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Higher Education Workforce Trends and How HR Can Respond

Deloitte's **Love Anderson** and **Ronn Kolbash**, Boston University's **Amanda Bailey**, Boston College's **David Trainor**, and University of Virginia's **Angela Knobloch** discuss the current higher education workforce trends and strategies for responding to employees' changing expectations.

Leadership from Deloitte came together with higher education leaders from Boston University (BU), Boston College (BC), and University of Virginia (UVA) to discuss the pressing workforce trends in Higher Education today and the strategies these leaders are deploying to proactively respond.

Topic

The topics of the conversation were centered around the following workforce trends across higher education institutions today:

Workforce Recruiting and Retention: Negative work culture leads to difficulties in attractiveness as an employer of choice for staff.

Compensation and Benefits: Pay matters; thorough compensation analysis that ensures pay equity is an important factor behind workers' employment choices.

Flexible Work: With many believing that most of their work duties can be performed remotely, it is important to consider culture and performance implications in flexible work environments.

Employee Experience: Lack of employee voice and inability to keep employees engaged can negatively impact retention and performance metrics.

Upskilling and Reskilling Staff: The shift towards a skill-based organization requires both workforce and succession planning.

Discussion

The dialogue below from the discussion with senior leaders at leading institutions shares insight into how institutions can respond to employees' changing expectations. Deloitte facilitated the discussion with questions and encouraged each of the HR leaders to respond when the topic was applicable to their institution and the work that they do. Comments have been edited for brevity and clarity.

? As institutions explore skill-based workforces, what differences do you see in the skills needed today versus 10 years ago?

Knobloch: We are definitely receiving more requests to move toward a skill-based organization. For me, the top skills needed today are personability and trainability. When you think about coaching and change management, it is about how we coach and interact with the employee experience, which is a core component for leaders.

Bailey: We have been identifying skills that are common across all of our jobs, and from a decade ago we have seen tremendous growth. Learning and development is key for this. We have expanded this and given core competency trainings, including one on empathetic leadership and other topics that we felt would have the greatest impact to employee development. Many of the datasets we continue to use come from CUPA-HR, which offers an abundant set of resources to make the business case for the movement to skill-based learning.

Trainor: I think the key is to start thinking about hiring for potential over the next three years. The pandemic hit us in the face and sped up the need for our response. The challenge is that we, as institutions, are high-touch organizations with significant competition for staff talent. It is about how we consider those skillsets and needs and think about the type of person we're hiring. As institutions, we sometimes are less flexible because we need to be there for our students. Every staff member has a role to play in the formation of our students, and that's a unique skillset beyond what we think. I think there are three things people ask themselves while in the recruiting process for a position at Boston College:

1. Does the mission resonate with my personal values?
2. Can I bring my full self to work?
3. Do they invest in my journey to become my best self?

We should all strive to put together a workforce that is committed to these things and what we're trying to do.

? We talk about retention, recruitment, and staffing being a major challenge, and how people were drawn into higher education because of the mission. Is the mission enough to be viewed as an employer of choice, and how can we differentiate ourselves?

? To follow up on that, Higher Education used to have pools of applicants, but now a lot of the time we "post and pray." Institutions put forth a significant amount of time and effort to recruit students. Are there elements of student recruitment that institutions can apply to staff recruitment?

Bailey: We have to focus on the experience of our staff coming in and how that relates to their career journey. For us to be a differentiator, it cannot stop upon hiring. We all have competition. We have to be forward thinkers and articulate our institutions' growth opportunities from the beginning.

Knobloch: We started working with our hiring managers for a more connective approach throughout the hiring process, such as checking in with finalists before and after interviews or even something as early as interacting with applicants. Yes, this takes time and effort, but hiring managers are a great resource to start with.

Trainor: In Boston, we have some of the best R1 institutions and world-class medical health centers. For me, we need to articulate why BC is special. Doubling down on what makes you special is so important, and being able to communicate this is even more important. The recruitment process is a friend-raising opportunity. If they don't get the job, we want them to keep applying and find a role for them. You may not have an opening now but want to reach out to them in the future.

Bailey: BU has affinity groups in every state that are multi-layered and include alumni. Recently at BU, we developed affinity partnerships to do the outreach for us and communicate our value and mission. We have developed six strategic partnerships to help promote our values and commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. We saw a 35% increase in applicants when we launched our strategic partnerships. Another thing we did was expand our LinkedIn presence on social media. We had 10,000 more applicants to BU in less than 60 days when we expanded our social media presence with LinkedIn.

Trainor: When students come to BC, the formative experience is of utmost importance. They learn what it means to be a part of a larger society. We can capitalize off of this; just because you've graduated doesn't mean your journey with BC ends. We try to leverage a similar mission when recruiting faculty and staff. We have designed employee development opportunities that are mission-focused and taken those principles of how we grow our students and applied them to our faculty and staff. We try to go to faculty and staff like we do with our students – the whole person. The benefits of this were noticed in our recent faculty and staff employee survey where more than 8 out of 10 faculty and staff noted that they feel valued by BC.

? **We talked about strategies for recruitment and how your employees have been going through lots of change (business processes, systems, leadership). All of that change brings uncertainty and anxiety. As HR leaders, how do you manage that?**

Knobloch: I am so passionate about this area of change. Instead of change management, I liked to call it change enablement to show how change can provide opportunities for growth for faculty and staff. I think the key takeaway about change is that it is more than just communication. Change enablement has some key pillars:

- Engagement: How are we engaging our stakeholders and socializing what is coming? Even if the decision is pretty certain, it is important to give our faculty and staff a voice in the process.

- Communication: What are the best means of communicating to reach the broadest array of stakeholders at the right time?

- Preparation: What do schools and units need to be ready for the change?

- Training: How do we teach them how to do the work that has changed because of this?

Bailey: From a disruption perspective, you have to have a plan. You have to ask yourself what you already know and have something to respond to [the disruption] in your back pocket. Use the data you have and rely on the organization to get you your data points. You have to manage relationships to get in front of the change, establish credibility for change, and generate the buy-in you need. These are factors of the type of leaders we attract today. This is also a key retention factor; when employees are in constant uninvited disruptions their frustration goes up and retention gets very hard.

Trainor: The most lasting change is incremental and deliberate. You have to think about it yourself. I used to like to make decisions quickly, but I learned the relationship piece is vital. We have to keep in mind the difference between influence versus authority. Influence is the opportunity you are provided based on your trust and relationships and being someone to count on to deliver and speak up. Keeping that distinction is critical; people that mow the lawns at BC have more influence than I do.

That is because they got out to the community and created those relationships.

? **You were talking about retention. For talent that leaves, do you do anything to keep that door open?**

Trainor: I love "boomerangs," which is what we call them. We talk about tracking people and getting them back. That is really important. I know you're disappointed, but you never know, as they may have an experience elsewhere where they grow tremendously and could be of even more value to your institution. We try to keep that in mind, especially for research and administrative staff. Pick up the phone and call them. It never hurts. I think we need to do more and more of that. Track your high performers and maintain connections if they leave so you can invite them to come back.
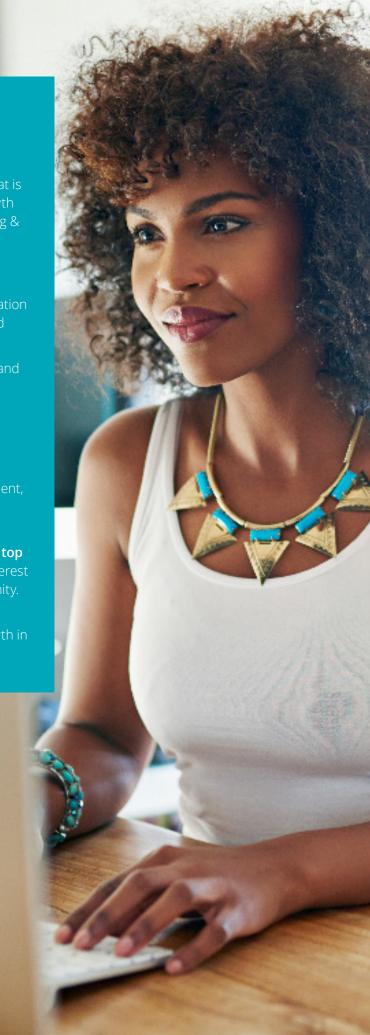
? **Since we were discussing the trend to hire for potential, what ideas do you have to balance that with implicit bias?**

Bailey: It is so important to put objective guardrails in place of measuring those competencies. We drive that requirement through the interview process where we give them scenario-type questions to determine how the candidate deals with it, which goes back to the preparation of the candidate.

Key Takeaways

- The move toward the **skill-based organization** requires talent that is coachable and willing to grow; institutions must facilitate this growth by identifying and investing in workforce potential through learning & development programming and prioritization of the employee experience.

- **To effectively recruit and retain top talent**, institutions must articulate the value of the careers they offer from the initial application stages, and this value must be continuously redefined and realized throughout the employee lifecycle.

- **Elements of student recruitment**, such as intentional outreach and focus on whole person development, **can and should be utilized to attract staff**. Strategic partnerships and alumni relations help to expand talent pools and foster connections among a growing university community.

- **Change enablement is critical to institutional growth** and development, and it consists of deliberate and relational engagement, communication, preparation and training to navigate continuous disruption.

- Universities have an opportunity to **maintain relationships with top talent who voluntarily exit the institution** who may have an interest in returning and delivering greater value to the university community.

- **Recruitment guardrails against implicit bias** are critical as institutions assess candidates' current skillsets and potential growth in an effective and equitable manner.

Participants

Facilitators:

Love Anderson is a Manager in Deloitte Consulting LLP's Human Resource Transformation practice. She is an experienced leader in higher education in the areas of human resources, workforce transformation, future of work, and change management.

Ronn Kolbash is a Specialist Executive in the Higher Education Practice at Deloitte Consulting LLP. He has over 10 years of experience working in higher education in HR and Shared Services. He has deep experience implementing and directing human resources and shared services programs.

Higher Education Leaders:

David Trainor is the Vice President for HR at Boston College. He has extensive experience in higher education HR and understands how innovation can strengthen the HR process. He holds a Juris Doctor degree from New England School of Law and a bachelor's from the College of the Holy Cross.

Amanda Bailey is the Vice President for HR at Boston University. Her experience and collaborative style helped BU implement their first hybrid work environment. Amanda earned a bachelor's from Florida Atlantic University and a master's in labor relations and HR management from the University of Rhode Island.

Angela Knobloch is the Senior Director of Change Enablement and Continuous Improvement at the University of Virginia. She has over 20 years of higher education experience with a focus in the areas of change management, continuous improvement, and HR. She holds an MBA from Illinois State University.

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