

**STRATEGY PAPERS
COMMITTEE**

Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D.
Editor

Sean Kirby and
Joan L. Whitman, Ph.D
GPA Publications
Committee Co-Chairs

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. The GPA Strategy Papers Committee accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process.

Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

Articles in this publication represent the opinions and views of the author(s) only.

www.grantprofessionals.org

Keeping Your Grant Professional: Updating Your Talent Retention Strategy

Kevin Burton, CFRE

Philanthropy Manager, Midland Care Connection, Inc.
Topeka, KS

GPC Competency 07: Knowledge of practices and services that raise the level of professionalism of grant developers

GPC Competency 08: Knowledge of methods and strategies that cultivate and maintain relationships between fund-seeking and recipient organizations and funders

Abstract

Since the Great Resignation, retaining talent has never been more important for nonprofit organizations and development teams. Organizations, managers, and supervisors must have resilience-building as an important component of the strategy for retaining grant professionals. Resiliency can lower resignation rates and prevent burnout. Supervisors must use skills that build resilience, specifically for grant professionals, to retain team members. By using these techniques, grant professionals will burn out less often, and organizations will experience decreased employee turnover.

Introduction

The Covid pandemic changed work in a multitude of ways. In the United States, the pandemic led to a restructuring of priorities and the Great Resignation in 2021. “The Great Resignation’ refers to the decisions of millions of workers to quit their jobs during the pandemic” (Kellett, 2022, paragraph 5). In 2019, the retention rate of grant professionals was less than 50 percent (Bachman, et al., 2020).

While it was a struggle to retain grant professionals before the pandemic, it became an increasingly challenging task with the Great Resignation, as the nonprofit sector experienced high employee turnover. In May 2021, job openings in the U.S. surpassed 9.5 million for the first time since at least 2000. Since then, that number has fluctuated between 9.5 and 12.5 million open jobs each month. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). The nonprofit sector represents approximately 500,000 open jobs. (Greer, 2021). This number includes grant professionals, and retaining grant professionals is crucial for sustainable fundraising operations.

**STRATEGY PAPERS
COMMITTEE**

Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D.
Editor

Sean Kirby and
Joan L. Whitman, Ph.D
GPA Publications
Committee Co-Chairs

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. The GPA Strategy Papers Committee accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process.

Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

Articles in this publication represent the opinions and views of the author(s) only.

www.grantprofessionals.org

In the last two years, organizations have become more focused on retaining talent (Schuster, 2022). There are a variety of helpful tips and resources to help managers keep employees. To retain grant professionals, managers need a robust retention strategy that includes resilience-building skills.

The Grant Professional's Struggle

Grant professionals face specific challenges which relate to their high turnover rate. The speed of the grant cycle and the constant need to write grants is a regular concern of fundraising teams and grant professionals. They constantly look for new grants to write, spend hours and even weeks writing grants, wait months to hear back, and, if the grant is declined, face the stress of needing to start the process over to fund the same need. This process leads to high stress levels and burnout.

Burnout in the Grants Profession: An Initial Analysis demonstrates that work stress was the main reason for grant professionals to leave the profession: "70% of those who left... report they did so because of chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors of the job" (Bachman, et al., 2020, p. 9). Additionally, the authors' analysis shows that individuals were more stressed from grant-related work than other aspects of their life, such as family, or finances (Bachman, et al., 2020). Improving grant professionals' ability to handle stress will increase their health and retention. Building resilience is an essential component of managing stress.

Why Resiliency Is Key

Incorporating resilience-building into the organization and manager's retention strategy will address stress and combat the low retention rate. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, or workplace and financial stressors" (Palmiter, et al., 2020, paragraph 4). Supporting the growth of resilience in grant professionals will help address workplace stress. Fortunately, supervisors and organizations can support resilience building.

A study on workplace resilience programs shows that such programs improve health, well-being, and performance (Vanhove, et al., 2016). Furthermore, the same study explains that one-on-one delivery formats were the best method of success for workplace resilience-building programs (Vanhove, et al., 2016). This study demonstrates the crucial role supervisors play in building employee resilience. In addition to better resiliency, the individual will gain improved health, well-being, and performance.

**STRATEGY PAPERS
COMMITTEE**

Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D.
Editor

Sean Kirby and
Joan L. Whitman, Ph.D
GPA Publications
Committee Co-Chairs

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. The GPA Strategy Papers Committee accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process.

Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

Articles in this publication represent the opinions and views of the author(s) only.

www.grantprofessionals.org

Resiliency Tips

There are a variety of tools available to supervisors to build employee resiliency, including ideas below adapted from the Mayo Clinic and tailored to grants professionals (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2022). Organizations and managers who employ these tactics to implement actionable steps with their grant professionals will retain them longer.

1. *Get Connected* – Relationships with others will provide “support, guidance and acceptance in good and bad times” (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2022, paragraph 6). Grant writing can be a very isolated activity. It is easy when writing to want the application to be perfect and polish it for hours. Supervisors help grant professionals step away by working with them to establish boundaries on their time to ensure they take breaks during the day and include grant professionals in team activities. Additionally, it is worth moving the grant professional’s workspace location to ensure they are not physically isolated. Their office space needs to be close to the team to facilitate building relationships with coworkers.
2. *Learn from Experience* – Receiving notice of a funding denial is never easy, and no grant professional is always successful with applications. When funders decline a grant award, supervisors support grant professionals by focusing on the denial as a learning opportunity and not letting professionals wallow in self-defeatism. Managers must schedule a debrief meeting and guide the conversation to focus on positives, growth opportunities, and any feedback on the application. At the end of the meeting, supervisors reorient professionals to upcoming opportunities so they are hopeful.
3. *Remain Hopeful* – It can be easy for the declinations of applications to weigh heavily on grant professionals. However, they must remain hopeful about their work and the organization’s mission. For that purpose, supervisors need to reassure professionals throughout the application process, especially after debriefing meetings. The reassurance helps grant professionals maintain a sense of purpose, stay connected to the organization’s mission, and build resiliency – all of which keep grant professionals confident.
4. *Be Proactive* – If there is an issue that the grant professional is facing, managers need to help them address it. Supervisors must not ignore the problem or let grant professionals avoid the issue. Knowing that grant professionals can improve and fix the problem will build their resiliency. Proactivity also connects to learn from experience. Managers

STRATEGY PAPERS COMMITTEE

Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D.
Editor

Sean Kirby and
Joan L. Whitman, Ph.D
GPA Publications
Committee Co-Chairs

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. The GPA Strategy Papers Committee accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process.

Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

Articles in this publication represent the opinions and views of the author(s) only.

www.grantprofessionals.org

and organizations that work with their grant professionals to address issues and make grant writing a learning process will reap the benefits. Supervisors have an opportunity to provide instruction on a variety of topics for different challenges. For example, if the grant professional struggles with pulling numbers from the budget, the manager offers training on reading a budget.

5. Make Every Day Meaningful – Grant professionals occasionally spend weeks working on one grant. During this process, it is not uncommon for professionals to become frustrated with the monotony of the daily routine, especially if other team members are securing significant gifts during this time. Grant professionals need to remember that their work is meaningful. Teams and organizations benefit when managers remind and congratulate grant professionals on small accomplishments, like completing the narrative or budget sections in an application. This process will make days more meaningful for grant professionals and help organizations retain grant professionals.

Putting Resilience Into Your Retention Strategy

These tips lay the groundwork for supervisors and organizations to incorporate resilience training into the retention strategy for grant professionals. While many resources on employee retention are also applicable to grant professionals, such as positive work environment, promoting work-life balance, supporting mental health, investing in their careers, recognizing their contributions, and increasing pay and benefits, organizations should also tailor retention strategies to address the unique challenges of a grant professional's job (Shuster, 2022).

Benefits

There are a variety of benefits for organizations and development teams for focusing on retention and incorporating resiliency training into the retention strategy. Individuals with a higher resilience will succeed longer in grant writing roles as their skills allow them to handle denials and the grant application process.

Retaining employees saves organizations money as they do not incur the costs of recruiting and hiring individuals (Shuster, 2022). Grant professionals who stay in their jobs for a long time will have strong relationships with coworkers and funders. Additionally, when grant professionals stay, organizations will retain institutional knowledge and have the opportunity to develop deep relationships with funders.

**STRATEGY PAPERS
COMMITTEE**

Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D.
Editor

Sean Kirby and
Joan L. Whitman, Ph.D
GPA Publications
Committee Co-Chairs

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. The GPA Strategy Papers Committee accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process.

Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

Articles in this publication represent the opinions and views of the author(s) only.

www.grantprofessionals.org

Conclusion

The Great Resignation transformed the working environment. Organizations must create a comprehensive retention strategy to combat the high number of people resigning, and resilience training must be part of that strategy. Resiliency will lead to grant professionals with higher job satisfaction and help organizations retain talent longer.

References

- Bachman, T., & Planton, B., & Rodgers, J. (2020). Burnout in the grants profession: An initial analysis. *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, 18(1), 1-19.
Retrieved from grantprofessionals.org/resource/resmgr/publications/journal/2020.gpa-journal.final.pdf
- Greer, Lisa (2021, October 7) 3 steps for nonprofits to take advantage of the great resignation. *NonProfit Pro*.
Retrieved from <https://www.nonprofitpro.com/article/3-steps-for-nonprofits-to-take-advantage-of-the-great-resignation/>
- Kellett, Ann (2022, February 11). The Texas A&M professor who predicted 'the great resignation': Management professor Anthony Klotz reflects on the phrase he coined and how the pandemic changed the workforce. *Texas A&M Today*.
Retrieved from <https://today.tamu.edu/2022/02/11/the-texas-am-professor-who-predicted-the-great-resignation/>
- Mayo Clinic Staff. (2022, July 14) Resilience: Build skills to endure hardship. Mayo Clinic.
Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311>
- Palmiter, D., & Alvord, M., Dorlen, R., Comas-Diaz, L., Luthar, S., Maddi, S. R., O'Neill, H. K., Saakvitne, K. W., Tedeschi, R. G., (2020, February 1). Building your resilience. *American Psychological Association*.
Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience>

**STRATEGY PAPERS
COMMITTEE**

Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D.
Editor

Sean Kirby and
Joan L. Whitman, Ph.D
GPA Publications
Committee Co-Chairs

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. The GPA Strategy Papers Committee accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process.

Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

Articles in this publication represent the opinions and views of the author(s) only.

www.grantprofessionals.org

Shuster, Lisa (2022, November 28). Out with the great resignation, in with the great retention: How to keep valuable employees in 2023. Forbes. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2022/11/28/out-with-the-great-resignation-in-with-the-great-retention-how-to-keep-valuable-employees-in-2023/?sh=34f750c714a8>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet>

Vanhove, A. J., & Herian, M. N., Perez, A. L. U., Harms, P. D., & Lester, P. B. (2016). Can resilience be developed at work?: A meta-analytical review of resilience-building programme effectiveness. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 89, 278-307.

Biographical Information

Kevin Burton, CFRE started writing grants for local foundations. Since then he has written local, state, and federal grants for health, human services, and arts organizations. He now supervises grant professionals, and enjoys mentoring grant professionals new to the field. He can be reached at Kevin.Burton5@gmail.com.