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Best Practices

Why Would I Go There?

Motivating workers to take and keep jobs in rural areas.

By **Rachel Deussom**, Health Workforce Officer, and **Wanda Jaskiewicz**, Workforce Performance and Support Team Lead, IntraHealth International

WHEN A WORKER LEAVES a rural community for better pay or better working conditions, too often that community is left worse off. Consider this example: Jorge received his teaching certificate and was hired to teach math and science in a small village. However, his students sat in an empty classroom for much of the day their entire first semester. Because Jorge was not provided with housing and the village did not have any houses available for rent, he had to travel a very long distance from the closest city. He quickly tired of the long commute and the extra fuel expenses he was incurring on his low salary. Jorge found a new teaching job in the city, leaving his students without a teacher for the rest of the school year.

Unfortunately, stories like this happen every day. Too often, countries struggle to attract and retain a skilled workforce in rural, remote and underserved areas. Across sectors, this translates into serious challenges for safeguarding the development and well-being of a sizeable portion of the population. The issue of attracting and retaining rural workers is problematic in multiple sectors, such as education, health, agriculture and social services.

Consider another example: Aminatou graduated with a degree in social work and was hired by the government to support its orphan outreach program in the more rural parts of the country. She struggled to keep on top of a challenging caseload and soon became overworked and stressed. When she gently voiced these concerns to her supervisor, with whom she rarely had contact, he told Aminatou that there was nothing he could do about it and that she should just get used to it. In time, she became completely overwhelmed and decided to seek a new profession. Aminatou's job remained vacant for months and her colleagues had little time to follow her caseload, leaving the orphans without adequate support.

Given the complexity of the social, professional and economic factors that influence motivation, how do institutions make rural job postings more attractive? Or, to ask this question in another way: What kinds of incentive packages can attract and motivate young, bright graduates to serve the areas of their country that



▲ *CapacityPlus's work on retention issues helps keep health workers in rural areas motivated. Here, nurse Christine Minayo in the community garden at the Friends Kaimosi Hospital in Kenya, 2009.*

are most in need? And how can we ensure that these workers—ones like Jorge and Aminatou—remain there over time?

While many recognize that salary is an important factor, other characteristics of a job—such as better living or working conditions, supportive supervision, opportunities for continuing professional development, career advancement, networking and even public recognition—can improve a worker's sense of purpose and their productivity.

What kinds of incentive packages can attract and motivate young, bright graduates to serve the areas of their country that are most in need?

Identifying and offering the right incentive package to workers can result in a win-win situation, with benefits for both the worker and the community served. For example, providing housing for a teacher can make him feel that he is a more integral part of his new community; in addition, he is more likely to be present and invest in his class. Ensuring that an agricultural extension worker has

the proper materials and equipment to do his job well will boost his morale and productivity because he can provide the kinds of innovative farming technologies that will help his rural community prosper. A social worker may tire of her stressful job, but when she receives an award for her outreach work, her high morale returns and she perseveres. A midwife will be more motivated to work the night shift delivering babies if there is electricity and run-

ning water in the maternity ward. And she will provide better care.

But how can we know exactly *which* combination of incentives will attract and retain the most workers?

To address this issue of job attraction and retention in the health sector, USAID's global project on health workforce strengthening, CapacityPlus, managed by InterAction member IntraHealth International, has helped ministries of health and NGOs (including faith-based organizations) answer these questions by using a rapid discrete choice experiment (DCE), a rigorous survey method that identifies the trade-offs that workers would be willing to make between specific job characteristics. Garnering statistical evidence of what motivates workers provides policymakers with the needed information to develop more cost-effective job incentive strategies. However, this approach can easily be adapted and applied to other sectors so that all workers in rural areas can benefit from more effective incentive packages.

The Rapid Retention Survey Toolkit (RRST) is a step-by-step guide that helps users plan, develop, implement and analyze a statistically relevant survey that can pinpoint which incentive packages will interest the greatest number of workers. The toolkit process is based on the DCE methodology, which has been used by economists for years. However, in many resource-constrained settings, conducting a DCE requires expensive, high-level consultants, and may produce an incomprehensible technical report that sits on the shelf at the ministry. Involving local stakeholders in the survey process increases the likelihood that the results will be understood and applied by decision-makers within the country.

In 2010, the RRST was applied in the Ugandan health sector, where 50 percent of the positions for health workers remained vacant. Graduate students in their final year of school had the potential to become the country's newly deployed medical officers, nursing officers, lab technicians and pharmacists. During the focus group discussions that helped shape the quantitative component of the survey, many students revealed that they were considering leaving the country to work where they believed their career prospects were better. Many were concerned about what the future held for them in Uganda. The RRST results helped the Ministry of Health identify and press for the most potentially effective strategies. Depending on the specific cadre of health worker, these included incentive packages that combined improving the quality of health facilities, supportive managers, opportunities for professional development, and increased salary.

In a global context where we are constantly pushed to achieve more with fewer resources, the RRST presents an important opportunity to make better choices about the investments we make. If we are going to take the time to train someone for rural work, shouldn't we do our best to ensure that they are truly willing to take up a job post where they may be most needed? And don't we want them to stay motivated and productive? If we can provide the right kinds of incentives to tireless individuals like Jorge and Aminatou to ensure that services are delivered across all sectors in rural areas, we are on the right track. ^{MD}

The toolkit is available online at www.capacityplus.org.

Year in review

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emphasis of focus. But he worries it will become part of a pattern of topics that are intensely followed by humanitarian agencies for three years or so but then fall to the wayside. "Of course we want to put the beneficiary at the center of humanitarian work," he said, "but that hasn't happened yet."

Talk of three-year cycles is frustrating to Amelia Kegan, a senior policy analyst for Bread for the World. She is a staffer for an agency whose grassroots supporters have a sustained, long-term interest in hunger and poverty issues. For Kegan, 2012 was notable for what "Congress has not done." Given the current fiscal climate of austerity, the fact that there were no major cuts to many antipoverty programs—both nationally and internationally—"was a victory in many ways," she said.

That was not surprising given that both Republicans and Democrats chose not to squabble about such issues in the months leading up to the 2012 presidential elections—although Kegan also credited the sustained work of lobbying by antipoverty groups. "They did a good job of pushing back for the programs we care about," she said.

Eyeing a fiscal cliff

While a fight in Congress over cuts was delayed, it was not permanently pushed aside. Both President Obama and a newly-elected Congress will face a postelection landscape where fiscal issues "will be the major topics for the lame duck Congress and for the Congress that convenes in 2013," Kegan said, "and deficit reduction will be the most prominent issue facing Congress." There will be enormous pressure for spending cuts as Congress peers over the fiscal cliff.

"We want to be sure that Congress protects our country's commitment to the programs that try to solve the issues of hunger and poverty," she added. Kegan and other Bread colleagues have found in the last year that, among congressional members of both parties, there is a sense that, given previous cuts to antipoverty programs, Congress does not want to further balance "the budget on the backs of the poor and vulnerable."

She calls the upcoming budget debates over issues that are important to the NGO community critical important, saying "the stakes are going to be really, really high."

Of course, the stakes are high for any number of issues, but the 2012 campaign season ended with neither President Obama nor former Governor Romney saying much about climate change, or other issues of concern to the humanitarian world, such as the welcome political changes in Burma/Myanmar; the ongoing problems in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; continued refugee migration into urban areas; and the issue of global poverty in general.

If those were disappointments, Tamburini finds encouragement in the fact that the humanitarian world is expanding, with new players in the field and new alliances being made with the private sector. He says such changes are necessary and good. That may be one critical and needed takeaway from 2012.

"Some feel we're giving up our independence by working more with the private sector. But I think it's a good thing, particularly in accessing resources," Tamburini said. "We can't return to the way it was, with each agency working in a silo." ^{MD}