The *Engage!* Study Executive Summary

Global Mapping International
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Background

The *Engage!* study focuses on understanding retention issues among North American cross-cultural missionary field staff. The study is comprised of a 25-minute quantitative web-based survey of active field staff and an hour-long in-depth qualitative web interview administered to former field staff as well as selected current staff. This report details results from 2006-2007.

The study was authorized by the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and is conducted by Global Mapping International in partnership with Best Christian Workplaces Institute and Generating Change. The study has followed up on learning from the U.S. portion of the ReMAP II study, which studied sending agency retention rates and the perspectives of agency administrators.

Among the key findings of ReMAP II was that the top two-fifths of agencies have an average 10-year retention rate of 77 percent, while the bottom two-fifths retain only 37 percent of their staff over the same period of time. Average tenure of the two groups also varied substantially (17 years for the top group; less than eight years for the other group). Further, the retention rate of the top group was improving over time, while the retention rate of the other group was decreasing over time.[1] These results suggested the need for additional research – from the perspective of current and former field staff – to explore retention issues and help agencies understand how to encourage staff to remain in effective service.

Thus far, nearly 1,800 active and former staff, representing 18 sending agencies, have participated in *Engage!*. Participating agencies (each of whom received agency-specific results) also provided information on their four-year retention rate, allowing survey results to be analyzed for their association with retention.

Eleven Questions That Field Staff Need Answered

The quantitative survey, administered to 1,727 current staff, included demographics and nearly 70 scaled items. Items were created with input from the joint personnel committee of The Mission Exchange and CrossGlobal Link, with several being borrowed or adapted (with permission) from the Best Christian Workplaces survey,

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[1] Van Meter, Jim, *ReMAP II: Worldwide Missionary Retention Study and Best Practices*, Missions Commission of the WEA, (PowerPoint document). Accessed 5/31/2009 at
http://www.wearesources.org/PublicationDetail.aspx?PublicationGUID=87d373e9-8c1d-4641-bd1c-8a44832f0190.

the best-known Christian workplace survey. Factor analysis of response patterns across those items revealed 11 key factors or areas of concern for field staff. These factors can be expressed as key questions that field staff seek favorable answers to as they consider continuing service (in no particular order):

- Is my family provided for?
- Do I have real friends?
- Do I have the support of those at home?
- Does someone know and care about what I do?
- Do we (colleagues and partners) live and work well in community?
- Is the work progressing with purpose?
- Am I free to do what needs to be done?
- Does my agency listen and speak to me respectfully?
- Does my agency steward people well?
- Does my agency prepare people to be effective?
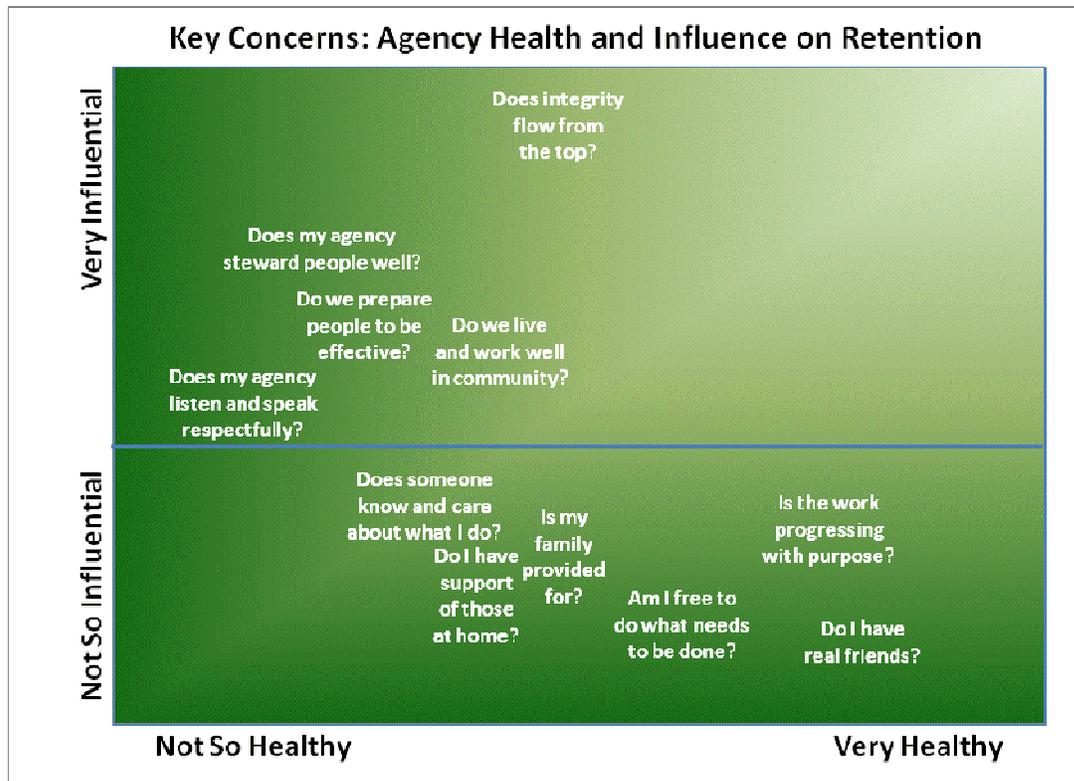- Does integrity flow from the top of my agency?

Agency Health and Influence on Retention

Mean scores for each factor (an average of component measures) were calculated for the aggregate sample as an indicator of the overall agency health, as well as room for improvement. Results indicated that the areas of greatest strength tend to be those within the individual's purview: **personal purpose/progress** and **having friends**. Areas with the greatest room for improvement tend to be enterprise-wide issues: **listening and speaking to me respectfully, stewarding people well** and **preparing people for effectiveness**.

Additional analysis focused on the association of the factors with agency retention rates. Five factors in particular were found to have statistically strong correlations (.4 or higher) with retention. These included (in order of importance):

- Does integrity flow from the top?
- Does my agency steward people well?
- Does my agency prepare people to be effective?
- Do we live and work well in community?
- Does my agency listen and speak to me respectfully?

Agencies that do these five things well are very likely to have a very high retention rate. The following chart shows both average rating (health) and degree of association with retention:

Key Concerns: Agency Health and Influence on Retention

Very Influential

Does integrity flow from the top?

Does my agency steward people well?

Do we prepare people to be effective?   Do we live and work well in community?

Does my agency listen and speak respectfully?

Not So Influential

Does someone know and care about what I do?

Is my family provided for?

Do I have support of those at home?

Am I free to do what needs to be done?

Is the work progressing with purpose?

Do I have real friends?

Not So Healthy   **Very Healthy**

The quantitative survey confirms conventional wisdom about team harmony being a key factor in continuing service. However, several agency-wide issues also appear to play significant roles in retention. Truthful, compassionate leadership that actively seeks and acts on input from the field is associated with strong retention. Similarly, appropriately preparing, placing and moving people into (or out of) leadership positions has a strong connection with retention.

A Closer Look at the Influential Questions

Given the association of these factors with retention, agencies may wish to more fully understand the components of these key questions:

1. **Does integrity and trust flow from the top?** This relates to agency leaders setting the tone for the organization, not only in terms of integrity, but also compassion, devotion, transparency, accountability and a calm response to crises. This factor was significantly influential on both intended and actual retention as well as on willingness to recommend the agency to others.

2. **Do we prepare people to be effective?** This covers items related to both pre-field and on-field training in both language and cultural adaptation. Depending on workers' tenure with their agency, this factor covers either or both of these perspectives:
   a. Looking back, was I well prepared?
   b. Looking forward, are the people they send to work with me well prepared?

3. **Do we live and work well in community?** This item relates to face-to-face relationships and teamwork on the field – with teammates, supervisors, national leaders and across teams or networks. In addition, it includes the issue of how the agency's values and strategy are carried out.

4. **Does my agency listen and talk to me respectfully?** The factor relates to long-distance communication between field and headquarters – in both directions. Field staff want their agency to intentionally seek and incorporate ideas/feedback from the field into organizational life. In addition, they also expect timely and clear communication/explanation from headquarters about decisions that directly affect field staff.

5. **Do we steward our people well?** This factor addresses effectiveness and justice issues about the way that people are selected, assigned, reassigned, removed and given roles of leadership. This factor applies to both field- and home-based personnel. In addition, it also relates to the way that agencies manage and resolve interpersonal conflict.

These factors demonstrate that field staff, while often operating within a local setting, are interested in and deeply affected by macro issues in their agency.

Comparison with Other Organizations...and with Domestic Staff

These influential issues listed above – covering leadership, communication, training, human resources and teamwork – are more difficult when operating in a globally distributed environment among people from varying cultures working in areas of varying technological capacity/consistency.

Best Christian Workplaces Institute observed that the scores for *Engage!* participants were low in comparison with scores in their database from domestic ministry

organizations on the same items. This was borne out by the results of one sending agency which participated in both *Engage!* (with international field staff) and BCWI's domestic survey (with home-office staff). The domestic staff gave the agency significantly higher ratings on 21 of 26 parallel measures.

Maintaining Focus on the Core Task

To what degree could the prior insights – drawn from current field staff – be confirmed by former field staff? This was the focus of the second component of *Engage!*, a set of in-depth open-ended interviews with 45 returned and 53 still-active field staff. Open-ended responses were coded into categories, then compared across segments to determine the negative issues more frequently mentioned by former staff – and the positive issues more frequently mentioned by current staff.

The following is a summary of significant influences:

Issues that Discourage Continued Service
- Poor conflict resolution/teamwork
- Poor field leadership
- Family/friend issues at home
- Conflict with nationals
- Poor headquarters leadership
- Not feeling included in decisions

Issues that Encourage Continued Service
- Continuing sense of calling
- Awareness of people's needs
- Feeling included in decisions
- Financial provision
- Sense of personal usefulness

These lists confirm some of the significant factors from the quantitative survey: working well in community, integrity flowing from the top, and listening/speaking to field staff with respect.

In addition, we also see in these lists that missionaries who stay on the field appear to have a greater focus on the **core task and resources of mission** – **need, calling, provision and ministry fit** – enabling them to continue in the midst of challenges. Former missionaries by contrast, tend to have had their focus distracted from the core task due to issues with others involved in the process: **teammates, local and international agency leaders, friends/family at home** and **nationals**.

Other Insights

From current staff

Ratings on nearly all factors begins high at the time of entry, then drops steadily each year through the end of the first (four-year) term. After this, ratings rebound to stronger, stable levels. Best Christian Workplaces Institute indicates that this pattern is similar to the one seen with domestic Christian organizations and secular firms; however, missions agencies tend to see the satisfaction "elbow" bottom out earlier than other types of organizations (which tend to see the lowest ratings at 6-7 years of service).

Females rate freedom in work and personal purpose & progress lower than do men. However, they rate personal support networks higher.

It may be possible to provide younger field staff with too much freedom. Among staff with less than 10 years' tenure, freedom in work had a significant negative correlation with stated intent to stay.

From former staff

Those who survive the struggle to raise funds for **ministry support** appear to be strengthened by it. Those still on the field were much more likely than former staff to say that support development was "hard," and much less likely to say it was "easy" or "natural." This seems almost counter-intuitive. One potential reason for this is that those who found initial support-raising to be easy may have attributed that as confirmation of God's calling – and therefore make them likely to attribute subsequent drops in financial support to be a sign of a change of call.

The ratio of returnees who reported problems with the way **finances** were handled was almost twice that of those still on the field.

Perception of **home assignments** makes a difference. Both current and former field staff are likely to consider them exhausting. However, those who have left the field are much more likely to view home assignments as disorienting and frustrating, while those still on the field are more likely to view them as re-orienting and fulfilling.

Personal development opportunities are significant, with those who are no longer on the field more than twice as likely as current field staff to say their agency does not encourage personal and professional development.

Going with the intent to serve in a **leadership role** can create problems. Of those on the field, only 1 in 6 went with the intent to serve in a leadership role, compared to

nearly half of those who have returned from the field. Going as a learner/follower appears to produce the healthier result.

Meanwhile, more than 7 in 10 of those who go to the field **not** expecting to be a leader end up in a leadership role anyway…and this is equally true for those who have left the field and those who have stayed. The difference between the two groups seems to be in whether **training was provided**. Those still on the field were more than twice as likely to have received specific training for their leadership role.

Similar proportions of active and returned field staff can obtain member care locally and have access to traveling teams from the outside. Where there is a difference is in **in-country pastoral care** – the option of getting away without leaving the country. Those on the field were much more likely to receive this kind of care than those who have left the field. (There were no differences in reported quality of pastoral care, just how/where it was offered.)

Conflict resolution is a key issue. Those who are no longer on the field report much greater use of an authoritarian style than those who are still on the field.

Recommendations

Agencies are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

1. **Track retention rate and average tenure.** Some agencies do not track this information. But because of the substantial cost of recruiting, vetting, training and placing staff, managing retention is a stewardship issue (as the up-front costs are "amortized" over the tenure of each staff member). Agency board members and senior staff should ensure that their agency knows its numbers and how those compare to the benchmark results from ReMAP II.

   For instructions on how to calculate retention rate, see Jim Van Meter's article: http://www.wearesources.org/PublicationDetail.aspx?PublicationGUID=3f72a43b-a94c-45d2-9c98-cfd226fc2f59. The more-accurate method is recommended in order to remove the effects of new recruitment. We recommend using a three-to-five year rolling average.

   The average retention rate for U.S. agencies is 94.6 percent. Denominational agencies average about one point higher; non-denominational agencies about one point lower.[2]

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[2] Van Meter, Jim, *US Report of Findings on Missionary Retention*, Mission Commission of the WEA, December 2003, p. 3. Accessed 1 June 2009 at http://www.wearesources.org/PublicationDetail.aspx?PublicationGUID=9a38c30e-c07d-4b4b-8831-a5c471887252.

For tenure, we recommend using the average tenure of those who have left field positions over the prior three-to-five years. Note that this is different from average tenure of all active field staff, which includes recruitment effects.

Beyond this, we also recommend calculating the full cost of recruiting, vetting, training and placing a staff unit/couple on the field. For a tool designed to guide you through the steps of calculating this figure, contact Global Mapping International for information about the Launch Calculator.

2. **Let ideas flow from the field. Let values flow from headquarters.**
   Create a systematic feedback loop to gather and consider ideas from the field. Intentionally implement field-initiated ideas/changes. Avoid imposing headquarters-initiated changes without dialogue with the field. Clearly communicate reasons for any decisions that directly impact field staff.

   Meanwhile, senior leadership should set the example and tone for the agency in transparency, spiritual disciplines, accountability and fairness.

3. **Recruit followers who have leadership potential. Train leaders upon appointment.** Those who are recruited specifically to lead are likely to be frustrated. Instead, recruit those who are willing to follow – most will grow naturally into leadership roles. Invest in leadership training for anyone in a new leadership role, and plan the training to occur as soon as possible following leadership appointments, as people learn better when they recognize their need and can immediately apply the training.

4. **Be sure that the main thing remains the main thing.** What leads field staff to become ex-field staff? Often the answer isn't *what* but *who*: anyone that distracts them from focusing on the people they seek to reach or serve. This can be conflict with other missionaries – teammates or field leaders – but it can also be national church leaders, agency leaders or family members. With this in mind, continually remind field staff about their mission, and consider having them track the time they spend with those they seek to serve.

   Also, because those in support roles have been shown in ReMAP II to be more likely than others to leave the field, encourage and/or require them to develop meaningful missional relationships in addition to their primary work role.

5. **Commit to fairness and consistency in personnel-related decisions.**
   Establish, communicate and adhere to clear policies for field staff placement, removal, reassignment, leadership placement, sabbaticals, travel, etc. Field staff are acutely aware of the exceptions and inequities that typically result

from an ad-hoc or frequently changing approach (e.g. making assignments based on convenience, timing or proximity). Results suggest that this area is one where agencies have substantial room for improvement.

6. **Commit to ongoing staff development.** All field staff should have ample opportunities to improve their skills and talents, and should be encouraged or required to have a personal-development plan.

7. **Communicate relentlessly and with clarity.** Recognize that leading a globally distributed, multicultural organization is inherently challenging, primarily due to the potential for miscommunication and lack of communication. Therefore, leaders should provide field staff with a high degree of clarity in communication and in work processes. This is particularly true in regard to communicating about financial policies and procedures.

8. **Commit to peacemaking in community.**   Incorporate both preventive and resolution-based conflict management into the core values of the organization. Take care to not give undue priority to those who are loudest, but seek to understand all perspectives. Provide in-country resources for mediation, member care and personal counseling whenever possible.

9. **Actively manage home assignments.** Being away from the field means exposure to many people and events that can distract field staff from the core task. Therefore, prepare and guide staff through their home assignment with the goal of helping renew their vision and focus – and of communicating that vision and focus effectively to those at home.

10. **Manage expectations of newer staff and re-recruit during the first term.** One of the interesting findings from the ReMAP II study was that while field staff in resistant/unreached areas tend to have shorter-than-average tenures, agencies specializing in such environments tend to have higher-than-average retention. This suggests that those agencies are able to help their staff to set appropriate expectations for difficult settings. Because across-the-board satisfaction tends to decrease throughout the first term, agencies are encouraged to intentionally manage expectations of new staff, as well as to continue sending messages of encouragement – much as during initial recruiting – until staff return for a second term (during which their perspective tends to stabilize).

11. **Finally, regularly review and reflect on the five influential questions.** Leaders are encouraged to frequently ask themselves, one another and those in the field the following:

- How well do we lead by example in demonstrating our values?
- How well do we steward people – our most precious resource?
- How well are we preparing people to be effective?
- How well are we experiencing and expressing community in the field?
- How intentionally and respectfully do we listen to and speak to field staff?

The *Engage!* study will continue to be made available to agencies, contingent on sufficient interest, on a sliding-fee scale based on agency size. Contact Global Mapping International (info@gmi.org) for additional details on costs and timing.