

CULMINATING
PROJECT



KEEPING THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATIVE STAFF EMPLOYED

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ABSTRACT

California legislators introduce upwards of three thousand pieces of legislation each year and oversee the implementation of a nearly \$500 billion budget each year. Much of the work to shepherd bills and the state budget through the legislative process is led by a relatively small cadre of roughly 2,760 staffers. Such staff positions are considered dream roles for many people who would like to impact change through policy, yet the California State Legislature appears to be facing a staff retention problem. Past studies have focused on the retention of traditional public servants but there are key differences that present a clear gap in the literature related to legislative staff and their motivations to maintain employment in the legislature. Through the application of political and public administration theory, this analysis explores some of the potential causes for legislative staff turnover, focusing on the California State Senate. The analysis results in three recommendations to better understand and explore staff retention, including more systematic collection of employee data, incorporation of collaborative governance theory, and prioritization of retention efforts.

KEEPING THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATIVE STAFF EMPLOYED: AN ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

04

Introduction

Many college graduates exit school with the goal of making a difference in the world by seeking a career at the local, state, or federal government level. They dream of opportunities to be in the room where decisions are made and to design the greatest public policy and political impact possible, not unlike “The West Wing” television show. California employs a year-round, full-time legislative staff of roughly 2,764 people, many of whom enter the State Capitol through an internship or fellowship (NCSL, 2021). Fellowships such as the Capitol Fellows Program elicit thousands of eager young applicants from across the state for a few, coveted positions available in each house of the Legislature. Beyond the hope of being able to live out a popular television show in real time, many new legislative staffers cite a variety of reasons for being attracted to the positions such as the ability to garner hands-on policy experience, exposure to political decision-making, intellectual curiosity, and opportunity to expand one’s employment network in a short period of time (Austin, 2007).

Yet, despite the high level of interest in legislative employment, the California Legislature is facing a retention problem. While reliable data is not publicly available, there appears to be higher than average rate of turnover and a high number of vacant positions in both the Senate and Assembly when compared to pre-pandemic levels. Such a retention problem can be considered in two different buckets. The first is when staff leave the Legislature entirely and the second includes instances where staff move between the two houses or between offices within the same house. Anecdotally, both types of retention challenges result in instability within the workplace, which leads to heavier workloads for remaining staff and the loss of institutional memory.

Like the vast majority of private sector workplaces, the California Legislature is an at-will workplace, meaning employees do not enjoy civil service protection or the benefits that often times come with being represented by a union, and management can generally fire people with or without cause. For many years, staff members and others outside of the Capitol have been pushing to provide legislative staff with the right to unionize in an effort to elevate employee voices. In 2023, the Legislature passed, and the Governor signed a bill to allow staff to initiate the creation of a union after January 1, 2026 (Kamal, 2023). As the unionization bill moved through the legislative process, staff became increasingly outspoken about their frustrations in the workplace and testified against bills to limit their employment options if they were to leave the Legislature. Moreover, there has been increasing media scrutiny and a number of staffers who have criticized the Legislature's Workplace Conduct Unit (WCU) which was established in 2019 as a response to the "Me, Too" movement (Wiley, 2022). According to the WCU's website, the unit "investigates reports of inappropriate workplace conduct by legislative employees, legislative Members, or third parties based on a person's protected class." However, the media and staff have alleged the unit is not independent from the Legislature and does not adequately perform its mission (Bollag, 2022). Taken together, struggles to unionize, the proposals to restrict post-legislative employment, and an impotent WCU may also contribute to a faster rate of staff turnover. Given the importance of legislative staff to state policymaking, it is essential for the Legislature and researchers to understand what motivates legislative employees. Only then can the Legislature comprehensively take action to increase retention. To further explore this phenomenon, this paper will include an analysis of the public administration and political implications that may be contributing to the California Senate's retention challenges, in addition to preliminary options to improve retention.

Background

As defined by the National Conference of State Legislatures, California is one of only ten states to have a full-time Legislature, meaning legislators are paid enough to have only one job and maintain a staff of full-time employees (NCSL, 2021). Among full-time legislatures, California has consistently ranked first in legislative professionalism which is an index that is considered in comparison to the professionalism of Congressional employment (Squire, 2007). Legislative professionalism components include salary and benefits, time demands of

services, along with staff and resources, all of which rank high in California's Legislature. Generally speaking, legislative staffers are hired to work for a particular member of the Legislature to serve in a specific role. Typically, staff are deployed either in the Capitol or in the district from which the member was elected. In the Capitol, roles vary but may include a scheduler, legislative aide, communications director, legislative director, and chief of staff. In the district office, there are typically a few district representatives and a district director. Outside of individual member offices, there are some career staff positions in each house which include those who work directly for the institution in an administrative capacity or committee staffers whose job it is to facilitate hearings and analyze legislation within their area of policy expertise.

Beyond California's high number of year-round staff, the state is widely viewed as holding outsized policy influence when compared to other states, in part due to its large and diverse population, as well as its economic prominence. Moreover, the state's progressive politics result in trend setting environmental and social policies that often spark nationwide discussions. In recent years, the state's growing policy influence has been dubbed the California Effect, which describes instances where policies enacted in the state are then replicated or gain considerable traction in one or more of the other 49 states or at the federal level (Doughtery, 2023). Such policy influence is bolstered by the state's nearly \$500 billion budget, which is three times higher than the next largest state budget in the nation. The state's robust economy is driven by industries such as technology, entertainment, and agriculture, which creates any number of opportunities to pilot a variety of different policies with considerable state resources. Decisions about the budget and policy are often directed by legislators but ultimately drafted and overseen by legislative staff who often have longer state-policy involvement than the legislators themselves.

California initially adopted term-limits for its state-level elected officials in 1990 and amended those limits in 2012. Today, state legislators are limited to serving a total of 12 years in the Legislature across both houses. The natural evolution of term limits means legislators turnover on a regular basis, which in turn impacts the employment of staff in a particular legislative office. The article, "Shifting Power in Sacramento: The Effects of Term Limits on Legislative Staff," found that in 2009, 58.97% of staff working for the Senate had less than five years of experience. Further, the author found evidence of high turnover among senior staff which likely indicates a loss in institutional memory (Robinson, 2011).

In terms of the jobs themselves, it is recognized that term limits lead legislative staff to hold a more influential role in the Legislature because their tenure is longer than the legislators they work for. Notably, turnover can increase the diversity of a workplace which may be a positive within a state institution representing a uniquely diverse population. Overall, term limits have effectively worked to increase staff power and duties, the likelihood of turnover, job hopping, and diversity, while decreasing legislator job stability (Robinson, 2011).

When compared to other public servants, legislative staffers also have limited upward mobility due to a hierarchy within the organization that is relatively short. This can be understood through the analysis of staff mobility in the U.S. Congress, which is the legislative body most similar to the California State Legislature. The article “Career Dynamics of Congressional Legislative Staff: Preliminary Profile and Research Questions,” is an initial exploration of the career ladder for congressional staff in the U.S. Congress. The authors identify patterns among congressional staff who hold different positions and the connection between staff attitudes and the rate at which a staffer moves up the career ladder (Romzek & Utter, 1996). The authors found through interviews that a short career ladder may be attractive to employees because they can move up the ladder and gain considerable responsibility quickly which can lead to good recruitment rates. However, the short career ladder may also lead to difficulty with retention, in part because people quickly run out of opportunities for upward mobility. The authors further argue the retention challenge aligns with high turnover rates of congressional staff and may contribute to a loss of institutional knowledge and lessened training availability for new staff (Romzek & Utter, 1996). There is reason to think this conclusion may also apply to California legislative staff.

Public Administration Lens

Like much of the workforce in 2020, the California State Senate transitioned from an entirely in person organization to a largely home-based workforce in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the 2022 midterm elections and as the pandemic waned, it became clear a decision about whether, or how, to move forward with a work from home policy would need to be made. Managers in the Senate made suggestions to leadership about a future work from home policy and some articulated a desire to be a part of a working group or process to decide how to best move forward in the post-pandemic world.

However, at the end of 2022, the Senate did not hold a work from home forum and instead decided to require all staff to return to in-person work and abolished any work from home flexibility that was previously allowed. This decision drew sharp criticism in the context of already higher turnover rates. Comparable jobs in the industry such as public service, government affairs, and lobbying often provide greater workplace flexibility and work from home options. Therefore, it is likely the Senate became a less competitive employment opportunity for those who prioritized workplace flexibility.

Changes in staffing and turnover in the California State Senate are difficult to verify because the institution does not provide consistent, publicly available data about its workforce. However, the Senate is required to post staff salaries annually, a posting that is released on the Senate's public website as simple point-in-time data, meaning it only shows the staff that are working in the Senate on the day the document is released. Recent years data were released at a different time each year: July 2020, August 2021, October 2022, and October 2023. While there are a number of limitations with the data, the information may be useful to indicate overall themes. The following analysis draws from the Senate's point-in-time data series.

The Senate staff is comprised of a variety of positions outlined in Table 1 including administrative roles, staff who work directly for legislators in the district or Capitol offices, and those who work for committees or one of the caucuses. Rather than having budgets for each of these different offices, the Senate utilizes a slot system where offices are provided with a certain number of positions within each classification. For example, new legislators are often provided with at least one from each of the following classifications to staff their capitol office: chief of staff, legislative director, press secretary, policy analyst, legislative aide, and scheduler. Each classification has an associated pay range and a required number of years of service. However, when the Senate does not have a sufficient pool of staff to meet the required years of service for higher level roles, there can be instances of misclassification (Wiley, 2022). As an example, data from years 2020 through 2023 show the Senate had an average of 30 people classified as legislative Directors over the four-year period. However, there are 40 Senators in need of a Legislative Director. While it is possible a few of those positions were vacant at the time the data was released, Legislative Director roles are coveted and highly desirable, so it is more than likely that several offices employed people to fulfill the Legislative Director role under

different, lower paying classifications. This phenomenon raises questions about the utility of the slot system if staff are being asked to perform duties outside of their classification, which could further contribute to retention challenges.

Table 1: California State Senate Point in Time Staffing Data 2020-2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES				
OFFICE ASSISTANT	64	55	39	23
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT / SCHEDULER	15	19	24	28
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT / SCHEDULER	24	19	15	11
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT	54	42	30	27
TOTAL	157	135	108	89
DISTRICT STAFF				
DISTRICT REPRESENTATIVE	99	131	145	176
SENIOR DISTRICT REPRESENTATIVE	0	0	0	5
DISTRICT COORDINATOR	44	45	44	44
TOTAL	143	176	189	225
PERSONAL OFFICE STAFF				
LEGISLATIVE AIDE	65	66	58	74
POLICY ANALYST	37	37	39	36
PRESS SECRETARY	7	9	7	31
LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR	27	32	25	33
CHIEF OF STAFF	35	37	36	36
TOTAL	171	181	165	210
COMMITTEE/CAUCUS STAFF				
COMMITTEE ASSISTANT	27	25	26	26
ASSISTANT CONSULTANT	17	16	18	17
CONSULTANT	47	47	43	40
PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT	49	49	52	54
PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT/EXEC	27	23	24	21
STAFF DIRECTOR	8	9	8	8
EXECUTIVE STAFF DIRECTOR	13	12	11	10
TOTAL	188	181	182	176
TOTAL NUMBER STAFF PER YEAR	822	822	811	870

Source: [California State Senate Website](#)

It is possible that there are limitations present during the legislative staff hiring process. Since each office is responsible for interviewing and selecting a potential hire, legislators can become fixated on hiring a staffer who can serve a specific group or who holds a particular background that is of interest. For example, legislators may choose to hire someone who was active in a labor union to show influential unions they care about that constituency. Alternatively, legislators may choose to hire someone who speaks an additional language or belongs to a particular ethnic group in the hopes the person can create good will with certain communities. While these preferences are not with poor intentions, such choices may cause further hiring delays. When hiring is slowed those who remain in the institution can become burned out and proceed to leave the organization due to chronic workload challenges. Therefore, hiring delays may contribute to greater retention problems.

Notably, the point-in-time data indicates the number of Senate staff has increased in recent years which could point to turnover being a lesser concern. However, due to the limitations of the data, there is a possibility turnover remains high and the increasing numbers are simply a result of sufficient replacement rates. Further, the data does not account for instances in which staff switch between different Senate offices. While the point-in-time data cannot accurately portray turnover, it may indicate staff turnover is occurring more between roles in the institution rather than attrition out of the institution. It is notable that Table 1 also shows a recent sharp decline in those holding administrative roles since 2020. Nearly half of these positions have disappeared or have gone unfilled. This may be for a variety of reasons, including changing responsibilities because of the pandemic, but may also be tied to low pay. The average pay among the administrative positions is \$70,000, with some positions making as little as \$38,136 per year.

Political Lens

Despite the strong influence of staff in policy making across the United States, there are few academic journal articles available on the topic of state or federal legislative staff and their motivations to stay in their job. Therefore, my analysis of California legislative turnover through a political lens relies heavily on my own observations along with articles written by the Sacramento Capitol press corps about these issues.

While it is true that California legislative staff are a subset of public servants (and paid in a manner similar to executive and legislative branch employees), there are pertinent differences that may change the overall motivations and health of the workplace.

Unlike other workplaces, the Legislature experiences both interpersonal workplace politics but also traditional party politics. California is dominated by the Democratic party which controls both houses of the Legislature and the Governor's office. In the Senate, 32 of the 40 seats are held by Democrats, meaning Democrats wield the power to appoint people to leadership positions and as a result, hold all of the chairpersonships. These dynamics can bring party politics into the workplace in a unique way that may be frowned upon or simply not allowed in other workplaces. A recent article further highlighted this issue as particularly prevalent in the U.S. Congress where staff cited political grid lock and heated political rhetoric as a top reason to leave their post (Kane, 2024).

While it is commonplace to have a power dynamic between a boss and their staff, legislators wield a unique amount of power. Outside of a high-profile scandal, elected officials can effectively only be fired by their constituents through an election or a recall. This power dynamic is further compounded by the power dynamics within the institution, particularly when it comes to human resources (HR). In the Senate, the Rules Committee consists of legislators who oversee the entire workforce, including the HR department, under the direction of the Secretary of the Senate. The Secretary is typically endorsed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and formally voted in by a majority of legislators in the house. Therefore, a unique tension presents itself when it comes to matters of human resources because the Secretary of the Senate and her leadership team is charged with holding accountable the very legislators that voted them in. While the Legislature created the WCU, critics have questioned whether the Rules Committee holds an outsized amount of discretion over the workplace when compared to traditional public service where a union may represent a majority of the workforce. Critics contend legislative leadership is often concerned with public perception of the institution which can disincentivize it from exploring accusations against legislators or high-level staff and result in inadequate accountability (Bollag, 2022). While it is challenging to draw distinct causation, it may be appropriate to question whether a lack of accountability and the unique power dynamic between staff and legislators results in some amount of attrition among staff.



Regarding actual party politics, many staff are pressured or expected to partake in political campaigns during election cycles (Wiley, 2022). Officially speaking, Senate staff are not permitted to participate in campaign-related or “non-state” activities during work hours or using legislative resources. However, staff are encouraged to utilize their paid time-off to “volunteer” to participate in campaigns on behalf of their boss’ party of affiliation. While there is not a formal or condoned punishment for staff who do not participate in such volunteer activities, there is a prevalent narrative that opting out of such political activity is not advisable and could result in slower promotion or fewer opportunities for professional growth.

Beyond party politics, some believe competition between the houses of the Legislature results in interpersonal politics and gamesmanship. Since each house operates independently, the institutions themselves have been known to hire or “poach” desirable staff by offering higher pay or flexibility to an employee in the opposite house. Such competition can result in additional turnover challenges. Additionally, staff who have worked for either house of the Legislature may be considered desirable by lobbying firms, otherwise known as the third house, which can often offer more competitive salaries or flexibility than that of a large institution.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Collect Employee Data to Better Understand Turnover Rates and Patterns

There is a clear gap in the public administration literature when it comes to employment of legislative staff which is worsened by a lack of publicly available employee data. There are few academic journal articles available on the topic of state or federal legislative staff and their motivations to stay in their job. Literature on public servant retention cannot be considered as a replacement for legislative staff research because there are pertinent differences in the two types of employment. In order to fully understand the scope of the problem and begin to formulate targeted solutions, the Legislature may consider making employee data available to researchers for further study and analysis.

Recommendation 2: Incorporate Methods of Collaborative Governance to Increase Employee Investment

While data and analysis could be useful in the future, the Legislature may consider taking steps in the interim to increase employee engagement. One way is through a collaborative governance approach. The lack of a work from home policy illustrates an instance where collaborative governance could have been used to increase stakeholder engagement and employee investment in the workplace. Had the Senate opted to use a collaborative governance approach to decide on a work from home policy, staff and other legislative stakeholders likely would have felt more included in workplace decisions and the Senate may have experienced greater staff retention.

Recommendation 3: Prioritize Retention Efforts

Legislative staff are valuable and essential parts of California's legislative process. Should the above recommendations not be possible in the short term, the Senate may consider ways to prioritize improvements to improve retention and maintain competitiveness in the broader policy industry.

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As a former legislative staffer, the interworking of the state Legislature was of particular interest to me, but it wasn't until I started the MPPA program that I started to examine my workplace through an academic lens. Shortly after starting the program, I became a middle manager where I had a role in hiring of staff and observed the challenges posed by frequent turnover. This project was born out of my desire to understand why the Legislature is facing a retention problem. Using this problem as my overall thesis, I applied the theories and concepts I was learning in a variety of different PPA classes to analyze the challenges facing the legislature. In this section I reflect on the artifacts I worked on throughout the last three years in the MPPA program.

Artifact 1: The Case for Retention Strategies in the California State Legislature

PPA 240A was the first class in a series of two classes about public administration. In this paper, I use public administration theory to discuss the concept of high turnover in the Legislature. Specifically, I explore how human resource theory explains the ways in which an organization can be negatively affected by higher-than-average turnover. Initially, I thought turnover would be the best way to describe the staffing problem I was exploring. However, turnover is understood as the rate of change to an organization which was difficult for me to measure without access to data that could clearly identify who came and left the Legislature. Through the process of writing this paper, I identified the severe lack of academic research available related to retention of legislative staff. Of the limited academic journals available about congressional staff, one piece about reduced upward mobility options was particularly interesting. This paper also provided an overview of research that was done about how public service burnout and compassion fatigue. This is one item that would be interesting to study in the context of legislative staff who often speak with highly distressed individuals or work on stressful policy issues.

In this paper, I further asserted that low pay was a key reason for lower retention in the Legislature, especially among lower-level staff which is consistent with the findings of my analysis related to administrative staff in the Senate. However, in this paper, I think I attributed pay as a more significant factor in legislative retention than I do today. Rather, I would argue a person's title, the amount of training they receive, political influences, and how included they feel in decision making within the organization may be of similar importance to pay when people make decisions about whether to stay in the legislature.

Artifact 2: Analysis of Failure to Collaborate: Legislative Work from Home Policy

PPA 270 was the first class in the two-part series related to collaborative governance where we discussed methods for collaboration and how to create a positive relationship outcome when negotiating with another party or parties. This artifact lays out an instance where the California State Senate missed an opportunity to collaborate with staff and related stakeholders to identify a plan for transitioning the workforce back to an in-person work environment following the pandemic. It has now been over a year since the decision to return the workforce to the in-person environment was made and a work from home plan has not been developed alongside staff. While one can debate the utility and efficacy of a work from home policy, I still agree with my analysis in this artifact that the lack of collaboration in the decision-making process has resulted in staff feeling undervalued and therefore more likely to leave the Legislature entirely.

Artifact 3: Theory of Change Revision Memo

PPA 240B was the second half of the public administration series which took a broader view of public administration by focusing on institutions and the theory behind how they work in concert with the people who work for them. In this course, we were tasked with choosing a workplace problem and identifying a theory of change for the institution to begin to resolve the problem. My theory of change laid out a strategy for how to increase the number of people in the Senate who understand something must be done to improve training that staff in the Senate are trained properly, so the entire institution can function more cohesively. To do this, I first identified what I thought were the root causes for the lack of formal, institution-wide training in the California State Senate. I still believe many



of the root causes I identified remain accurate. Today, I would add that increased training options have the potential to contribute to greater collaboration among staff across the institution. I now understand the importance of staff being and feeling like they are at the decision-making table, which can further contribute to improved retention, beyond the added benefit of having staff who are better prepared to serve the organization.

Next Steps

Since pursuing the topic of legislative staff retention, I have left the Legislature and am no longer a staffer. However, understanding workplace retention remains a priority for me professionally. Regardless of whether I return to the Legislature one day, I continue to work in and around the legislative process where I observe different trends and hire from a considerably similar pool of applicants to those who apply for legislative positions. The creation of these artifacts and subsequent analysis has provided me with tools to retain employees, collaborate with colleagues, and deploy strategies for change within an institution, large or small.

ARTIFACT 1: THE CASE FOR RETENTION STRATEGIES IN THE CALIFORNIA STATE LEGISLATURE

18

I. Introduction

The onset of the Great Resignation following the COVID-19 pandemic, workplaces across the United States and the world are faced with a common challenge: turnover. Turnover has many definitions, but it is typically defined as the rate of employees who leave an organization over a period of time (Wynen et al., 2019). While a small amount of turnover is normal for many organizations, researchers have found that when organizations experience high turnover, there are a variety of impacts at both the organizational and employee level. One theory is the human capital theory which hypothesizes that high turnover results in negative effects on the overall organization due to a decrease in institutional memory and knowledge (Wynen et al., 2019). On an individual level, the social capital theory suggests that high turnover in an organization can “disrupt social ties and negatively affect trust amongst colleagues” (Wynen et al., 2019). Further, turnover has been shown to increase stress and decrease employee’s sense of independence (Kim, 2017). Therefore, it is often in the best interest of an organization to retain employees to the greatest extent possible. One organization that faces retention challenges is the California State Legislature.

California employs a year-round, full-time legislative staff of roughly 2,764 people (NCSL, 2021). While data is not available to verify this assumption, it is widely discussed among those in and around Sacramento that the California legislature is experiencing higher than average rates of turnover and facing serious challenges filling vacant jobs in recent years. Anecdotally, the high rates of vacancies have led to greater workload among staff who have stayed in their job and high turnover has contributed to the loss of institutional memory. Moreover, California’s transition to term-limits for its statewide elected officials makes experienced staff with long-lasting memories even more essential to the success of the institution and long-term policy creation. Given the relative importance of legislative staff to state policymaking, it is essential for the legislature and researchers to understand what motivates legislative employees to stay in their job which may help inform the legislature of actions it could take to increase retention.

In researching the topic of legislative turnover and retention, a gap in the public administration literature became apparent. There are few academic journals available on the topic of state or federal legislative staff and their motivations to retain in their job. While it is true that legislative staff are a subset of public servants, there are pertinent differences that may change the overall motivations and health of the workplace. For example, legislative staff work for elected politicians directly. By comparison, other public servants often perform within departments or agencies led by an elected or politically appointed official but are unlikely to interact with the elected directly. Legislative staff are also often paid less at entry level positions than those in the public sector with similar educational and experiential backgrounds. Additionally, staff jobs may become unavailable due to the outcome of an election resulting in job instability. Finally, legislative staff are more likely to have regular and direct interactions with members of the public. All of these unique elements make the study of legislative employees a timely and necessary endeavor. To that end, this paper will utilize existing literature about legislative staff work and motivation, public employee motivation, and retention in public workplaces to inform potential steps that the California legislature may choose to take to increase staff retention.

II. Literature Review

Term Limits

In California, state legislators are limited to serving a total of twelve years in the legislature across both houses; Senate and Assembly. The natural evolution of term limits means that legislators turnover on a regular basis, which causes an associated turnover impact on their staff. The article, "Shifting Power in Sacramento: The Effects of Term Limits on Legislative Staff," found that in 2009, 58.97% of staff working for the Senate had less than five years of experience. Further, the author found evidence of high turnover among senior staff which likely indicates a loss in institutional memory (Robinson, 2011). In terms of the jobs themselves, the article suggests that term limits lead legislative staff to hold a more powerful role in the legislature because their tenure is longer than the legislators themselves (Robinson, 2011). While it is possible that staff has become more important in the legislature, the article also highlights challenges associated with legislative work under term limits. One unique challenge for legislative staff when compared to a typical public servant is the lack of job stability caused by term limits (Robinson, 2011). When legislators are subject to limited years of service, their staff are forced to find new jobs more frequently which increases "job

hopping,” also known as turnover (Robinson, 2011). However, the article also points out that turnover can increase the diversity of a workplace which may be a positive within a state institution representing a uniquely diverse population of constituents. Overall, this article suggests term limits effectively increase staff power and duties, decrease staff and legislator job stability, increase risk of turnover, increase job hopping, and increases diversity (Robinson, 2011).

Productivity

As with any public organization, the legislature prioritizes employee productivity and effective oversight on behalf of the people of California. The article “The Institution’s Knowledge: Congressional Staff Experience and Committee Productivity” explores the relationship between staff years of experience and the productivity of congressional committees. Using publicly available data on committee composition and staff tenure in congress, the author found that more experienced congressional committee staff can produce more effective oversight and are therefore more productive (Ommundsen, 2022). While this study was done at the congressional level, it is reasonable to assume that there may also be a correlation for state legislative staff meaning that longer serving staff are more effective and desirable to the organization.

Career Ladders

When compared to other public servants, legislative staff have lessened upward mobility due to shortened career ladders, meaning that the hierarchy within the organization is relatively short. The article “Career Dynamics of Congressional Legislative Staff: Preliminary Profile and Research Questions,” is an initial exploration of the career ladder for congressional staff in the United States Congress. The authors identify patterns among congressional staff who hold different positions and the connection between staff attitudes and the rate at which a staffer moves up the career ladder (Romzek & Utter, 1996). The authors found through interviews that a short career ladder may be attractive to employees because they can move up the ladder and gain considerable responsibility quickly which can lead to good recruitment rates (Romzek & Utter, 1996). However, the short career ladder may also lead to difficulty with retention, in part because people run out of upward mobility options quickly (Romzek & Utter, 1996). The authors further argue that the retention challenge aligns with high turnover rates of congressional staff and may contribute to a loss of institutional knowledge and lessened training availability for new staff (Romzek & Utter, 1996).

Finally, the author asserts that there is a pattern of differing attitudes among those who engage in congressional work for the short-term versus the long-term (Romzek & Utter, 1996).

Polarization

The article “Does politicization influence senior public officials’ work attitudes,” explores the relationship between politics and legislative staff job satisfaction. This article asserts that an increase in politicization of legislative work leads to a decrease in job satisfaction for employees (Kim et al., 2022). For example, the author argues that in a highly politicized environment, politicians are less likely to listen to staff advice because the politics outweigh the substantive reasons a policy may be good or bad (Kim et al., 2022). Based on interview data, the author heard from staff that the effect of such politization leads to a decrease in respect by politicians towards staff leading those staffers to feel unappreciated and useless (Kim et al., 2022). The lack of appreciation for the long-term work of staff can result in a loss of autonomy and decreased motivation, making those employees at higher risk of turnover (Kim et al., 2022). In a highly politicized world, this correlation may be particularly important when assessing challenges with legislative staff retention.

Burnout & Compassion Fatigue

The article “When Perceptions of Public Service Harms the Public Servant: Predictors of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Government,” evaluates public servant perceptions on different elements of their workplace through the predictive effect of compassion fatigue and burnout during the coronavirus pandemic using the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model. The study found higher than average rates of psychological distress with a burnout rate of 33% and compassion fatigue rate of 22% across the two sample groups (Scieपुरa & Linos, 2022). Overall, the researchers found that employees’ perceptions of their own role, their coworkers, and the beneficiaries of their work can predict their rates of psychological distress (Scieपुरa & Linos, 2022). However, employees’ perceptions of their coworker’s competence do not have a relationship with compassion fatigue but does have a negative correlation with burnout (Scieपुरa & Linos, 2022). Using measurements of psychological distress, the article has broader implications for the importance of employee mental health. Further, with an increase in turnover and decrease in the number of senior staff in the legislature, perceptions of coworker competence may worsen which can increase legislative staff risk of compassion fatigue (Scieपुरa & Linos, 2022).

In the article, “The contrary effects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations on burnout and turnover intention in the public sector,” the authors use the self-determination theory and public service motivation (PSM) to assess burnout and turnover when considering employee motivation. The self-determination theory asserts a relationship between employee’s autonomy over their work and the employee’s level of job satisfaction (Kim, 2017). Public service motivation speaks to an employee’s desire to perform public service duties within their job (Kim 2017). When considering an employee’s non-monetary, intrinsic motivations the authors found that those with high intrinsic motivation are less likely to turnover and perceive less burnout (Kim, 2017). However, those with high extrinsic motivation are at much higher risk of burnout but are no more likely to leave an organization (Kim, 2017). Finally, the author found that high public service motivation (PSM) may also contribute to decreased risk of employee burnout for those with high intrinsic motivation (Kim, 2017).

Pay

The article, “Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Pay: Evidence from the Public Workforce” explores how pay relates to employee’s intent to leave. The authors utilize the word “voice” to describe people’s likelihood of raising their concerns with management prior to voluntarily exiting the organization (Lee & Whitford, 2007). The authors highlight that previous research indicates that employee loyalty towards an organization increases the likelihood that an employee will use their voice to express concerns before exiting an organization (Lee & Whitford, 2007). The authors suggest a variety of pillar theories to test the existing hypotheses and understand how pay impacts exit, voice, and loyalty. In their research, they found that in general employee pay satisfaction decreases employee’s intention to leave an organization (Lee & Whitford, 2007). However, for supervisors, perceived organization loyalty towards their employees holds more importance than pay satisfaction because supervisors care more about working in an open culture with increased ability to initiate opportunities to provide feedback to organization decision makers (Lee & Whitford, 2007). Finally, for employees who experience pay dissatisfaction, perceived organization loyalty is less important for the purposes of retention (Lee & Whitford, 2007). Overall, pay satisfaction is an important factor for lower-level staff in order to retain employees.

The Great Resignation for Gen Y & Gen Z

The article, “Great Resignation—Ethical, Cultural, Relational, and Personal Dimensions of Generation Y and Z Employees’ Engagement” explores actual turnover following the COVID-19 pandemic on organizations employing a younger workforce. The research suggests that work engagement ranges and includes many factors but generally, those in generation Y and Z care about values and self-fulfillment more than pay (Kuzior et al., 2022). Further, they find that in recent years, generation Y and Z are twice as likely to plan on leaving an organization within the next year compared to their older generation counterparts (Kuzior et al., 2022).

This is relevant to legislative staff turnover because the research done on turnover in California legislative staff indicates that there are significant amounts of people who work in the capital with less than five years of experience (Robinson, 2011). Therefore, if those statistics hold consistent today, it is likely that many of California's legislative staff with five years of experience or less belong to Generation Y or Z. This is notable because generation Y and Z's likelihood to leave an organization may contribute to higher turnover in the legislature.

III. Implications and Contribution

Limitations

In reviewing the available literature on legislative staff retention, it is important to note the limitations of this study. Overall, there is a lack of research initiated specifically on Sacramento-based legislative staff. However, data from congressional study fills can be used to inform some gaps when it comes to state legislative staff. The study also suffered from limited data availability specifically to quantify California legislative staff turnover. In the future, it would be helpful to acquire employment data from the organization to better understand and confirm the scope of the problem.



INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this limited literature review, retaining legislative employees benefits the organization and its remaining employees. Additionally, there are implications and some recommendations found in the literature to retain legislative employees. First, to mitigate the effect of today's highly politicized environment, research suggests that organizations should focus on increasing people's autonomy and providing more organizational support (Kim et al., 2022). Additionally, to increase supervisor loyalty which will in turn retain senior staff, organizations should provide an open culture and allow for regular opportunities for feedback from supervisors to upper management (Lee & Whitford, 2007). The legislature should also assess whether pay for entry-level employees is sufficient since the literature suggests that pay dissatisfaction makes other workplace factors such as a healthy work environment less important (Lee & Whitford, 2007). Finally, to increase employee engagement the legislature should focus on hiring those with higher public service motivation which has the capacity to decrease risk of burnout for those who are intrinsically motivated (Kim, 2017). While the legislature cannot change the effects of term limits or the turnover risk of short career ladders, these recommendations can go a long way in increasing retention which will benefit the organization and the residents of California.

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ARTIFACT 2: ANALYSIS OF FAILURE TO COLLABORATE: LEGISLATIVE WORK FROM HOME POLICY

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Like much of the workforce in 2020, the California State Senate transitioned from an entirely in person organization to a largely work from home workforce environment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Senate took the pandemic seriously and only allowed one and later two staffer members to attend work in person from July of 2020 through the beginning of 2022. During that period, anyone who did not want to attend work in person or who could not come into the office due to any health-related reason, did not need to come to work in person. However, at the beginning of 2022, the Senate decided to allow each individual legislator's office to require as many staff as they would like to come into the office. This led to a wide variety of workplace structures with some individual legislative offices consisting of just one in person staffer per day to other offices where everyone was in every day, five days a week. The fragmented approach drew criticism from various perspectives. Some staff preferred a more flexible approach, some lobbyists and activists were frustrated by lack of in person meeting availability, and some managers who wanted their offices to be "back to normal" but experienced staff push-back. During this time, managers in the Senate questioned those in Senate leadership and questioned their future work from home policy. Some even articulated a desire to be a part of a working group or process to decide how to best move forward in the post-pandemic world. Following the 2022 midterm elections and as the pandemic waned, it became clear that a decision about how or whether to move forward with a work from home policy would be desirable. However, at the end of 2022, the Senate did not hold a work from home forum and instead decided to require all staff to return to in person work and abolished any work from home flexibility that was previously allowed. This decision drew sharp criticism from across the organization because during that same period the Senate had a significant number of vacancies and experienced a higher-than-normal rate of turnover during the prior year. The decision to bring back the workforce in person left many feeling blindsided and left out of the decision-making process.

Had the Senate opted to use a collaborative governance approach to decide on a work from home policy, staff and other legislative stakeholders likely would have felt more included in workplace decisions and the Senate may have experienced greater staff retention. Such stakeholders could have included capitol and district staff, management level staff, Senators, legislative leadership, advocates, lobbyists, and administration staff who engage with the Legislature. Advocates, lobbyists, and administration staff would be important to include because their work life and business model is directly dependent on the ways in which the Legislature chooses to operate. Had each stakeholder been provided with a seat at the table, they each may have walked away with a sense of ownership and a greater sense of community. Further, there is a significant amount of interdependence among each of the aforementioned stakeholders both in terms of physical presence in the workplace but also through the policy process more generally. By utilizing a collaborative approach, the legislature also could have garnered goodwill and greater collaboration more generally among these stakeholders, which would have been particularly appreciated coming out of the pandemic. Additionally, by creating a trusting space to share ideas and establish a positive relationship, the infrastructure established through the collaborative governance approach for the work from home policy could have created an opportunity for stakeholders to also tackle other issues in the industry. Additionally, coming out of the pandemic, many other workplaces within the industry such as public service, government affairs, and lobbying often provide greater workplace flexibility and work from home options. Therefore, the Senate became a less competitive employment opportunity. While the Senate did increase wages as inflation rose, many argue that workplace flexibility cannot be made up for through wages.

Ultimately, there are a multitude of reasons that a collaborative approach failed in the instance of the Senate returning its workforce to an entirely in person environment. In terms of drivers for collaboration, there were two drivers present in the situation. The first was uncertainty about how and whether to bring the workforce back in person and whether to allow any work from home flexibility. Secondly, there were consequential incentives for collaboration because the Senate is motivated to retain employees, employees want to have their voice heard, and other stakeholders want to ensure they can exert influence on the legislative process. However, the situation lacked other drivers for collaborative governance. For example, while there is interdependency among stakeholders in terms of the legislative process, there is not interdependency between the Senate and outside stakeholders in this instance because the Senate does not rely on the

other stakeholders to make workplace decisions. While other stakeholders are inherently affected by the decisions, the relationship is not reciprocal. Additionally, despite a few staff who offered to join working groups to tackle the issue, the situation lacked someone to force the issue and initiate leadership to make the working group happen. Instead, they waited for the institution to make it happen, which it never did.

There were political dynamics and power relations that contributed to the situation. For example, some managers and Senators articulated a desire for all staff to be back in person in their offices because they believe that staff are easier to manage when they attend work in person. Given upper management and Senators have greater power in the workforce, the disbalance in power reduced the likelihood for collaboration. Additionally, the Senate as an institution is inherently more powerful than its entirely at-will workforce. This means that the political headwinds were in favor of the Senate making the decision on its own, rather than through an inclusive dialogue.

Overall, the Senate's choice to make a decision about a work from home policy in a vacuum rather than through collaboration resulted in greater frustration and a less transparent process. A collaborative governance approach could have resulted in greater trust among the employer, its workforce, and outside stakeholders leading to mutual understanding over the benefits and challenges of a more flexible workplace.

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ARTIFACT 3: THEORY OF CHANGE REVISION MEMO

For my theory of change, I made the case that the California State Senate should create institution-wide training for certain positions that perform largely similar work across individual Senator's offices.

Institutional Norms, Work, and Identity

The Senate has historically relied upon the passing of institutional knowledge from experienced staff to new staff. Such a norm aligns with the Senate's organizational identity as the upper house of the Legislature, as an exclusive employer, and as an institution with historical traditions (Gioia et. al, 2000). To uphold this norm, the Senate performs institutional maintenance work by framing and repeating institutional myths that communicate the organization's prestige without explicitly stating it (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Such myths include statements like, "We don't have to provide training because members and staff should start in the Assembly to train and then move to the Senate" or "Managers are responsible for training their staff because every member is so different." By framing the Senate's lack of training in this way, the organization works to maintain a sense of prestige to solidify its legitimacy and, in turn, to gatekeep knowledge (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The problem is that politics have evolved such that few members serve in the Assembly before the Senate. Additionally, the Senate now faces turnover, retention, and vacancy challenges across the organization. With an influx of new staff, member offices are forced to train new staff on their own. The lack of training provided by the institution then creates more work and a less cohesive working environment across the organization because fewer members of the organization understand Senate processes. Therefore, the lack of institution-wide training is testing the institutional myth because fewer staffers know what they are doing, which creates downstream effects for the entire institution (Nite, 2017).

For my theory of change, I made the case that the California State Senate should create institution-wide training for certain positions that perform largely similar work across individual Senator's offices. As a middle manager within the organization, I serve as an institutional knowledge "expert" who is tasked with training staff on the norms and practices of the Senate. Such a role provides me with a middle manager perspective where I understand the concerns of those in charge of the Senate while also understanding the frustrations faced by those lower on the hierarchy (Corley, 2004). This unique position leads me to my theory of change:

If I use a modified version of Kotter's 8-step process then more people in the Senate will understand that something must be done to improve training options so that staff in the Senate are trained properly, so that the entire institution can function more cohesively.

I chose to modify Kotter's 8-step process by utilizing just the first two phases and leaving out the third phase which I felt I didn't have control over in my place within the organization (EPM, 2022). Phase 1 is to create a climate for change by creating urgency, building a coalition, and creating a vision. To create urgency, I would speak with offices that have many new staff and frame their frustration with the institution as a problem due to lack of training (Nite, 2017). My next step would be to build a coalition of managers who are tasked with training a high volume of new staff. Then, I would create a vision as a part of my advocacy by creating my own myth of what could happen if staff are properly trained. Phase 2 engages and enables the organization by communicating a vision, empowering others, and creating quick wins. I would first communicate my vision to the Secretary of the Senate by sharing my experience in my current role and making the case to Senators in leadership. Then I would empower others by creating relational space with other managers who are in similar positions (Kellogg, 2013). Finally, I would illustrate what sufficient training can do to improve the circumstances of the office that I currently work in.

Since my theory of change takes a disruptive approach, it is only natural that some resistance would be expected. Such resistance could include institutionalists that believe that training will make working in the Senate less prestigious or dilute the value of their institutional knowledge. In response to such concerns, I would argue that without training, the Senate's superiority and identity are at risk (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Further, I would instigate a point of competition with the Assembly which does offer training through institutional work of mimicry (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Middle managers who are currently tasked with the bulk of the training responsibility may repeat the institutional myth that every member is different and therefore the organization could never provide sufficient training. For such concerns, I would argue that the training offered by the institution would be high-level and only intended for information that is applicable across offices which would allow middle managers to focus their training on the special requirements of their individual member. Finally, lower-level staff may be skeptical of the Senate's interest in offering training given the lack of institutional support provided in general. I would plan to highlight the optional nature of the training that would provide them with the choice of whether to participate.

Revised Theory of Change

I received feedback that maybe the theory of change should go further than simply "understanding" that something must be done to improve training options. My end goal is advocacy, so it makes sense to more clearly articulate that point. Additionally, in response to questions about whether training efforts would be diluted by making them mandatory, I think it's important to clarify in my theory of change that my intent is to provide people with training options. In response to both pieces of feedback, I have modified my theory of change to better align with my end goal. In conclusion, my modified theory of change can be found below:

If I use a modified version of Kotter's 8-step process then more people in the Senate will advocate for better training options, so that the entire institution can function more cohesively.

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