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Work To Create Communal Careers

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Across America, graduates are once again marching across university lawns and out into the work world. As the class of 2005 enters the labor market, Jewish organizations are hoping that more than a few will choose to work for them.

From local synagogues to national agencies, Jewish communal work is a multi-billion dollar sector of the American economy, employing tens of thousands of workers. American Jewry has staked much on its organizations — and if they are to be effective, they need to be places where talented workers can flourish.

Are Jewish organizations doing well in their efforts to recruit, empower and retain talented personnel? It has been hard to say. We have no "Jewish Bureau of Labor Statistics" to give us actual data. Instead, questions about the health of the Jewish sector tend to be answered with anecdotes or, worse, anxiety.

In part to redress the lack of systematic information, we and our colleagues Michael Rabkin and Carl Sheingold at Brandeis University have begun to study the Jewish sector's workforce. With support from the new Professional Leaders Project — which is working to develop the sector's talent pool — we surveyed more than 1,400 employees of nearly 200 synagogues, day schools, federations and agencies in six communities.

We found a surprisingly diverse labor force. Jews do not carry out this work alone. Many Christians also work as partners to strengthen Jewish life. This is true everywhere, especially in smaller communities.

Professionals arrive by many routes. About half the Jewish employees make Jewish work their first and only career. The other half, as well as most of the non-Jews, bring years of experience from the outside.

For Jewish employees — "lifers" and "switchers" alike — the teenage years are a critical point of entry. Half held their first Jewish job during high school or college. Working part time or summers in camps, youth groups and religious schools, they discovered career options that most young Jews never imagine.

Expanding Jewish jobs for teenagers is likely crucial to maintaining a healthy applicant pool. But this may not benefit all organizations equally. According to our respondents, synagogues, day

schools and non-federation local agencies do reasonably well at recruitment. Far fewer federation workers say as much.

Organizations that attract good people still may not be able to keep them. In most cases, workers reported more problems with retention than with recruitment, especially at the entry level. Those most likely to consider quitting are those who feel unappreciated and unable to advance. With poor career ladders and senior leaders in no hurry to give up their positions or perks, young recruits might easily be tempted to move on.

Overall turnover rates range from 12% to 22%, depending on the job. Does this mean that scores of workers are walking away from the Jewish sector? Not exactly.

When rabbis, cantors and Jewish educators quit their jobs, they typically migrate from one Jewish organization to another. In contrast, when fundraisers quit, they do tend to leave Jewish work altogether. Fundraising positions seem especially vulnerable to low satisfaction and high attrition, even though the jobs pay better than most.

One group not paid better is women. In all job types we found gender-based salary gaps on the order of tens of thousands of dollars — gaps that could not be explained by education, seniority or other factors. It is one way the rewards of Jewish work are not distributed equally.

In spite of widespread dissatisfaction with pay, advancement opportunities and recognition, most workers in Jewish organizations still express high overall job satisfaction. Clearly, other aspects of the work compensate, like the chance to make a difference in people's lives. When asked if their organizations are creating productive, professional and humane workplaces committed to fairness and quality, most people answer with a qualified yes.

Traditional wisdom from *Pirke Avot* says that, "According to the difficulty, is the reward." The rewards for working in Jewish organizations are multiple. Let's hope that the new graduates entering Jewish sector work will find themselves in organizations committed to making the difficulties as few as possible.

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