Providing Remote Work Opportunities Will Aid Your Retention Efforts

By Jacqueline Bichsel, Ph.D., Melissa Fuesting, Ph.D., and Mark McCormack
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Introduction

During the pandemic, much of higher ed has been faced with two distinct challenges: 1) setting up remote work environments for employees during quarantine, and 2) navigating a return to campus for many employees after quarantine. These challenges have posed varying degrees of difficulty depending on how well institutions were set up for remote work pre-pandemic, as well as their degree of flexibility or rigidity in requiring employees to return to campus.

Anecdotally, many higher ed leaders fear a talent tsunami is underway, as they report problems filling positions that have been vacated. This fear is substantiated by data that show employees are leaving their jobs, both within and outside of higher ed.[1,2,3] Many

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[1] Fuesting, M., Nadel-Hawthorne, S., Schmidt, A., & Bichsel, J. (2021, May). *Professionals in Higher Education Annual Report: Key Findings, Trends, and Comprehensive Tables for the 2020-21 Academic Year* (Research Report). CUPA-HR

[2] Nadel-Hawthorne, S., Fuesting, M., Schmidt., A., & Bichsel, J. (2021, June). *Staff in Higher Education Annual Report: Key Findings, Trends, and Comprehensive Tables for the 2020-21 Academic Year* (Research Report). CUPA-HR.

[3] Foster, S. (2021, August). *55% of Americans Expect to Search for a New Job Over the Next 12 Months.* Bankrate.

employees who worked remotely during the pandemic do not want to return to commuting five days a week.[4] Their case for having more flexibility in their work environment is buttressed with data showing that: 1) productivity is just as good or better when they are working remotely, and 2) flexible work arrangements may help reduce employee stress.[5,6]

In August 2021, EDUCAUSE and CUPA-HR explored these trends together through a collaborative poll of higher ed IT and HR employees, collecting similar data from both groups of employees on work arrangement preferences, work arrangement realities, and the likelihood of looking for other employment within the next year.[7] Our first report on this data described responses to these questions, as well as the preferences those in leadership positions have for their staff's working arrangements.[8]

This second report takes a deeper dive into the relation between the misalignment of preferred and actual work arrangements and the likelihood that employees will seek other employment.[9] The data in this report suggest actions that higher ed leaders can take to build more flexible work policies and environments and improve employee morale and retention. In our first report, we found no meaningful differences between HR and IT staff in regard to: 1) preferred working arrangements, 2) actual working arrangements, or 3) the likelihood they would look for other work within the next 12 months.[10] Therefore, the analyses for this report combine the data for both HR and IT employees.

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[4] Ellis, L. (2021, January). "A Mass Exodus:" Inflexible Remote-Work Policies Could Bring Major Staff Turnover. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
[5] Clancy, M. (2020, April). The Case for Remote Work. *Economics Working Papers*: Department of Economics, Iowa State University.
[6] McCormack, M. (2021, January). EDUCAUSE QuickPoll Results: Stress in the Workplace. *EDUCAUSE Review*.
[7] The poll was conducted on August 16-27, 2021, and resulted in 2,147 responses from both HR and IT employees. The sample is representative in terms of institution classification, affiliation, size, and U.S. geographical region. Most respondents (99%) represented U.S. institutions.
[8] Brooks, D.C., & Bichsel, J. (2021, September). EDUCAUSE and CUPA-HR QuickPoll Results: The Misalignment of Preferences and Realities for Remote Work. *EDUCAUSE Review*.
[9] Thanks to Anthony Schmidt, data visualization researcher at CUPA-HR, and Diana Tubbs, survey researcher at CUPA-HR, for their work on the graphics and analyses in this report.
[10] Brooks & Bichsel (2021).

Preferred Work Arrangements Do Not Align With Actual Work Arrangements

We were interested in knowing about current remote work preferences as well as what employees anticipate for remote work in the future. We asked respondents to answer two questions: 1) What would you consider to be an ideal work arrangement for you in your current role?, and 2) What will be (or what do you anticipate will be) your work arrangement when your institution begins its fall 2021 academic term? The response options were the same for both questions:[11]

- Completely on-site
- Mostly on-site
- Partially on-site and partially remote
- Mostly remote
- Completely remote

We assigned ascending values to these options from 0 (completely on-site) to 4 (completely remote). We then calculated a "misalignment score" by taking the preferred work arrangement value minus the actual work arrangement value. Positive scores indicate greater preference for more remote work than what the actual work arrangement is. Negative scores indicate greater preference for more on-site work than what the actual work arrangement is. A score of zero indicates a match between preferred and actual work arrangements.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of misalignment scores. About one-third (36%) of respondents reported total alignment (a score of 0) between their preferred and actual work arrangements. That leaves nearly two-thirds of respondents reporting some degree of misalignment between preferred and actual work arrangements. The greatest percentage of misalignment cases (51%) occur with just one or two degrees of misalignment in the direction of employees preferring more remote work options than what their current work arrangement allows.

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[11] An "other" option was also provided, but those responses were not included in the analyses.

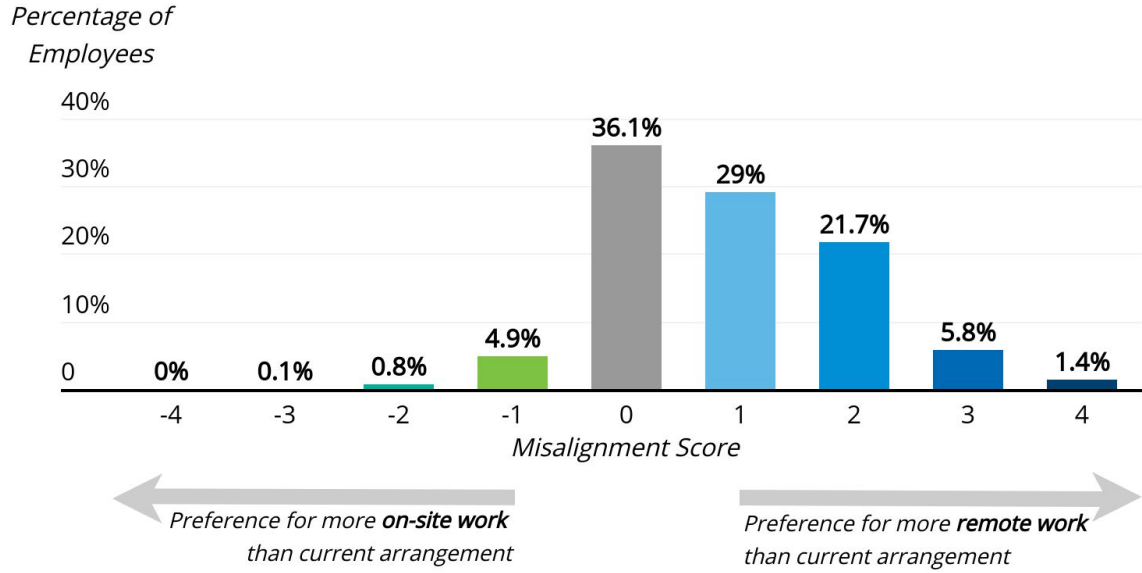# Distribution of Misalignment Between Actual and Preferred Work Arrangements

Percentage of Employees

40%

36.1%

30%

29%

21.7%

20%

10%

0

0%   0.1%   0.8%   4.9%   5.8%   1.4%

-4   -3   -2   -1   0   1   2   3   4

Misalignment Score

← *Preference for more **on-site work** than current arrangement*

*Preference for more **remote work** than current arrangement* →

Figure 1. Distribution of Misalignment Between Actual and Preferred

Work Arrangements

Nearly Half of Employees May Be Weighing Their Employment Options

Given the anecdotal fears we have been hearing about a "mass exodus" in higher ed, we were also interested in how many of our respondents might be looking for other employment. We asked participants to respond to the following question: What is the likelihood that you will be looking for other employment opportunities within the next 12 months? Response options were: very unlikely, unlikely, somewhat likely, likely, and very likely.[12] Nearly half (43%) of respondents stated they are at least somewhat likely to look for other employment in the next year (Figure 2).

2021 CUPA-HR/EDUCAUSE Quick Poll
Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Within the Next Year
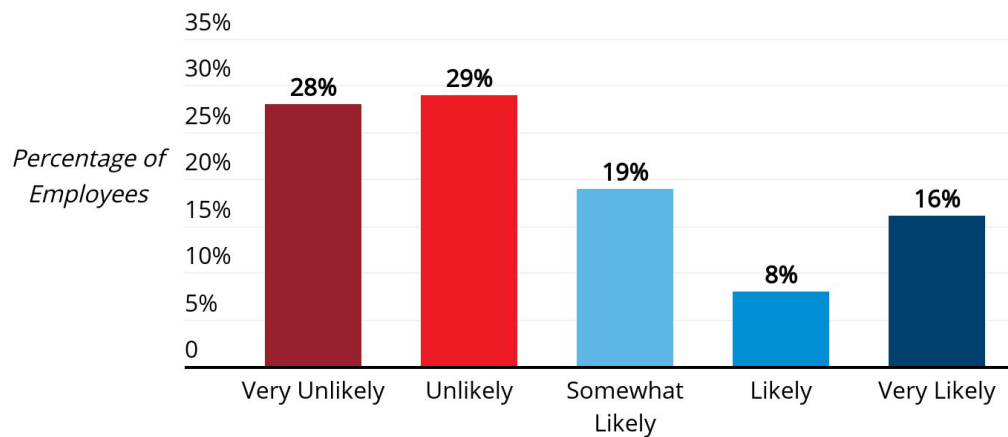
© College and University Professional Association for Human Resources

Figure 2. Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Within the Next Year

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[12] A "don't know" option was also provided, but those responses were not included in the analyses.

Misalignment of Preferred and Actual Work Arrangements Is Related to the Likelihood of Seeking Other Employment
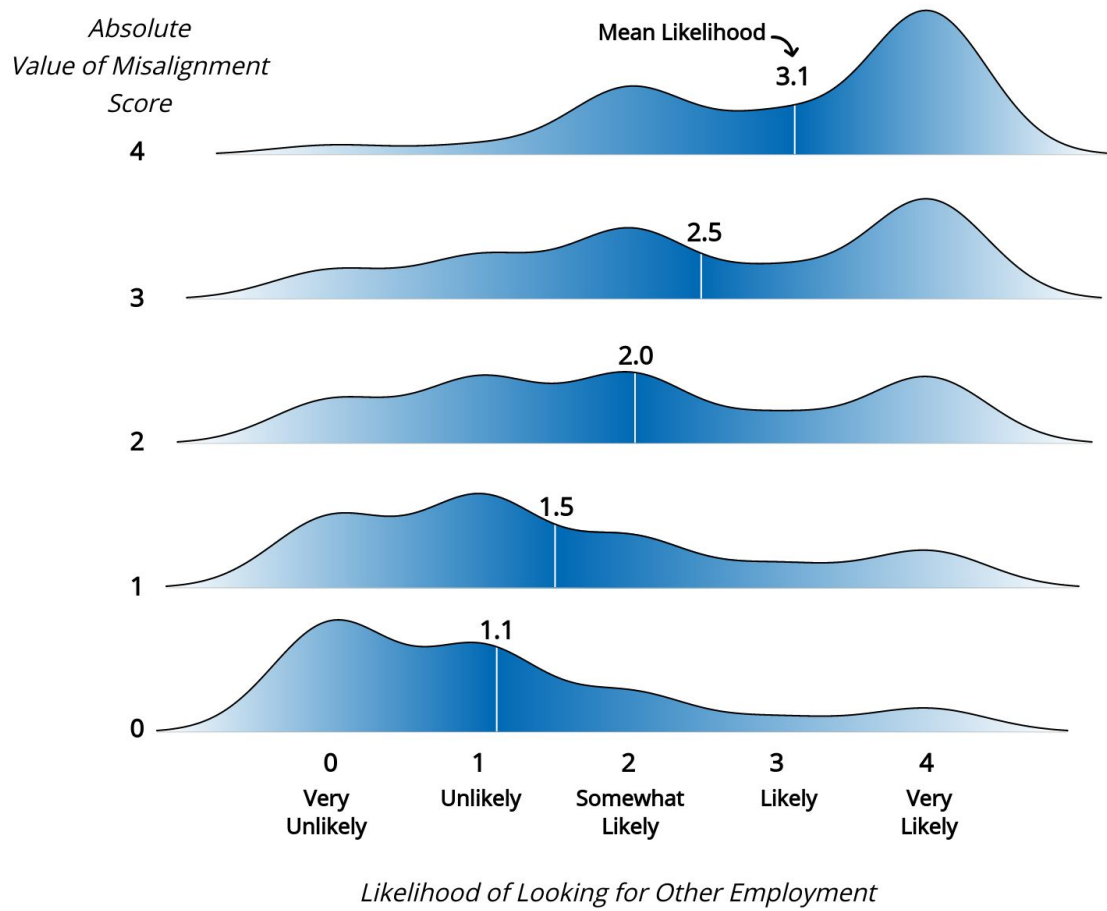
Misalignment of preferred and actual work arrangements is positively correlated with the likelihood of seeking other employment.[13] This result, plus the fact that there are many more cases of misalignment in the direction of preferring more remote work than what one's actual arrangement allows (as opposed to preferring more on-site work than what one's actual schedule allows), leads us to conclude that misalignment in the form of not having preferred remote work options is the riskier form of misalignment when it comes to retention. In other words, when employees prefer more remote work opportunities than what they actually get, they are more likely to seek other employment.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the likelihood of seeking other employment at each absolute value of the misalignment scores. Individuals with lower misalignment are unlikely to look for other employment within the next year, whereas individuals with higher misalignment are likely to look for other employment.

Those with no (0) or low (1) misalignment between their preferences and actual working arrangements predominantly responded that they are unlikely or very unlikely to seek other employment in the next year. Individuals with middling levels of misalignment (i.e., 2) are more balanced between unlikely and likely to seek other employment. Those with a higher (3) or the highest (4) misalignment score mostly responded that they are likely or very likely to seek other employment.

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[13] Spearman's r = .324, p = .000. Taking the absolute value of misalignment scores resulted in a slightly lower but similar correlation, Spearman's r = .320, p = .000.

Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment by Misalignment Score

Absolute Value of Misalignment Score

Mean Likelihood

3.1

2.5

2.0

1.5

1.1

4

3

2

1

0

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Very Unlikely | Unlikely | Somewhat Likely | Likely | Very Likely |

Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment

cupa-hr

Staff in Non-Leadership Positions Have Greater Misalignment in Their Work Arrangements and Are More Likely to Seek Other Employment

Staff in non-leadership positions are more likely to look for other employment opportunities than those in leadership positions (Figure 4).[14] This is likely because non-leadership staff have a significantly higher misalignment score.[15] In looking at the graphs depicted in Figure 4, one can see that for both the likelihood of seeking other employment and misalignment, leaders' scores are more concentrated toward the bottom of the scale, whereas staff scores are more spread out — there are greater numbers of 2's, 3's, and 4's.

These data indicate that — when comparing leaders and non-leaders — there are higher numbers of non-leadership staff who are both looking for other employment and desiring of more remote work opportunities. Those in leadership positions may have fewer expectations for flexible or remote work arrangements for themselves and a greater presumption that their presence on campus is required. Leaders who desire to improve retention in their staff, though, may want to gauge whether they can provide more flexible work arrangements for them.

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[14] $t(2,036.90) = 4.93$, $p = .000$
[15] $t(2,127.6) = 6.81$, $p = .000$

Differences Between Leaders and Staff in Their Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment and Misalignment Scores

Figure 4. Differences Between Leaders and Staff in Their Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment and Misalignment Scores

Conclusion and Next Steps

Many higher ed employees want more flexible work arrangements, especially in regard to remote work. Our data show that:

- Nearly two-thirds of respondents report some degree of misalignment between their preferred and actual work arrangements, particularly in regard to having the ability to work remotely at least part of the time.
- Nearly half of employees are at least somewhat likely to be looking for other employment opportunities in the near future.
- There is a clear relationship between the provision of remote work opportunities when employees prefer them and employee satisfaction in terms of whether they will be seeking other employment.
- It would take only a small movement in the direction of providing more flexible work opportunities to result in improved employee satisfaction with their work arrangements and improved employee retention.

Although those in leadership positions in HR and IT are less likely to experience misalignment between actual and preferred work arrangements, they need to keep in mind that their staff may be experiencing this misalignment and that this may be a catalyst for them to look for other employment. Taking even small steps to provide employees with more flexible working arrangements for even part of the week may lead to greater employee satisfaction and retention.

For HR and IT leaders considering models and practices for sustaining long-term flexible or remote work arrangements, both CUPA-HR and EDUCAUSE have organized a set of resources to help guide work planning and decision-making:

[CUPA-HR Resources on the Future of Work](#)

[EDUCAUSE Resources on Working Remotely](#)

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