

Executive Summary

It has been two decades since CMF collected data on the satisfaction congressional staff have with their jobs. The 1995 report “Working in Congress: The Staff Perspective” described a workforce on Capitol Hill comprised of individuals who generally liked their jobs and were satisfied with most aspects of their work, despite a range of factors that made employment in congressional offices particularly challenging. As that report described in its introduction:

“At first glance, Congress is not an attractive place to work. Staff typically work exceedingly long, unpredictable hours that leave little time for outside activities; receive lower pay than both private sector and federal executive branch staff; work in cramped quarters with no privacy; exercise minimal control over their work schedules; and have virtually no job security.”¹

In two decades, much in the world has changed, but the fundamental challenges described back then still exist. Add to them the post-9/11 security concerns, increased volume of constituent communication,² and the Internet-driven 24-hour news cycle. That translates to the same conclusion as 1995: Congress continues to be a very interesting, but very challenging place to work.

Our research for this report, “Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff,” indicates that despite these challenges, congressional staff remain generally satisfied with, and are engaged in, their jobs. They repeatedly cite their dedication to public service and the meaningfulness of their work. However, the research also raises questions as to whether these altruistic motives are enough to overcome the inherent issues to working in Congress.

Congressional staff repeatedly cite their dedication to public service, but is it enough to overcome the inherent issues to working in Congress?

¹ Congressional Management Foundation, *Working in Congress: The Staff Perspective*, 1995.

² CMF estimates that most congressional offices have experienced a 200-1,000% increase in constituent communications in the last decade as a result of email and the Internet. Source: Congressional Management Foundation, *Communicating with Congress: How Citizen Advocacy Is Changing Mail Operations on Capitol Hill*, 2011.

Top Contributors to Congressional Staff Job Satisfaction

This research found that 80% of congressional staff reported overall satisfaction with their current jobs, including 40% who are very satisfied. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of congressional staff also indicated overall satisfaction with their current offices, including 44% who are very satisfied.

Specifically, congressional staff were surveyed on 43 aspects relating to their work environment, their relationship with management, their career development, and compensation and benefits. For each aspect, staffers were first asked to rate *how important the aspect is* to their overall job satisfaction. They were then asked to rate their *overall satisfaction* with that aspect at their current job. Comparing differences in *importance* and *satisfaction* in employee attitudes identifies gaps where offices can address concerns or seek improvement.

Of the aspects that congressional staff rated as most important to their job satisfaction, most related to their work environment and the value and meaning they find in their work. The percentage of respondents who rated those work aspects as “very important” are noted as follows:

- Overall office culture (79%);
- Meaningfulness of their jobs (75%);
- The work itself (75%);
- Opportunities to use their skills and abilities in their work (72%);
- Communication between employees and senior management (70%);
- Vision and goals of the Senator or Representative (70%);
- The contribution their work has on the overall goals of the office (70%);
- Relationship with immediate supervisor (70%);
- Relationships with co-workers (70%); and
- Health care/medical benefits (66%).

The most important aspects for congressional staffers’ job satisfaction also were examined by several key demographics: gender, chamber, generation, location, and position category. Some notable demographic differences included the importance of compensation and benefits between district/state staff and Washington, D.C., staff as well as between male and female employees such as:

- While 70% of district/state staffers considered retirement and savings plans to be very important, about half (49%) of D.C. staffers felt the same.

The job aspects most important to congressional staff relate to their work environment and the value and meaning they get from their work.

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of district/state staffers considered work-life flexibility to be very important, compared to less than half (43%) of D.C. staffers.
- More than two-thirds (69%) of women considered the overall benefits package to be very important, compared to about half (48%) of men.
- Similarly, the flexibility to balance life and work issues was very important to 63% of female employees and 43% of male employees.

Congressional staff were generally satisfied with the aspects of their jobs that they considered most important. For all of these factors, at least half of staffers indicated they were somewhat or very satisfied. However, further scrutiny of staffers who were *very satisfied* with these aspects shows that considerable gaps existed between importance and satisfaction. In particular, the largest gaps were for:

- Communication between employees and senior management (e.g., Chief of Staff, District/State Director, Legislative Director) (70% very important, 22% very satisfied);
- Opportunities to use your skills and abilities in your work (72% very important, 32% very satisfied);
- Overall office culture (79% very important, 41% very satisfied);
- The work itself (75% very important, 37% very satisfied);
- The contribution your work has on the overall goals of the office (70% very important, 34% very satisfied); and
- Meaningfulness of job (75% very important, 43% very satisfied).

Top Contributors to Congressional Staff Engagement

While congressional staff report being satisfied with their jobs, does this mean they are engaged? Employee engagement differs from job satisfaction in that it relates to employees' connection and commitment to their work and organization—what and who is motivating employees to work harder. This issue is of particular concern to congressional managers because they are in a constant struggle to obtain the greatest possible productivity and value from their staffs. Understanding what makes employees satisfied with their jobs is critical, but to get the most out of staffers, managers must also know what keeps staffers engaged and performing at their peak. The top aspects contributing to congressional staff engagement in 2011 were:

- 97% of congressional staff agreed that they are determined to accomplish their work goals and confident they can meet them.
- 86% said that they are highly motivated by their work goals.
- 83% reported that they enjoy taking on or seeking out new projects or work assignments beyond their job requirements.

Communication between employees and senior management—with a gap of 48 percentage points—is the largest gap of any aspect of congressional staff's job satisfaction, across all categories.

- 81% agreed their work gives them a sense of personal accomplishment.
- 80% said that their offices never give up.
- 79% agreed they have passion and excitement about their work.
- 75% reported that, in their offices, employees are encouraged to be proactive in their work.
- 74% considered their colleagues adaptive to challenging or crisis situations.

When compared to U.S. employees, a much higher percentage of congressional staff responded that they *strongly agree* with many of the engagement opinion statements, especially those regarding their work goals:

- 63% of congressional staff strongly agreed that they are determined to accomplish their work goals and confident they can meet them, compared to 34% of U.S. employees.
- 51% of congressional staff strongly agreed that they are highly motivated by their work goals, compared to 25% of U.S. employees.

Top Contributors to Congressional Staff Retention and Turnover

Although congressional staff reported being generally satisfied with and engaged in their jobs, when employees were asked whether they would, by choice, look for a job outside of their current office in the next 12 months, almost half (46%) of congressional staff were likely or very likely to do so. When breaking out responses by location, stark differences emerge, with almost two-thirds (63%) of Washington, D.C., staff indicating they would look for new jobs, compared to about one-third (36%) of district/state staff. When U.S. employees were asked this question, 37% responded that they were likely or very likely to seek new employment.

When congressional staff were asked why they stay in their jobs, their top reasons largely related to the value of the work they do:

- 94% of congressional staff said they stay because they believe what they're doing is meaningful.
- 92% cited their desire to help people.
- 91% reported that they get a sense of accomplishment from their work.
- 90% said they stay out of dedication to public service.
- 90% responded that they enjoy working for their Representative or Senator and with their colleagues.
- 72% reported that their benefits influence their decision to stay, but only 38% said compensation was a significant factor.

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Almost two-thirds of D.C. staff indicated they were likely to look for a job outside of their current office in the next 12 months, compared to about one-third of district/state staff.

Compensation was not a significant factor in congressional staff's decision to stay in their jobs, nor did they consider it as important to their job satisfaction relative to the other factors surveyed. Overall compensation/pay ranked 22nd in importance of the 43 aspects considered by congressional staff.

Though compensation plays a limited role in congressional staff's decision to *stay* where they are, it was the top reason cited in their decision to *leave* employment:

- 51% of congressional staff cited the desire to earn more money as a significant factor in their decision to leave their current job or office.
- 45% of congressional staff also said increasing their income was a significant factor in their decision to leave Congress altogether.

Other top reasons congressional staff had for leaving their current job or current office include:

- Inadequate opportunities for professional development (48%);
- Frustrations with the management of your office (48%);
- Desire for a job that will make better use of your skills and abilities (47%); and
- Unsatisfactory relationship with supervisor(s) (47%).

As for leaving Congress altogether, in addition to the desire to earn more money, staffers also cite the following factors:

- Desire to pursue a different type of work (42%);
- To seek a better balance between your work and your personal life (38%);
- Disillusionment with the political process (36%); and
- To obtain private sector experience (33%).

Recommendations for Congressional Offices

1. Set a Clear Direction for the Office. Operating a congressional office is like running a small business, with the Member of Congress serving as CEO. In the best-managed offices, the Member is the *leader* of the office, responsible for setting the overall direction of the office, while the senior management staff (e.g., Chief of Staff, District or State Director, Legislative Director) are the *managers* responsible for the day-to-day operations and carrying out this direction. Together, they must set goals and priorities so that both the Member and staff can make informed, strategic choices about what they will and will not do. Unfortunately, many Members are unable to set priorities and balance their aspirations with their resources (i.e., budget and staff), which has considerable consequences for an office. They overburden themselves and their staffs,

Congressional staff cited the desire to earn more money, inadequate opportunities for professional development, and frustrations with their management as top reasons to leave their current job or office.

Setting a clear direction, fostering a positive office culture, and investing wholeheartedly in staff development are ways managers can retain top talent for longer.

wreak havoc on the systems and morale of the office, and don't make the hard trade-offs necessary to be more effective. Despite their efforts and ambition, they often find they have accomplished little because they are spread so thin. Drafting a mission statement, developing strategic goals, and implementing these goals as a team are crucial steps to achieve long-term accomplishments.

2. Foster a Positive Organizational Culture. In Congress, the Member's political ideals, personal values, and professional ambitions are the basis of the office's culture. Consequently, it is critical that Members of Congress (and their Chiefs of Staff) take time to consciously think about the type of culture they want to create for their offices and how they intend to create it. Those who bestow a genuine sense of trust, respect, and appreciation on their staffs are more likely to enjoy the incalculable benefit of loyal, committed, and motivated staffs. Those who do not, tend to experience high staff turnover, loss of office productivity, insufficient institutional memory, and a lack of office continuity and teamwork. These Members and Chiefs of Staff essentially forfeit the opportunity to create a positive culture and an effective office.

3. Institute a Performance Management System. Most congressional offices use a haphazard approach to managing staff, intervening only when personnel issues arise. Managers do little proactively to reduce staff performance problems, to help turn good staff into great staff, or to ensure that great staff don't become bored and look for new opportunities elsewhere. Instead, by investing wholeheartedly in the development of staff, Members and managers can create more productive, effective, and loyal employees and build a better office. While this annual and ongoing approach requires discipline and might seem labor-intensive, it will take far less time than many offices spend on the range of personnel problems that routinely crop up throughout the year, such as dealing with under-performing staff or high turnover.

Methodology

For this research, 10,983 employees in House and Senate personal offices were contacted to participate in the survey. A total of 1,432 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 15%. Of these respondents: 72% were employed in the U.S. House of Representatives and 28% worked in the U.S. Senate; 55% were employed by Democrats, 43% worked for Republicans, and 2% worked for Independents. Data collection for the congressional staff survey took place August 8 – October 4, 2011.

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More than 1,400 staff from the U.S. House and Senate responded to this survey.