURTESY OF WARREN DAVIS

PRESSURE TO DO GOOD
 Warren Davis says some of the anxiety fundraisers feel is self-induced. The "drive to make the world better means that they work far more than they should."

WARREN DAVIS used to spend 100 hours a week raising money. He stopped only when the stress of his workload put him in the hospital. Three years ago, Davis ran the annual campaign for an arts organization in Chicago, helping raise at least \$25 million a year and working on a \$100 million endowment campaign. He developed ulcers. His overall health deteriorated from the pressures of his job, and he reached a breaking point. "I was close to having a heart attack or stroke from stress," he says. His doctor urged him to go on medical leave, and he left the job. In 2017, Davis hung out his shingle as a full-time development consultant, now based in Phoenix. The pressure he felt is shared widely by other fundraisers, he says, and contributes to turnover. "That innate drive to make the world better

means that they work far more than they should," he says. Davis's situation may have been extreme, but it's not unique. Too much pressure to meet unrealistic fundraising goals, coupled with too little pay and frustrating organizational cultures, is driving away fundraisers, according to a new survey of 1,035 fundraisers in the United States and Canada, conducted by Harris Insights & Analytics, through the Harris Poll, for the *Chronicle* and the Association of Fundraising Professionals. Half of all fundraisers surveyed expect to leave their jobs in the next two years. What's even more alarming is

that three in 10 fundraisers in our survey said they have recently left or plan to leave the development field altogether in the next two years. While the large number of baby boomers in fundraising could account for some of that, it's hardly the main source; only 12 percent said they planned to retire or had family changes or other personal reasons for quitting. The new data show that even after a widely shared study in 2013 sent a warning signal to nonprofit leaders about the anxiety and unhappiness of fundraisers, little has improved. Half of the top development officers in that survey, "Underdeveloped," conducted

by CompassPoint and the Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund, said they were looking to leave their jobs.

Fundraising as Pressure Cooker

The reasons the revolving door of fundraising keeps spinning are numerous, our survey shows. But two findings stand out:
 ■ 84 percent of fundraisers say they feel "tremendous pressure to succeed" in their role.
 ■ 55 percent of fundraisers say they "often feel unappreciated" in their work. With government funding for nonprofits constantly under threat,

a reduction in the ranks of donors from America's middle class, and more charities sprouting all the time, competition for donor dollars is fierce. Many fundraisers feel that competition is unsustainable, with too many charities battling for the same wealthy supporters. The number of vacant fundraising positions should raise red flags, says Denny Young, a veteran fundraiser for charities in Toronto, who retired in 2018 from 14 years teaching fundraising management at Humber College. "I'd be a little suspicious about why there are so many damn jobs," he says. "It seems out of whack — because it is."

The competition, and the consequent pressure and turnover, takes a toll on frontline development professionals. Teresa Stohs has been in fundraising for 25 years and has been an executive director four times in her career. For eight months now, she's been a foundation-relations specialist at Avow Hospice, in Naples, Fla. She loves her job, a newly created position that plays to her strengths as a writer. But to take it, she left a major-gifts position in a two-person development office that had become a one-person office when her colleague departed — leaving her with a doubled workload and no relief in sight. Stohs sees signs of burnout everywhere she looks in the development field. "Exhaustion is one of the major reasons why fundraisers leave," she says. In addition to the pressure of meeting dollar goals, she says, frontline development officers

must handle the public-figure aspect of representing an organization to donors. "Anywhere I went, people saw me, and I was working. I was always 'on,'" Stohs says. "I think people have no idea of the sheer energy drain, the pressure to always be happy, always be pleasant. Your people will burn out mentally, emotionally, and physically." **Turnover and 'Betrayal'** The nonprofit world is hardly the only sphere with problems that prompt high turnover: aging leaders who hold too tight to the reins, dysfunctional management, tight budgets, understaffing, workers' feeling underappreciated. But there may be something about charities, and the type of people who choose to dedicate themselves to those causes, that makes these and other frustrations *Continued on Page 10*

93% agree that they could work for a nonprofit only when they have a strong belief in its mission.
46% say fundraising jobs are pretty similar no matter the organization.

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harder for fundraisers to bear.

Jennifer Harris raised money for 15 years at academic and medical institutions, where she had a new supervisor, at all levels, roughly every 18 months. Eight years ago, she left to become a consultant. She thinks a sense of betrayal is at the center of fundraising's perennially high turnover rate.

"We walk into organizations that, in our mind, are designed to do good," says Harris, whose consulting group, the JH Collective, is based in San Diego. "There's an assumption that the people working there are also designed to do good. And that's not always the case. Organizations don't always value their employees."

The discussion, she says, should be "a lot bigger" than whether it's

inadequate leadership that leads to stress, burnout, and turnover.

"In our field, the boundaries are blurred between our head and our heart," Harris says. "People who are called to this work have a higher calling to purpose. And when it stops functioning, it's a betrayal. What I see in so many clients is this heartbreak, because they care about the mission."

And ultimately, she says, "What

makes someone leave is feeling like they can't deliver on the mission."

The new survey from Harris Poll points to some of the problems that bring about a sense of dissatisfaction, if not outright betrayal, in the fundraising world. Recruiters, consultants, and development professionals offered the *Chronicle* some of their ideas for making the revolving door slow down.

PROBLEM

Not enough help from leadership — or anyone else

SOLUTION

Teach everyone to play a role in fundraising

CONGRATULATIONS, you've been hired as a fundraiser! Now go raise money and don't bother anyone.

That's the message too many fundraisers feel they've been given by their chief executives, their boards, and the people they work with: You're on your own, kid.

Oh, and this: And you better come back with the money — or else!

In the 2013 study "Underdeveloped," directors of development complained about a lack of help from their executive directors and boards. The new Harris Poll shows that a significant number of development professionals still struggle to get the help they need from their organization's leadership: 36 percent of fundraisers say they're dissatisfied with the support they get from their boards.

Recruiters and fundraisers alike share dismay over how fundraisers are isolated in organizations, and how other staff don't understand fundraisers' jobs — especially how long it takes to establish deep relationships with wealthy donors.

Derric Bakker, a fundraising consultant and recruiter in Asheville, N.C., offers an example: His firm placed a fundraiser at an organization in October, in the middle of year-end giving season. "We met with them in April, and they're ready to throw in the towel, because he's not raising any money," Bakker says. "This guy has probably already started sending out his résumé. He's been set up for failure."

That situation isn't unusual, he says. "People don't understand the complexity of fundraising, so they just start thinking, We need to get someone else. They probably could, but they need to first fix some of the issues in the organization."

Too many boards aren't made to understand their role of helping with fundraising, and too

many CEOs outsource development planning to their fundraisers. Many staff members don't talk at all with the fundraisers who make their work possible.

As fundraisers, says Young, the educator, "we often don't understand how much of our work is going to be a political process of getting people within the organization on our side." Fundraising associations, he believes, need to do a better job of preparing their members to educate charity leaders and foot soldiers about what fundraising is and the role they need to play.

That's exactly what the Association of Fundraising Professionals has in store, according to Michael Nilsen, vice president for communications and public policy. In recent years, the group has increased the number of educational sessions it offers on building a "culture of philanthropy" within charities. And it's planning much more.



CHRISSEY GRAY

WINNING TRUST
Arts fundraiser Chris Carter impressed his executive director and trustees so much they approved his plan to add to his team. That kind of support is a key reason he stays in the role.

30% of fundraisers are dissatisfied with the level of recognition for their accomplishments.

29% are dissatisfied with the support they get from their organization's CEO.

PROBLEM

Unrealistic goals

FUNDRAISERS are driven by mission — 93 percent of participants in our survey said they couldn't work for a charity if they didn't have a strong connection to the cause. And they relish working with donors: 78 percent said they wished they had more time to spend meeting with supporters.

But those donors are changing. Compared with five years ago, they want more information on their gifts' impact (according to 92 percent of our survey participants), they're more aware of social issues (85 percent), and they're more likely to earmark their gifts for specific programs (77 percent).

And fundraising is getting harder: One in three fundraisers surveyed said donations to their charity had dropped in the past two years. The latest "Giving USA" figures showed philanthropy overall down 1.7 percent in 2018 compared with the previous year — including a 3.4 percent drop in giving by individuals.

That reduction was very likely fueled in part by changes in the federal tax code, which made it less likely that millions of taxpayers would benefit from charitable deductions. The full impact of the tax law passed at the end of 2017 is still uncertain. A stock-market swoon in December 2018 also depressed giving at year's end.

"There's no guarantee that 2019 will look like 2018," says Mark Rovner, of the fundraising consultancy Sea Change Strategies, in Takoma Park, Md. "Everyone was budgeting that they'd get a big bump at the end of 2018, and it didn't happen. I think there are more surprises like that coming."

In such a challenging climate, many fundrais-

ers say the dollar goals set by organizations can be ... fanciful.

"The line between optimism and abusing your development director gets very fuzzy," says Rovner, one of many who criticize what he calls the "magical thinking" of some charities about how they set fundraising goals.

Donors are aware of being squeezed in the service of an overly ambitious monetary goal, say fundraisers, and of not being thanked sufficiently before the next ask.

"I have had direct donor feedback. People have said, 'We don't want to go to any of your functions anymore because we feel like we have become a number,'" says Rachele Beckner, a fundraiser at Clemson University who last year, feeling burned out and wanting more time with her kids, shifted to a job as project coordinator of a tiger-conservation project at Clemson. "When donors can see and feel that, that's not a good situation."

Part of the problem, fundraisers say, is an emphasis on growth for growth's sake — the gala that has to raise 10 percent more this year because the

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SOLUTION

No more 'magical thinking'

HOW THE SURVEY WAS DONE

The *Chronicle of Philanthropy's* survey of fundraiser job satisfaction, in partnership with the Association of Fundraising Professionals, was conducted online in May and June by Harris Insight & Analytics, through the Harris Poll. Questionnaires were sent to *Chronicle* subscribers and members of the fundraisers' association, yielding 1,035 responses.

■ **Participants live in the United States and Canada.** Ninety percent of them are either employed full time as fundraisers or lead an organization that relies on fundraising.

■ **The survey pool leans toward smaller organizations.** Forty-six percent of fundraisers in the survey work for organizations that raise \$1 million to \$10 million annually, and about one in four work for charities that raise less than \$1 million a year. The fundraisers surveyed work at organizations that employ a median of three development professionals.

70% of fundraisers say their charity's fundraising goals are reasonable.

MORE ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO TOOK THE SURVEY

- 57 percent have worked in fundraising for more than 10 years.
- 45 percent have been in their current jobs for two years or less.
- Just over three-quarters are women, 85 percent are white, 4 percent are Hispanic, and 3 percent are African-American.
- Social services accounted for the organizational missions of the largest share of participants in the survey, at 17 percent, followed by education (15 percent), and health (11 percent).

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CEO says so, or the campaign that keeps moving its goal posts just because it can.

Board members who come from competitive, go-go industries like finance sometimes push

27% of those who are likely to leave fundraising or have left say unreasonable goals are a key reason.

fundraising goals beyond reason, development experts agree. “For some reason, there’s a boatload of hedge-fund billionaires on boards,” Rovner says. “They can cause a lot of trouble, because they’re used to making crazy bets.”

A more common issue, many fundraisers say, is that too few organizations are taking a cold, hard look at their donor bases and planning their fundraising efforts accordingly.

“You have to look at your donor pool and your portfolio and be realistic,” Beckner says. “You can’t expect a development officer for an arts program to raise the same money as the development officer for an engineering program. A \$5,000 gift, to an artist, might be a really meaningful gift. And I don’t think we should stick our noses up at that.”

PROBLEM

Too many bad managers

SOLUTION

Better training and alternative paths to promotion

POOOR SUPERVISION and a toxic organizational culture are among the chief reasons that development professionals flee their organizations.

Dysfunctional managers, who help foster that toxic culture, may find that fundraisers are less willing than other nonprofit employees to put up with nonsense — not when the job market is so warm and welcoming.

“People in development are usually not 22, 23 years old,” says Nicole Randle, a regional advancement officer at Emory University who, at 37, has been a fundraiser for five years. Because so many development professionals “fall into” the job after having other careers, she says, “people tend to be older and not inclined to be treated like children.”

When fundraisers are great at raising money, they are often tapped for managerial positions that cut down on the work they love (talking with donors) and replace it with tasks they may have no

zest for or even understanding of.

Turning a happy road warrior into a department manager can be a mistake, say experts. “Promoting people into jobs that are not so external

18% of fundraisers who are likely to leave or have left the profession say their charity CEO is a big reason.



STEPHEN NOWLAND/EMORY U.

WE’RE NOT CHILDREN

Nicole Randle of Emory University says because fundraising is often a second or third career, it’s a mistake to treat fundraisers like they are in their first job.

has ruined more good fundraisers,” says Jennifer Dunlap, co-founder of DRi, a fundraising consultancy in Arlington, Va.

The problem, she says, is that most organizations don’t know how else to reward high-performing fundraisers. An honest conversation, or several, about what it would take to keep building their skills and compensation is what she suggests, along with recognition that a new role calls for new forms of professional support.

“A good fundraiser may not be a good man-

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25% of current fundraisers are dissatisfied with their access to professional development.

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ager,” Dunlap says. “So it means being clear that we’re promoting Jane, but we know that Jane has never managed people, so we will make sure she has some leadership training.”

Professional-development training — often among the first things axed when budgets are tight — is not a luxury, fundraisers say.

At Mercy Ships, an international medical charity, fundraisers are given help with membership dues for professional associations and with

training, including preparation for the Certified Fund Raising Executive exam. The practice is one of several that strengthens the development staff’s “connectivity to the organization,” says Roy Jones, vice president for development.

“I really encourage [our fundraisers] to join in national organizations that have regional meetings, so they can meet with their peers on a regular basis,” Jones says. “For frontline fundraisers out in the field, it’s important that they know that they’re not alone.”

PROBLEM Lack of resources

SOLUTION Invest in what pays off

IN AN ERA when charities are rated by watchdog organizations like Charity Navigator on how much “overhead” they have versus how much they spend on programs, it can be a struggle to get the money, staff members, and technology needed to find and engage donors. “Even the most enlightened executive director has to deal with their board and how many stars they have

director who has the courage to say, ‘Yes, we can raise X number of dollars, and this is what we’ll need,’” says Jennifer Harris, the fundraising consultant in San Diego.

If budgets truly are tight, some organizations might need to make tough choices, focusing only on those activities that will pay off.

Lisa Schiller, executive director of MHY Family Services, in Mars, Pa., says her organization has done just that. “We got rid of a gala,” she says.

“For all the hours it used from our staff, it wasn’t as valuable as devoting time to grant writing or community outreach.”

Mining the group’s donor data also showed a drop-off in giving by local church congregations, which had long supported the charity. It has reversed that decline by focusing more intently on those relationships.

Schiller’s advice: “Everyone should look at their yearlong book of work and ask what is the right matrix, given the resources that they have.”

Increasingly, charities are focusing on major donors. Jason Lewis, author of *The War for Fundraising Talent*, believes that is almost entirely what fundraisers should do, leaving the rest of the field for others.

“I believe we’re setting fundraisers up to fail when we require them to be spending time on special events, direct mail, a couple of grants each year,” says Lewis, who left a fundraising career five years ago to become a consultant and trainer based near York, Pa. “Those are not high-margin activities.”

Better, he says, to ask “highly capable volunteers” to run galas, Giving Tuesday, and other time-intensive fundraising efforts, and to automate much of the rest of the tasks that development staff now performs. Put greater emphasis on subsequent rather than initial gifts, he suggests. “I don’t want to pay a fundraiser to do what technology can take care of.”

In 10 years, Lewis predicts, “the only employee on the payroll that we will recognize as a fundraiser will be the major-gifts officer.”

62% of people who left fundraising jobs say they were dissatisfied with how resources were allocated.

39% of current fundraisers are dissatisfied with the data or data analyses they receive about donors.

on Charity Navigator,” says Mark Rovner, the consultant. “Everything that’s not program has second-class status.”

In such an environment, fundraisers and those who manage them can be loath to ask for what they really need in order to accomplish their organization’s revenue goals.

“Rarely have I worked with a development

PROBLEM

No succession path or career-advancement possibilities

THE MESSAGE from our survey by Harris Poll is clear: Seeing an unpromising future at a job can stir a fundraiser’s restlessness. At the jobs they left most recently, survey participants were likeliest to be dissatisfied with their prospects for promotion (85 percent), and a lack of succession planning (83 percent).

In small organizations, moving out may be the only way to move up. But managers should know that a lot of the young, lower-level people at their organizations are already stewing.

“It’s about letting tedium end up with the person at the bottom of the hierarchy,” says Jamie Smith, executive director of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network. “Rather than letting them connect with the things that might have gotten them interested in nonprofit work in the first place, they’re stuck in a basement doing data entry.”

“A common complaint about millennials is that they’re entitled or want to punch above their weight too soon. But you have to find a balance between logistical work that does need to get done and chances to grow.”

And keeping them in that basement, she argues, doesn’t give them the skills they’ll need to move up when opportunities do become available. More professional-development opportunities, and especially personalized attention, for early-career fundraisers, could help extend their

SOLUTION

Spread power around

tours of duty, Smith and others say.

Monotony can be a morale killer for fundraisers at all levels of an organization. “You have to look at who is attracted to fundraising roles,” says Isaac

61% of people who left fundraising jobs say they were dissatisfied with their access to leadership training.

Schild, who is based in the San Francisco office of Scion Executive Search, where he is managing partner. “Historically, those are the people who are dynamic within their communication and execution, and they have a creative bent.” Such people “are going to want to shift gears more.”

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Should You Counter a Fundraiser’s Job Offer? It Depends, Say Experts

A REALITY CHECK: If your fundraisers are any good — and maybe even if they’re not — they’re getting emails and calls from recruiters perhaps weekly, even daily. It’s a matter of supply and demand: There are far more development jobs than there are qualified people to fill them.

Sooner or later, one of your organization’s high-performing fundraisers will enter your office, close the door, and reveal that he or she has been offered a job elsewhere.

Should you make a counteroffer?

Probably not, say many fundraisers and recruiters. Not only is it too late to have the money talk, but money might not be the reason your fundraiser is leaving.

Lauren Yamaoka, a development officer at Children’s Health, a medical center in Dallas, started her career in talent management, working with fundraisers at Northwestern University. She believes that a bidding war for development professionals has contributed to the epidemic of

job hopping in the field. “I am inclined to say I wouldn’t counter,” she says, “because it builds the wrong culture.”

Better, she argues, to build a culture of regular and frank communication, making sure that fundraisers and all employees know they are valued.

“You should never let it get to that moment” when a fundraiser presents you with a competing bid, Yamaoka says. “If you truly value an employee and want to retain them, you should make sure they know that.”

The ‘Stay’ Interview

By contrast, Isaac Schild, a recruiter for nonprofit clients, favors making a counteroffer, though he offers a few caveats.

Often the reason for leaving is not really about money, says Schild, managing partner at Scion Executive Search.

Instead, it’s an indicator that you needed to do

a “stay” interview and that you should do them regularly with your high performers.

“You should ask them: How are we doing? How can we keep you? What are your struggles? How are you doing financially? How can we challenge you?” Schild says.

It’s vital to find out why a prized fundraiser is interested in another job, says Jennifer Dunlap, a veteran fundraiser and co-founder of DRI, a consulting group. “Why is it exciting to them? Can you do that inside the organization or not?”

In some circumstances, it might be worth including a bigger paycheck as part of a more holistic retention plan, she says. “I have seen fundraisers accept the counteroffer. But it has to be real and sincere.”

But “usually by the time someone comes in and says, ‘I’ve got another offer,’ they’ve made up their mind to go,” Dunlap says. “And the time to have kept them was six months prior to this. You should have been paying attention.”

— HEATHER JOSLYN

34% of current fundraisers are dissatisfied with their access to leadership training.

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Getting them involved in strategic planning, for example, or putting other new challenges in front of them can help keep them happy, Schild says.

Failure to promote from within can also make fundraisers eye the exits. “We used to grow our own,” says Jennifer Dunlap, who was a fundraiser for organizations like the American Red Cross before she moved into consulting. “Organizations don’t do that anymore. They think it’s OK to go outside rather than upgrade the skills of their workers.”

Lauren Yamaoka, a development officer at Children’s Health, a medical center in Dallas, started her career in talent management at the alumni-relations department at Northwestern University. She believes that internal hiring, along with incentivized bonuses (available annually and based on either individual or team performance) and management training for high-performing fundraisers, can help give staff members more reason to stay.

“Create that talent pipeline internally,” she says, “so a fundraiser can see, There’s a place for me here in one, two, or three career moves.”

PROBLEM

Inadequate compensation

SOLUTION

Be prepared to pay market rate

duties onto one or two development professionals while paying them peanuts. Teresa Stohs, of Avow Hospice, is stunned by today’s fundraising job ads: “I see what they want people to do for \$30,000 or \$40,000 a year, and it just makes me tired.”

If you can’t pay fundraisers what their skills are worth in the market, “you become a training ground,” says Derric Bakker, the consultant and recruiter. “The people who take those jobs wind up moving out. There is always somebody willing to pay more. People are desperate. They’re desperately seeking superheroes.”

Interestingly, 18 percent of the fundraisers in

NO ONE gets into nonprofit work to get rich. But pay is a big source of dissatisfaction among people in our survey who told us they are likely to leave or have left fundraising.

For people living in high-cost markets, or carrying student-loan debt, compensation is a huge factor.

Lisa Schiller, of MHY Family Services, is one charity leader who thinks that the math no longer works for many early-career fundraisers.

“I think we’re facing a time when many student loans exceed entry-level compensation,” she says.

Small organizations often pile unrealistic

26% of current fundraisers are dissatisfied with their salaries.

our survey said a bonus or incentive-pay plan would be important to their job satisfaction. Monetary incentives for charity fundraisers have long been a subject of ethical debate, but they’re common at medical and higher-education institutions.

Failing to pay fundraisers at market rates, in accordance with their actual (rather than theoretical) duties, starts the self-defeating cycle spinning faster. While pay might not be the main or only thing that draws talent away, it can prove a powerful magnet, says Denny Young, the veteran fundraiser and fundraising educator — especially on a tough day, when a new opportunity can seem like an escape hatch.

“We all have moments,” he says, “when we hang up the phone and call a good friend and say, Talk me out of this.” ■

20% are dissatisfied with their benefits.



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