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How to Retain Your Dragon: Motivation and Retention of Research Administrators

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Project Overview

Research Administrators (RAs)
self-report work-related
stress and burnout

- High stress positions result in increased turnover and low retention.
- Research Administrators Stress Perception Surveys (RASPerS) conducted by the Society of Research Administrators International in 2010, 2012, 2015, and 2023
- Historically, RAs have low turnover and burnout but high levels of self-reported stress
- Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions complain of high turnover and low retention

Problem Definition & Goals

Focus on RAs with between 4 and 9 years of experience (aka “mid-life”)

- Few studies performed on mid-life RAs
- Mid-life RAs began careers immediately preceeding the COVID-19 pandemic
- What factors drive these mid-life RAs to remain in RA and/or to feel valued and motivated to grow in their current jobs rather than to move to another institution or another career path?
- What retention strategies can organizations use to retain the mid-lifers in the RA field and to foster talent and career satisfaction among this demographic?

Literature Review

LOTS and LOTS of reading

- While there is an exhaustive amount of literature available that studies and reviews employee motivation and retention, far fewer are published specifically on the field of research administration.
- General motivators include (1) **support** from supervisors, (2) good **work/life balance**, and (3) **positive relationship** with coworkers .
- Many of the motivators were lost when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and RAs were moved to work-from-home positions.
- Tangentially, did the COVID-19 pandemic alter motivators?

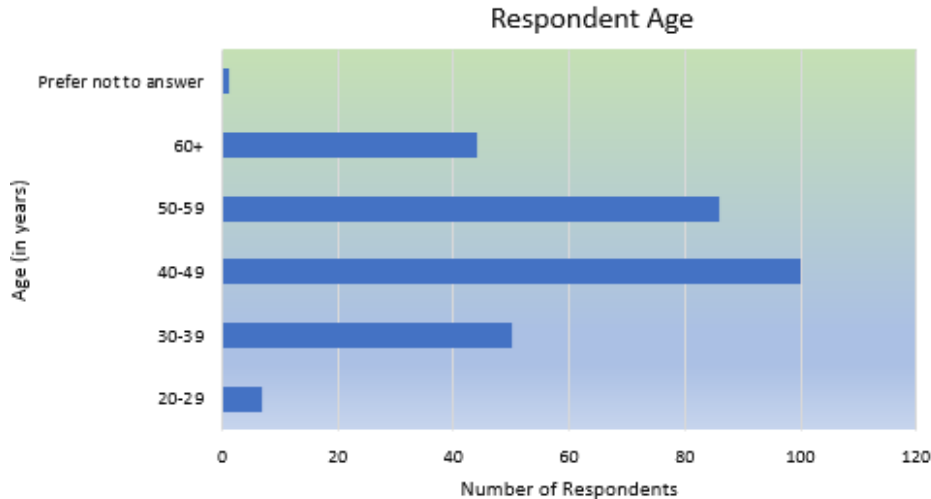
Methods

Survey!

- Redcap survey distributed over SRAI CONNECT forum and the [Research Administration Listserv \(RESADM-L\)](#)
- Asked demographic information, factors RAs motivate to remain at and/or leave their current position, rank choice of potential employer retention strategies, and optional question regarding COVID-19's impact on motivation factors
- Hoping for 200 usable responses

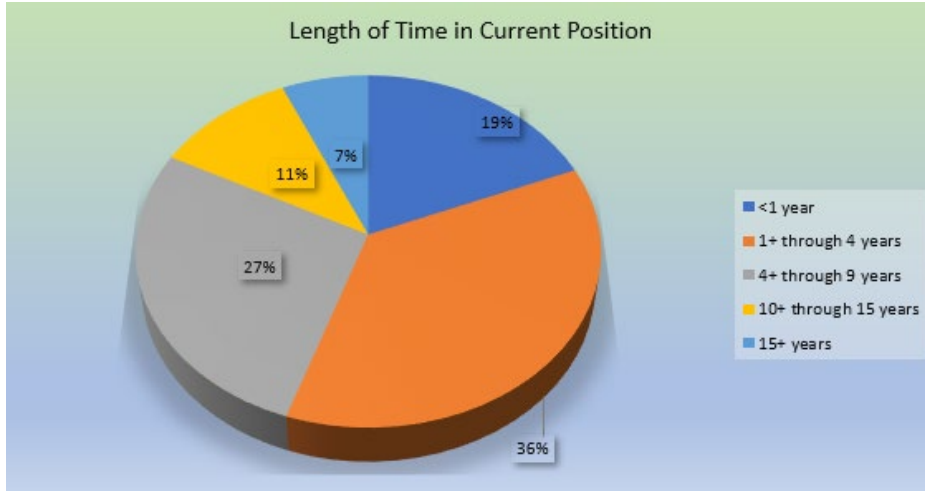
DATA COLLECTED

- 316 responses in 2 weeks
- 28 incomplete and discarded
- 288 usable responses
- Overall Data Collected:
 - 89% identified as female
 - Majority of respondents between 40 and 59 years of age



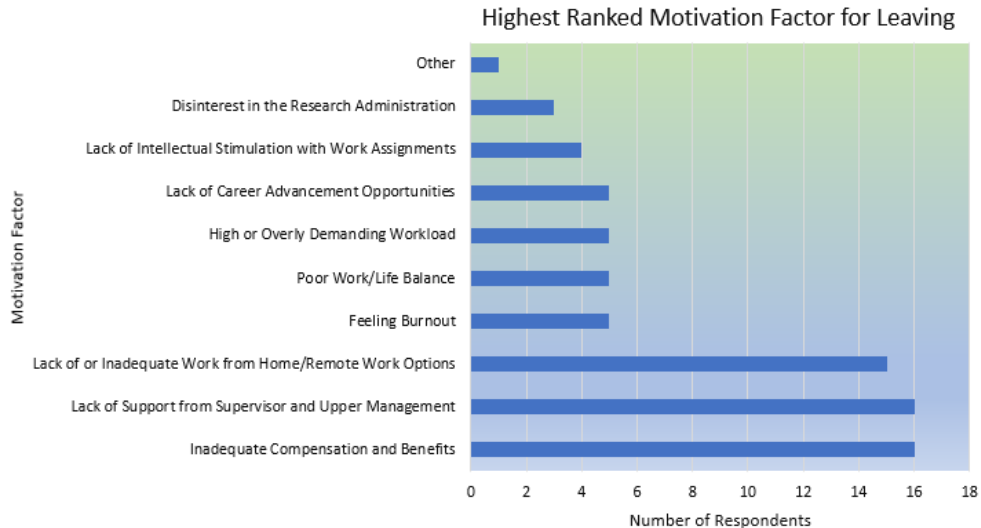
DATA COLLECTED PT.2

- Majority of respondents had been in current position between 1 and 4 years
- 27% percent (focused population) between 4 and 9 years
- 20% had been in role less than a year



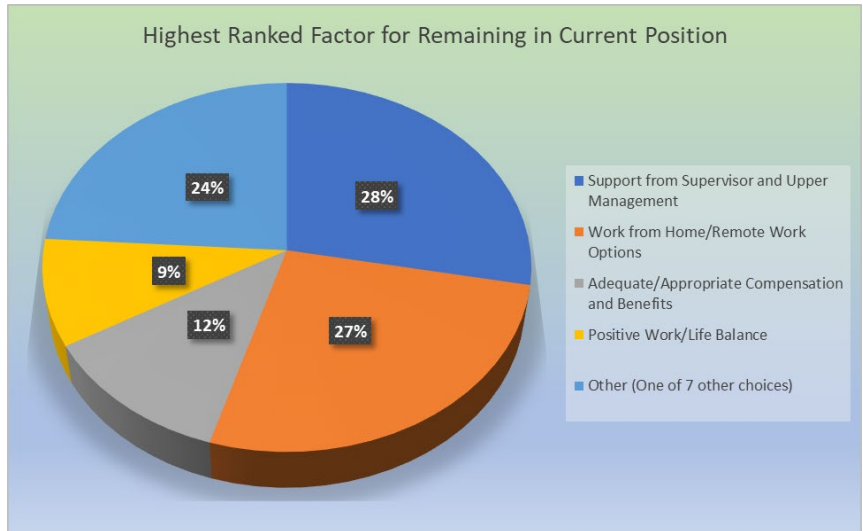
Motivation(s) for Leaving Position

- Half of all respondents chose either (1) inadequate compensation/benefits or (2) lack of supervisor or upper management support as motivator for leaving
- Followed closely by lack of or inadequate WFH/remote options



Motivation(s) for Remaining at Position

- Consistent with results from Motivation to Leave; respondents tend to stay due to:
 - (1) supervisor/upper management support
 - (2) WFH/remote work options
 - (3) adequate compensation/benefits
- Light blue is combined: coworker relationships and work/life balance
- Supported by comments from respondents

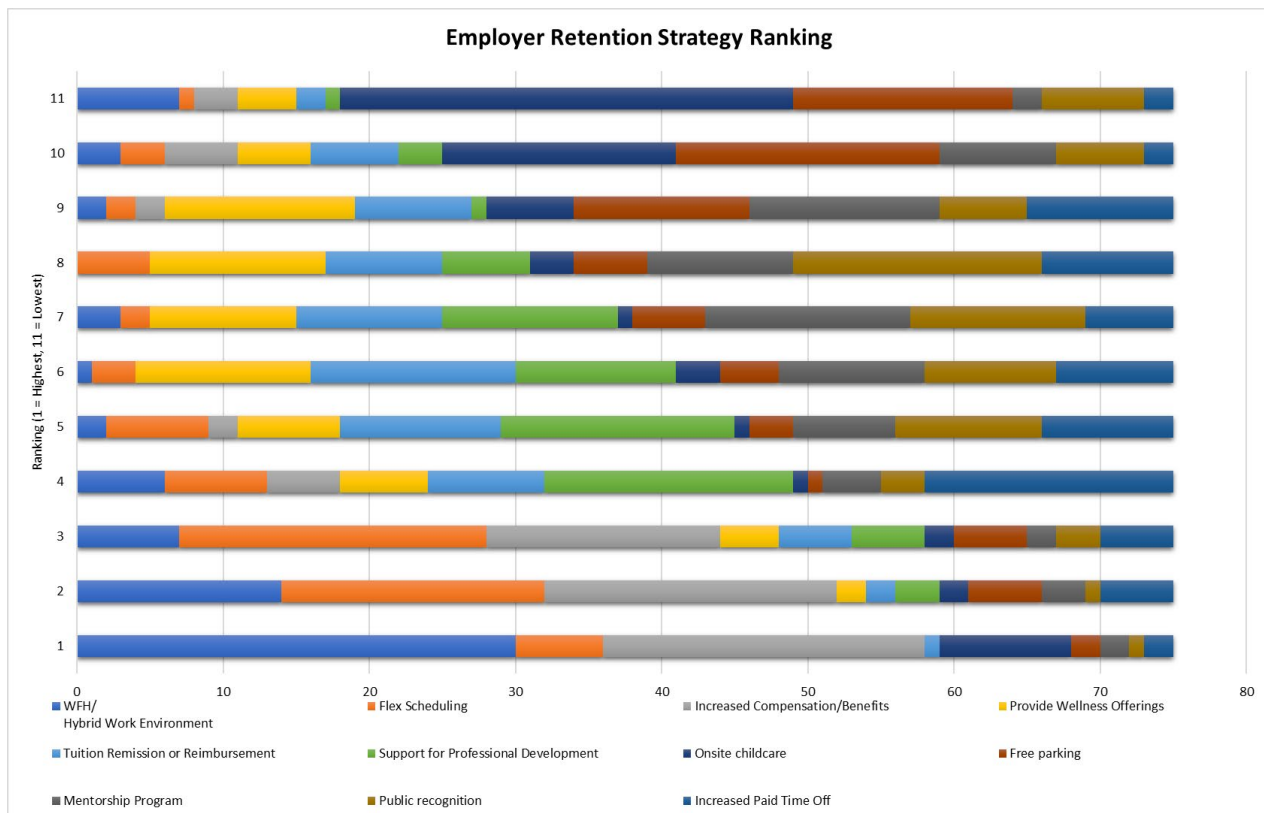


Eleven Retention Strategies

- Work from Home (WFH)/Hybrid
- Flexible Work Schedule
- Increased Compensation/Benefits
- Provide Wellness Offerings
- Tuition Remission/Reimbursement
- Support for Professional Development
- Onsite Childcare
- Free Parking
- Formal Mentorship Program
- Public Recognition
- Increased Paid Time Off

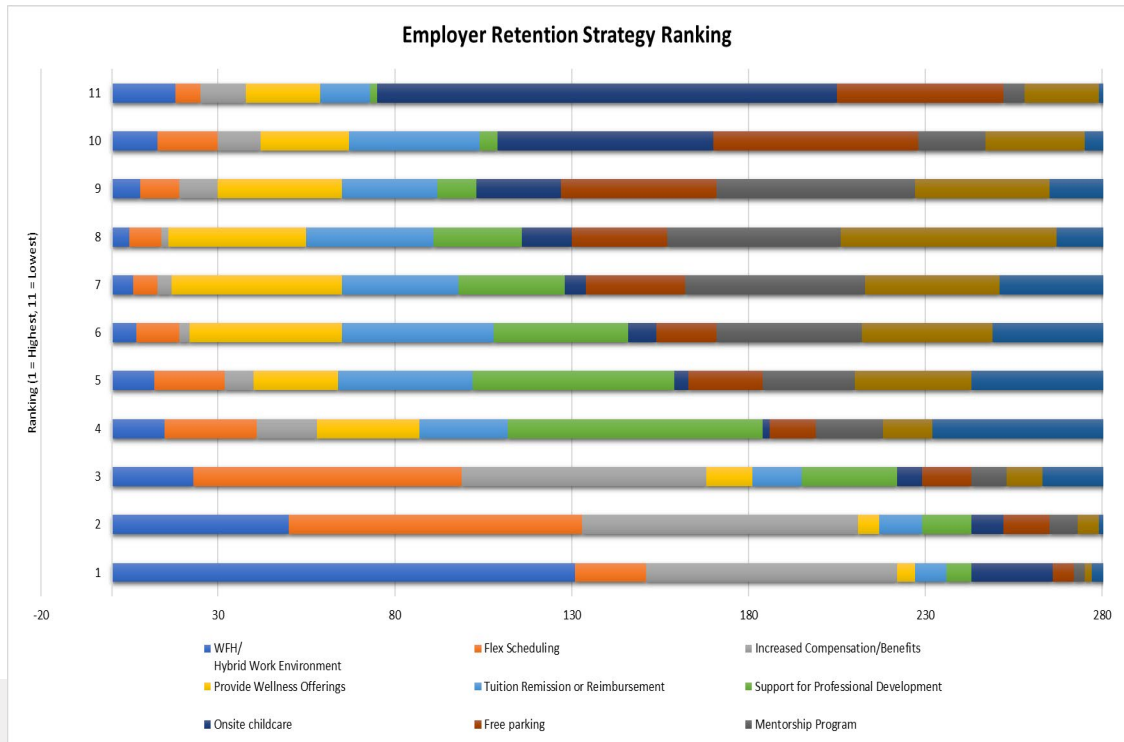


Ranked Retention Strategies (subset)



Ranked Retention Strategies (all)

- When subset compared to all respondents, answers were generally consistent.
- Only visible difference is that public recognition was generally ranked lower and increased PTO ranked higher by all respondents than by the subset



COVID-19

- COVID-19 had a minimal impact on retention and motivation, other than the increased preference toward remote/hybrid work as a retention strategy.



Living the dream

Interesting Comments

- Remote work was never a factor before, but once I realized the positive impact it had on my quality of life, it became my highest priority. I left my previous institution of 12+ years over that issue and am now 100% remote.
- Remote work had gotten extremely hard to balance for example, me not being responsible to be able to start and end work hours. But in fact, the work must be done therefore, making this sort of not doable.
- With Covid, it showed our field how well it actually works to be able to do things remote. Also, with the extremely deadline driven nature of our jobs, it allows us to focus, get our work done, and have more of a work-life balance than what we could pre-covid. Our Research Administrators have showed how well we work as a whole. In the past, it was rain, shine, snow, sickness, health - you name it! We were getting that deadline submitted.
- It was very hard to recruit young RAs or parents. I feel like we have a very big age gap between experienced RAs and RAs with 1-4 years of experience, I think this is already starting to cause an issue with training our RAs with lesser experience as our older generation retires.

RECOMMENDATIONS! CONCLUSIONS!

- Multiple respondents stating that they feel “well respected and supported”; “*challenged*” by the work; and feel “potential for growth.”
- Other comments stated that they would leave their current place of employment because there are “*poor administrative processes*”; instances of “*favoritism*” and “*racism*”; “poor workplace culture”; and “lack of respect and integrity”.
- Based on the data, to retain mid-life RAs (and even those who are new or have over a decade of experience), institutions should offer **competitive compensation and benefits packages** along with the ability to **work from home or a remote work environment**.
- The data consistently supported a **focus on work-life balance**, allowing RAs more time to concentrate on non-work activities and appropriate compensation for their efforts to support their lifestyles.

Questions?

