

## Staff Retention

SOMETIMES THE BEST WAY to define or describe something is to say what it is not. This is not an entirely unscientific procedure, and would seem to apply to treatment of the subject of staff retention. These remarks<sup>1</sup> will be better understood and perhaps more readily accepted if you will keep in mind that this is not a paper on recruitment of librarians nor even procurement of staff, but on retention of staff, and is further delimited to include only professional staff. For not all of the comments I shall make would apply to the nonprofessional, and certainly if this paper were to include nonprofessionals, there would have to be some changes and many additions. This is not to say that I necessarily consider staff retention to be more important than recruitment for the profession or procurement. It is to say that I am treating only the one facet of a larger problem, one, however, which seems to be of great importance and vital interest today.

I will not attempt to rank in order of importance the factors conducive to staff retention. This would be a futile exercise, since all the factors treated are considered important. However, I do believe the most important to be that of working relationships, for it seems to me this has caused more resignations in the library profession than any single factor.

In order to create a situation which will be conducive to good working relationships, an old rule of thumb of personnel administration must be observed: everyone must be responsible to

someone and no one must be responsible to more than one person. In turn, that person must be someone who is competent to supervise the individual's work to a degree that will be observable to the individual. When this is not the case, an examination of the situation will probably reveal that the wrong person is in charge or that the staff member is unable to recognize adequate supervision. In either case, reorganization is in order to the extent of replacing the supervisor or shifting the staff member to another supervisor, or, of course, termination.

A dissatisfied individual or one who is not satisfactory to his supervisor should be given an opportunity to transfer. If the staff member is too poor a worker, the other supervisor probably will not accept the transfer. It is then obvious that the staff member should be dismissed. Sometimes a supervisor, not knowing the qualities of the dissatisfied individual who has been working in another department, can be asked and will agree to give him another chance. Often this works out, sometimes not.

One of the most disturbing factors in working relationships is brought about by the wrong person approaching the wrong person in another department, when such interdepartmental communication is necessary. Good policy seems to be to have anyone make this contact who desires and make it at any point he desires, as long as it works. But when it does not work, and it often does not, the entire staff should know that the matters are referred up to department heads or their equivalent, and then cross. This insures the validity of the assumption that the problem was interdepartmental.

An illustration would be that a cata-

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loger advises a page about shelving. Well, this is all right if it is sound advice, if the page accepts it, and if the suggestion meets with the approval of the stack supervisor or whoever is in charge of pages. It is silly to say that because the informal crossing-over between departments might not work that it should not be permitted or even encouraged. There are simply too many opportunities to facilitate work by this informal exchange where it is acceptable, and individuals do enjoy it, thereby not feeling blocked off from other departments.

No department head or equivalent should ever give an order to or, especially, reprimand a staff member not in his department. It is best to have a general policy, frequently stated, that when this is done, the individual has the right to react as he will, preferably telling the department head who is out of order that it is none of his business, and this need not even be said politely. In this way, one of the worst things in a library can be prevented—that thing being the existence of some awesome or angry person making this awe and anger felt in an area wider than his immediate staff responsibilities officially go. While position, tenure, etc., all may make the individual more valuable in his work, organizational lines can be badly tangled by such an individual's assuming a set of administrative prerogatives that were thought out along entirely different lines and assignments made that did not include this crossing-over, which permits a kind of seniority abuse.

The administration of a library should endeavor to make it well-nigh impossible for this kind of out-of-channels arbitrary administration to be felt. Years ago many libraries had this problem with the faculty. It is much less prevalent today. The faculty are too busy with their own work, and library

staffs may quite probably be more adequate in size, quality, and organization. Many of us favor the assignment of specific faculty rank to the individual professional librarian in order to give him a kind of status which is highly desirable in an academic atmosphere. A librarian with the rank of instructor can use his own judgment as to whether or not he wants to argue a matter with a full professor of English. One thing is certain: he has as much status and therefore as much equipment with which to argue as has the instructor in history to argue with the full professor of English. From here on, it is a question of the individual and whether he likes to argue and is willing to take his chances. Many do, many don't, but this is not characteristic of librarians any more than of instructors at large.

The suggestions thus far made might be grouped loosely as working relationships. There is another group that might be called "working conditions."

By working conditions is intended coverage of such items as heat, ventilation, proper lights, good equipment, adequate space, scientific, or at least sensible, arrangement of jointly-used facilities, whether books, furniture, or coke machines, and parking conditions—one I hesitate to include, since I myself have never been able to solve that problem. I think it is unnecessary to extend this list, since it is large, but different, in each situation. However, included in this area are many satisfactions or dissatisfactions which often lead a person to stay at or to leave an institution. I suppose there should be included here the item of living conditions, but since that is ordinarily more a community, town, or city problem than an institutional one, it is only mentioned here.

I imagine salary is the most important single factor as far as procurement of

librarians is concerned, especially those beginning professional work. I am not sure this is true, but I think it might well be. For this reason, many of us prefer to keep our beginning salaries around the national median so that other factors will enter into the individual's decision to work at a certain institution. There is a reason for this. The other factors are the ones that are going to influence the decision as to how long a person stays. So you might as well face them at the start. Nothing is more irritating and discouraging to an individual than to take a job at a relatively high salary, and then find that the institution is going to get all its money back, by not raising salaries in accordance with cost of living, merit, or tenure increases.

It is possible, no doubt, to get a couple of years' work out of someone before he discovers this, but since this talk is about staff retention rather than how to kid somebody out of a couple of years' work before he leaves, this dubious gain will be ignored.

Beginning salary for a junior professional person, however, should not be confused with initial salary, though it often is, so of course the national medians are merely a base for initial salaries, should the individual have experience or training of value to the particular institution.

Salary schedules should be determined, applied, well known, and widely understood. Raises should not be given in the light of specific offers, though with an unenlightened college or university administration, it may be necessary at certain times at certain places. When this applies, the administration of the library should make every effort to join with the other academic administrators to see that this is corrected.

Few things are more disturbing to the individual than to be aware of the

fact that the only way to get a raise is to get an offer. As a matter of fact, he soon catches on that he is better off neglecting his immediate duties and should start shopping for offers. These offers are frequently accepted, resulting in undue turnover. However, there is another reason of equal importance why raises should not be given in the light of an immediate offer. With this policy, it is possible to share the enthusiasm of a staff member who receives an offer. The potential of the new position can be compared with the present position, and the future of the individual can be discussed in a decently objective but personal manner.

As most of us are aware, I am sure, offers to staff members literally pour in these days. This is all very flattering and enjoyable and is of great interest and value to the average college or university administrator. At least, this is true as far as the total is concerned, but the individual negotiation disturbs everyone and, as I say, many of us feel raises in the light of an offer should never be recommended by the library. While this may seem a difficult if not impossible way to proceed by some librarians who are working under college or university administrators who expect or even require such offers before allowing raises, it can be done. We have not in the past fourteen years recommended a change in salary for a professional librarian to meet another offer. If this policy is never violated, the staff comes to know that what used to be known in the ivy league schools as the "jack and screw" method of remuneration is not in operation.

Of course, offers are taken into consideration seriously as reflecting outside evaluation of an individual, but this is done annually at budget time and through channels; otherwise, especially in this time of extreme shortages and

innumerable offers, there would be little time left for the library administrator to do anything other than revise salaries constantly. Meanwhile, all the other staff members are disturbed, wondering if they, too, ought not to look up from work long enough to be getting their salaries raised through offers.

The library administration's willingness and ability to determine the true value of the individual staff member, to pay him that much and no more, within a given scale, is, I am convinced, one of the major factors in staff confidence, and, therefore, staff retention.

It may be that the individual feels you are mistaken in determining his ability, but one thing he knows is that you are paying him what you think he is worth, and not what you think you must, except as this applies generally to all staff members. This policy cannot be put into effect successfully unless the total salary scale is at least equitable to comparable institutions. Again, some of us feel that assigning specific rank to the professional staff member pretty well takes care of this.

The individual staff member will not remain in a position, if he can help it, which does not have certain responsibilities. These responsibilities should not be assigned until the individual is prepared to meet them without a sense of inadequacy. At best, some of us feel, work in the more immediate operation of the library should be delegated. This will insure individual staff members having the sense of responsibility which keeps the position interesting.

To this individual must go all credit and discredit, for the assigned and assumed obligations. It is true that everyone in the hierarchy above, supervisor through administrator, is equally responsible, but in all fairness to the individual, credit must be given him when a good job is done.

If a poor job is done, it is better for

the succeeding officer above the individual to assume the responsibility, especially outside the organization. In other words, when a thing is done right, let everybody outside the library know the staff member who did it. When it is not done right, never specify which staff member caused the failure, as far as the outside world is concerned. It is almost impossible to prevent fellow staff members from knowing what happened, but there is always something rather sickening about an administrator who explains a failure of his organization by pointing out that a particular staff member failed. While this may very well be the case, it was the administrator's responsibility to see that an adequate person was given the assignment.

Every staff member must have someone who feels responsible for him, and either that responsible person or someone above that responsible person must let the staff member know what he feels to be the potential of that individual, and also that there is someone interested in his attaining that full potential, either within or outside the given institution. This potential must be an actual one, and not one that has been just trumped up for morale purposes, because time and circumstance will prove the theoretical potential to be wrong.

Sometimes a staff member and somebody above him are aware that he has greater abilities, but there is no opportunity for further promotion or for placement in the job that is right for that individual. When this is the case, there should be a definite, stated understanding on the part of everybody concerned that this is the case. Then a decision can be made, according to the policies and practices of the organization, as to whether the individual should be urged to seek his full professional potential in another institution or to stay in his present job. The supervisor or administrator or whoever is con-



cerned must be very careful not to assume prerogatives which are those of the individual, the institution, or the profession at large.

In doing this, depending upon time, place, and conditions, the obligations of management might be at times to favor slightly one or the other. Ordinarily, since the institution can better afford it than the individual, the decision should be made to favor the individual's career rather than to have him work at fractional capacity, since actually, for the long haul, the institution definitely benefits by this attitude.

One benefit that accrues to the institution is the favorable position it has with the library schools in placement preference of promising young people. The library schools feel that in such an institution a promising young person does not get lost professionally.

Another benefit is derived from the individual himself, who, having finally left the institution, encourages other people of great potential to accept appointments where the individual's career is given an even break with the institutional need, or, when at all possible, is slightly favored.

It might be mentioned parenthetically that the ethical obligation of management is probably met by merely not attempting to block the individual's professional growth when this means leaving a job, but does not extend to seeking specific positions for him and recommending him to other institutions.

In other words, management does not need to feel obligated to find better jobs for its own staff, especially in times of shortage. This does not apply to certain cases, for example, where someone has accepted a position, say, as assistant order librarian in order to get a minimum of training for running his own order department in a comparable institution. Here, when a person has been acquired with that understanding, the

spirit of the contract probably includes helping discover the proper spot for a person who has come for this minimum training, so stated at the time, and hired on that basis.

Where legally possible, encouragement to further formal and informal professional training should include leave with pay, certainly to the extent of one full quarter each year; financial assistance in addition to leave, a matter which is more easily attained than most institutions now recognize; aiding the staff in securing scholarships or assistantships in the library schools; no exclusion from merit or tenure salary increments; and terminal conditions should be most carefully handled. Actually, some of the best staffs in colleges and universities in this country are made up substantially of repeaters.

A continuing interest in former staff members should be taken, not entirely because they might return, but also because this is to the institution's credit, and becomes known generally. For example, appointment, or suggestion of appointment, to an important professional committee will often involve consideration of a more mature staff member who is no longer at the institution, rather than merely suggesting a promising one who is on the staff. Both reflect credit on the institution, but since presumably the ex-staff member is better qualified, a better job will result, while only discredit can come to an institution which can demonstrate wide committee and other association activity, but where people are not ready. It is definitely better not to be represented than to be poorly represented.

The staff member likes to be identified with a popular department or unit, and the popular ones invariably are those that do the best work, so it probably follows that a high standard of work—qualitative and quantitative—is conducive to retention of staff.