NPHI BEST PRACTICES SERIES:
NPHI STAFF RETENTION

The ability of NPHIs to conduct public health functions efficiently and effectively depends on having a highly motivated, well-trained, and stable workforce. High staff turnover not only affects the performance of an organization but also is costly.

In the face of limited resources and systems that deter financial or other incentives, many NPHIs have difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff. In general, salaries and financial packages for NPHI staff, particularly those with professional degrees, are significantly less than in the private sector. This is particularly true in NPHIs that use civil service employment systems.

WHAT CAN NPHIS DO TO RETAIN GOOD STAFF?

Foster a collective sense of purpose and organizational pride

In most NPHIs, staff can have a significant impact on public health, which is highly satisfying; in a well-functioning NPHI, employees have opportunities to achieve more collectively than any one person could do on his or her own. This collective sense of purpose derives from strong and visionary leadership, a clear mission, and opportunities for staff to participate in successful project and activities. The more embedded employees are in an organization, the less likely they are to leave.

High-quality internal communications, opportunities to work on high-functioning teams, the sense of working together for a higher purpose, and many of the other concepts discussed in this document all contribute to persons feeling part of and pride in the organization. Although private and non-profit organizations, including academic institutions, might share elements of an NPHI's vision and mission, NPHIs represent a combination of a broad public health mission -- embedded in the country's governance -- and a

> **RIVM Academy**
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> The RIVM Academy was founded in 2013 to promote collective learning and a collective sense of purpose among the employees of RIVM, the NPHI of the Netherlands. The Academy aims to develop, share, and safeguard RIVM's unique knowledge and skills to prepare staff for future challenges and opportunities.
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> The RIVM Academy provides opportunities for staff from different groups across the organization to explore together what RIVM's mission and strategies mean to them and how each employee can give meaning to the institute from his or her own position in the 'chain.' In so doing, the Academy acts as a tool for organizational development that helps staff realize the institute's goals and mission and continue to innovate as both individuals and teams.

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commitment to service that is unique in the global health community and should be fostered and nurtured.

Create opportunities for personal and professional development

People generally like to be challenged and to learn. In addition to formal training programs, managers can provide staff at all levels opportunities to develop new skills, engage their creativity, and gain new experiences. Approaches to developing staff include:

- Formal trainings - Education and training opportunities not only are intellectually stimulating but are also good for the organization. Training enables workers to improve their work, take on more demanding duties, and achieve personal goals of professional advancement, as well as successfully meet job requirements.
  - A caveat is that sometimes organizations support training for the sake of training – that is, being opportunistic in deciding which trainings to allow and support. Another issue is that systems for deciding which staff should participate in training should be transparent and fair.

- Special assignments - These might include temporary assignment to a different group at the NPHI, assignment to a challenging project or initiative, or a joint appointment at a university.

- Mentorship programs - A mentorship or "buddy" program, especially for new and junior staff, provides a structured mechanism for developing strong relationships within an organization and is a solid foundation for staff development and retention. With a mentoring program, an organization pairs someone more experienced in a discipline with someone less experienced with a goal of developing specific competencies, provide feedback on performance, and design in individualized career development plan (See *NPHI Best Practices Series: Mentorship)*.

- Career ladders and paths - A career ladder is an explicit program or plan that specifies opportunities for high-performing staff to have upward mobility – progression from a lower-level position to a higher level of skill or pay. A career path encompasses various forms of career progression, including traditional vertical career ladders as well as growth through horizontal transfers and other experiences. Employees with clear career development paths are more likely to feel that the NPHI is investing in them, and will in turn feel more invested in the NPHI.

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Create opportunities to recognize staff

Research has shown that workplace appreciation and gratitude for the work being done by employees are strong motivators. Recognition of good work should be both informal and formal.

- Recognition by managers - It is said that workers leave managers, not companies. Although this is not universally true, ongoing recognition and appreciation by managers are strong motivators and contribute to retention. Recognition by managers can take the form of frequent acknowledgement of work being conducted, performance reviews, and investment by the manager in helping the employee advance in his or her career through identifying opportunities for visibility, training and new experiences, or advancement.

- Institutional employee recognition programs - Employee recognition programs are designed to acknowledge good work and thank employees for their contributions. Characteristics of successful programs include:
    - Clear criteria related to eligibility and selection
    - Explicit articulation of what merited the award
    - Provision of the same award to all who had the same achievement
    - Recognition as close to the event as possible

Consider compensation enhancements

Competitive salaries and compensation packages might not be an option for government agencies due to strict and constrained budgets, but other options for compensating staff can be considered. Financial rewards might include overtime pay and 'top-offs,' bonuses for completing particular training programs or degrees, health insurance, and housing or transport allowances.

Incentives that support work-life balance can also be motivating. These include rewards of paid time off for exemplary performance or extra hours of work, and allowing employees to "bank" time for later use.

Ensure a supportive work environment and systems

Within the limits of available resources, NPHI management should provide a comfortable and safe environment for employees, for example, by ensuring a clean work space, well-maintained equipment, and adequate supplies to do the job. Employers also have a

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responsibility to implement procedures for identifying and addressing workplace hazards and environmental problems as they arise.

Some NPHIs, such as the US CDC and Colombia's INS, have gone beyond a focus on safety to include programs that encourage staff to adopt healthy lifestyles. These can include allowing time for exercise and sometimes providing exercise equipment and classes, offering healthful food options, and providing financial or other incentives for participation.

In many NPHIs, approvals for activities and protocols, procurement, manuscript reviews and clearance, and other systems function very slowly and may not be transparent or easy to navigate. Poorly functioning systems can be demoralizing. Employees also benefit from well-defined and well-communicated rules and standard operating procedures for performing their jobs optimally. NPHIs should strive to create systems and conditions that support staff in doing their jobs.

Implement special strategies for new employees

Turnover is often high among new employees. One way to help reduce turnover is to present applicants with a realistic picture of the job during the application process. Another option is to implement an "onboarding" program to help new hires to become embedded in the NPHI. This includes both formal orientations and informal activities to introduce new employees to the NPHI and its staff.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

New "best practices" regarding staff retention are constantly being developed and tested in public and private sectors. NPHIs can learn from the experience of others to continuously improve retention. A few particularly relevant issues are highlighted below.

Matching the workforce to the needs

Most NPHIs face constraints on the number of staff they can hire. Therefore, it is important to ensure that positions address the most important needs. This includes having an appropriate balance of managers, scientists, and technical and administrative staff, with 'task shifting' to ensure that the more skilled, highly paid staff are optimally utilized and those with less skills have opportunities to be challenged and grow.

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Succession planning

Succession planning is the proactive identification of future personnel needs and investment in advance, to ensure that those needs are met when the time comes. Succession planning is strongly related to both leadership development and staff retention. It ensures that experienced and capable employees are prepared to assume leadership roles when they become available. It is both a way to retain the individuals being groomed for leadership roles and a way to ensure organizational stability during times of change.

Use of metrics

Some organizations use metrics to determine which parts of the organization are having unacceptable levels of turnover. Although benchmarking – e.g., determining acceptable rates of turnover – can be a challenge, an NPHI can measure retention rates over time and strive for continuous improvement, particularly in units that have higher-than-average turnover rates. Surveys or key informant interviews can identify causes and inform strategies and a retention plan. If a retention plan is implemented, its results should be tracked.

> **Using Competency Frameworks to Motivate and Retain Employees**
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> Best practices also include defining the competencies needed for performing the varied jobs in the NPHI, and ensuring that both new employees and current staff meet these competencies. Competency frameworks have been shown to improve employee satisfaction by increasing awareness of the skills needed to do well in a job. A competency framework also helps identify training needs, so that staff receive the mentoring and skills to improve in their jobs and stay motivated to excel.
> Information on core competencies for public health:
> www.phf.org/resourcestools/pages/core_public_health_competencies.aspx

Creation of parastatal organizations

Some NPHIs have pursued becoming parastatal organizations to address and overcome restrictions from civil service and other governmental systems. Parastatal agencies (also known as autonomous agencies) usually have more financial and administrative flexibility than is typical for a line agency and may operate more efficiently and be more effective in attracting donor funds. Parastatal NPHIs may potentially offer salaries that are more competitive, more flexible and straightforward hiring processes, and more efficient purchasing and procurement processes compared to line agencies.

Although parastatal agencies often receive some government funding, they may rely more on external funding sources than line agencies. Parastatals sometimes have difficulty supporting work on the country's highest priority public health issues or gaining the attention of Ministry leadership. Also, the establishment of a parastatal often requires

setting up new administrative systems, which can be expensive and time-consuming. (See *NPHI Best Practices Series: Legal Mandates and Governance for NPHIs*.)