It’s not always easy being a staffer. Some legislative staff jobs have been eliminated. Pay and benefits often are cut or frozen. Tensions of an increasingly partisan legislature can sour the workplace environment. A staffer’s value is sometimes questioned. Work hours often conflict with family time. And finally, many staffers’ baby boomer colleagues are retiring.

These are among the more striking challenges facing legislative staff, according to a recent nationwide NCSL survey of legislative staff managers. Not surprisingly, two-thirds of the nonpartisan staff and three-fourths of the partisan staff who responded expect to leave legislative service before 2021.

It’s tempting to conclude the main cause of the anticipated staff turnover is the pending retirements of baby boomers, but researchers found turnover to be a problem among all age groups.

One-quarter of the youngest cohort—between 20 and 34 years old—said they plan to leave legislative service within five years, higher than any other age group. On the other hand, nearly half plan to serve 11 to 15 more years before leaving. That won’t make them legislative careerists, but it will give them enough time to build the knowledge and experience legislatures need from their staff.

Staff between 35 and 49 years old led the field among those who said that they expected to leave legislative service within 11 to 15 years. Nearly 60 percent of them said that they planned to be out the door before they turn 65.

Baby boomers, age 50 to 64, were least likely to say they planned to depart within five years, confirming the trend by the largest generation to delay retirement and work longer than their predecessors.

NCSL’s confidential survey asked respondents to rank the importance of 12 potential management challenges. The top three were:

- The loss of skills and experience from retiring senior staff.
The Survey

NCSL emailed this online survey in June 2011 to the 9,849 legislative staff in all 50 states who have used NCSL services. This is about one-third of all state legislative staff in the country.

NCSL received 1,260 responses—13 percent. Although the makeup of legislative staff nationwide is about evenly divided between nonpartisan and partisan staff, about three-fourths of the responses to the survey were from nonpartisan staff and one-fourth from partisan staff. For that reason, the opinions of partisan staff are somewhat under-represented.

Nearly half of all respondents were baby boomers. Because veteran staff are more likely to know about and use NCSL services, older staff also are likely to be over-represented in this sample.

“...The impending loss of experienced staff and legislators due to term limits, baby boomers’ retirement, and private sector salary competition have wreaked havoc on the experience level and effectiveness of legislative staff.”

—RESPONDENT TO NCSL’S STAFF SURVEY

Not everyone views retirement of the older generation negatively. “Although senior staff … add much wisdom and knowledge of the legislative process, they often block change and fresh ideas,” another staffer said. “We are still performing duties that are 20 years out of date because it has always been done that way.”

Interestingly, the younger the staff, the less worried they are about the problem of replacing retiring senior staff. Either the older generations value themselves much more than the younger ones do, or the junior staff have a “we’ll handle it” attitude.

Hurt by Tight Budgets

Stagnant salaries drew many laments.

“We are going on four years without a salary increase,” said one respondent, “and I don’t expect an increase in the near future due to the acrimony in our capitol.”

“Our aides are paid $30,000 to $40,000,” a partisan staffer said. “The legislature has gotten rid of pay raises, so there is no way to stay as legislative staff because we can’t make a living. The result is that most of our staff are in their early 30s, with no institutional knowledge.”

Public cynicism and distrust of government in general and the legislature in particular also play a role: “Our services are not...
Managing the Future

At a workshop at the 2011 Legislative Summit in San Antonio, several small groups of legislative staff came up with ideas for addressing staff management concerns.

Replacing retiring senior staff:
- Develop a succession plan for replacing senior managers. Identify those who are likely to retire and their potential successors. Invest in training and professional development for younger staff.
- Increase cross-training so that more than one person can perform all key functions of an office. This helps reduce the effect of both anticipated and unanticipated staff departures.
- Develop a mentor program that draws on the knowledge and experience of senior managers.
- Reward and remunerate mid- and junior-level staff to minimize turnover among these future senior managers. If salary increases are limited, use other incentives such as employee appreciation days, out-of-office learning opportunities, flexible office hours and wellness programs.

Dealing with budget reductions:
- Provide individual annual reports on salary and benefits to clarify the value of staff compensation.
- Involve all staff in determining how savings can be found. Consider having a contest for staff to contribute ideas on ways to save money.
- Communicate and discuss budget changes so staff understand what has been done and why. This can be a springboard for other cost-saving ideas.
- Charge a committee with developing no- or low-cost community-building activities such as potlucks, shared breakfasts, or group recreational activities.
- Ensure staff understand and appreciate their vital role in the legislative process and feel they are valued.

Coping with new legislators who may not value the work of legislative staff:
- Re-evaluate your legislature’s new member training and development program to make it as effective as possible, and involve your office in it.
- Develop a mentor program between senior staff and legislators, to help new lawmakers learn the legislative process.
- Increase personal contact with new members. Something as simple as introducing yourself can break down barriers.
- Develop a video testimonial showing veteran legislators who have benefited from the value of your office’s services.
- Be prepared to respond to power shifts among legislators and leaders by adapting your office’s services to reflect their different values.

valued, and we aren’t being granted even cost-of-living increases. State employees make 40 percent of what private sector employees make, and the public seems to want to send our best and brightest elsewhere.”

Others pointed to problems with work conditions. “I notice a lot of staff turnover because of the unfriendly family nature of legislative work, such as unpredictable evening hours.”

While some staffers acknowledged the generous job benefits they receive, others complained about cuts in benefits, such as training. “We have no ability to participate in professional development due to budget constraints. I used to attend NCSL conferences regularly, but no more!”

One of the challenges posed in the survey—attracting young people to legislative service—scored relatively low. Some respondents said retention rather than recruitment was the bigger problem.

It used to be easy to attract people to work in the capitol, one respondent said. “However, the legislature’s salary structure is lower than that of the private sector or the executive branch. In addition, increased political polarity and an increased disrespect for the value of staff by some new members can make it difficult to retain good staff.”

Friction With Lawmakers

Legislators for whom staff work also came in for criticism in the survey, but who doesn’t like to complain about their boss? Some of the concerns focused on unrealistic expectations from lawmakers, especially related to information technology. “With the proliferation of technology comes the expectation that we provide support for outside services like Gmail, Google Calendar, or personal phones,” one person responded. “I couldn’t fathom an employee at a Fortune 500 company calling the help desk for support on their personal phone, email or laptop.”

Another respondent lamented that “in our instant information world, there seems to be an inadequate appreciation that carefully drafting legislation and preparing background information sometimes takes time.”

The problem of poisonous partisanship and narrow perspectives were reflected in survey results as well, especially among the older set. “Our legislators and staff are increasingly partisan and increasingly lacking in knowledge about issues. They seem interested only in information that supports their position.”

The younger staff were somewhat less concerned about partisanship. Perhaps their generation reflects, or has accepted, the changing character of legislatures. Or, more likely, unlike their elders, they can’t yearn for the “good old days” if they haven’t experienced them.

The Rewards

By its very nature, the survey invited legislative staff to complain—and kvetch they did. Yet, despite all the gloom, American legislatures will most likely adapt, as they have in the past, to the tough circumstances confronting them. Legislative staff will no doubt rise to the challenges they face, and probably emerge the better for it.

One staffer expressed a love for the job that many feel. “My Legislature is ... one of the most interesting places to work, like being at university with all the intellectual stimulation and variety of high-energy people, but without exams, registration, tuition or GPAs to worry about. ... I like (almost) all the people interaction we get here (but the angry, shouting, threatening ... people I can do without). I love it.”