JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

What Young Nonprofit Workers Want

By Jim Rendon

in December, Sydney Aulffo left her job at a nonprofit after working there three years. She was passionate about the group's mission. But the 25-year-old is also interested in her own career. She felt working remotely during the pandemic had impeded opportunities for mentoring and that the group's flat organizational structure meant there were few opportunities for advancement.

"It felt like I'm going to be in this same pay range until I reach that next level. That might be five or more years down the road," she says. "You want to feel that your work is reflecting the skills that you have."

Aulffo just received her master's degree in public administration from George Washington University and started a new job at Alexandria Economic Development Partnership, where she is excited about the professional opportunities. She says her new workplace also reflects her values, which is important to her.

"Whatever you tie yourself to is a reflection of who you are," she says. "I would want to work in a place that supports my morals."

Aulffo is one of millions of younger nonprofit employees who think differently about work than many of their older colleagues. Nonprofit leaders would be smart to pay attention to them, says Mandi Stewart, an associate professor of public administration at the North Carolina State University. Millennials — who are now ages 26 to 41 — have been the largest generation in the work force since 2017.

Younger people today approach work differently, says Jasmine Johnson, an associate professor of public policy and administration at George Washington University who teaches aspiring nonprofit professionals and studies younger workers.

They are less likely to stay at an organization for very long. They are more interested in work-life balance, and they value diversity much more than earlier generations, she says. They want to see their values reflected in the workplace as much as in the rest of their lives. And because of the large amount of student debt young workers carry, pay is also important — as is the ability to grow and learn within an organization.

"My students are always thinking, can I get more experience? Can I move up in the organization?" Johnson says.

They can also be quick to leave when things don't go their way, particularly if the pay is not what they think it should be, Johnson says. "If they're not getting paid [appropriately], if they're having a bad experience with their supervisors, they leave."

'Who's Going to Do That?'

Some employers find the demands from younger workers unrealistic. Angela Habr, executive director of the Hyde Park Neighborhood Club, a group that offers programs for young people in Chicago, says she has hired younger leaders who won't do any work or check email after hours. Work-life balance is great, she says, but there needs to be flexibility to respond to something like a building closure or some other crisis.

"Who's going to do that if you're not?" she asks. "I'm having to carry that slack for younger workers because their sense of work-life balance is so strong that they're not willing to do even the crisis management."

It can be easy to get frustrated with younger employees' approach, says Libbie Landles-Cobb, a partner at the consulting firm Bridgespan. Nonprofit executives who worked hard and made sacrifices to rise through a culture that rewards self-sacrifice can be tempted to sneer at the demands of younger workers. But, she says, before demanding those sacrifices from others, leaders need to ask themselves what the value is in perpetuating systems of inequity or overwork.

Of course, nonprofits can't meet every demand. Being transparent about what is and isn't possible and how changes to the workplace might affect the mission of the organization are more important than granting every request, Landles-Cobb says. But leaders also need to be willing to rethink some of their own biases about work culture. "We just need to be more creative and more open-minded and really think about the possibility that exists right now to make some of these changes," she says.

Flexibility Is Prized

Tenneille Choi, 31, is a development officer at Free Arts, in Arizona. The two things she has come to appreciate most about the organization since she started in the fall of 2020 are its mission — helping abused children through the arts — and flexibility.

She got to decide how much she wanted to work in the office and how much at home. She tried a few arrangements and finally settled on working from home on Wednesdays. Choi realized that when she was at home, she would keep working and working, sometimes until 9 p.m., when her boyfriend would remind her to stop.

"Compartmentalizing just helps me maintain that work-life balance," she says. "I still have my workaholic tendencies, but I like having that one workday to maybe have a slower pace in the middle of the week." And she can change the days anytime she wants. "I feel spoiled."

Choi says if she ever left the organization, she couldn't imagine working somewhere that required her to be in the office every day. "We tasted what teleworking can be

like, what hybrid working can be like," she says. "I think an employer would be really foolish to not offer that flexibility in the future."

Millennial nonprofit employees aren't afraid to question an organization's policies.

The kind of autonomy that Choi has can make a difference for younger workers who are more likely to question an organization's policies, says North Carolina State's Stewart. For example, if young workers are forced to come back to the office, they want to know why.

She says if employers ask staff to start working from the office again but they are just commuting in to do Zoom calls all day, they will question whether that decision makes sense.

"What's the motivation for being together?" she asks.

Weeding Out Employers

Young nonprofit professionals care deeply about equity, diversity, and inclusion — and Johnson says a nonprofit's approach to DEI is an important factor for many young workers when they consider job opportunities. Young people are more upfront about the many ways they identify and are more used to interacting with people with diverse identities than older workers are, she says. "They're just more able to sniff out if you're walking the talk."

Johnson says some of her trans students and students of color are making their identities clear on their résumés. She says when she was their age, that was frowned on but that students today see things differently. They put their identities on their résumés to weed out prospective employers. If an employer has an issue with their identity, she says, the student wouldn't want to work for the organization anyway.

Choi says Free Arts is a good fit for her because the values it espouses — communication, transparency, and respecting boundaries — are important to her in both her personal and professional lives. She says she sees them play out in the workplace regularly.

"I think it's why our team has worked really well together," Choi says. "I personally love all of those values for myself."

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