

Building the Dream Team:

Recommendations for Attracting, Retaining, and Nurturing EDD Staff

Introduction

At many Economic Development Districts (EDDs) across the country, the quality and passion of staff is often the “secret sauce” that allows these organizations to best serve their local communities. With a dedicated and engaged team, EDDs can more effectively meet their goals of convening partners, identifying funding opportunities, writing and administering grants, collecting and mapping data, and preparing community and regional plans.

An influx of pandemic recovery stimulus funding from federal agencies, including the [U.S. Economic Development Administration \(EDA\)](#), helped facilitate and expand hiring for new positions at EDDs in 2021 and 2022. However, now that many of those funds have been expended, EDDs continue to face the perennial challenge of attracting and retaining staff. This challenge is particularly acute for districts serving small metros and rural regions, where it is difficult to compete with the more competitive salaries, benefits, and other resources offered by the private sector and organizations in larger metros.

Despite these budget and resource limitations, forward-thinking EDDs are embracing creative and intentional approaches to finding, recruiting, and nurturing staff for the long-term. As part of the [Economic Development District Community of Practice \(EDD CoP\)](#), executive directors were asked to share some of the creative and meaningful ways they have managed hiring and staffing at their organizations. This resource covers some of the approaches taken by EDDs and also spotlights a handful of executive directors who share in their own words the ways they have recruited new staff, shaped their work and office culture, and built a sense of belonging at their organizations.

Some of these examples may require changes to HR policy and need board approval. Others are small tweaks that can be implemented by an executive director almost overnight. Either way, all of these recommendations have the same purpose: to build a team of individuals that are dedicated and passionate about making a long-term difference at their EDDs and throughout their regions.



Table of Contents

Creative Recruitment Strategies	Page 02
Welcoming and Collaborative Workplace Culture	Page 04
Flexible Workplace Arrangements	Page 06
Employee Benefits and Opportunities	Page 08

Creative Recruitment Strategies:

Some EDDs are deploying unique recruitment strategies to attract new and diverse talent to their organizations. This includes crafting job descriptions that highlight shared values and broad interests that may attract applicants from a wide variety of fields and disciplines. Districts should cast a wide net by posting job openings across online platforms serving different sectors to reach a broader audience. Furthermore, some EDDs are proactively seeking out and sponsoring talent through initiatives like the H1-B visa program or intern/fellowship programs. Strengthening collaborations with international and domestic educational institutions can better position EDDs to attract top-tier students and graduates who align with their organizational values and goals. Finally, some EDDs are experimenting with hiring local retirees for part-time work, such as retired grant writers who are looking for additional income and a flexible schedule.



Try This! Examples from Peer EDDs:

- Rethink your job descriptions, who your audience may be for a new position, and where you post your job openings ([Southwest Michigan Planning Commission](#))
- Expand your applicant pool by exploring opportunities to participate in the H1-B visa program ([Region III Planning and Development Council \(WV\)](#))
- Consider hiring local retirees looking for flexible, part-time work to fill positions for grant writing or administrative support ([Area 15 Regional Planning Commission \(IA\)](#))
- Partner with planning departments at local colleges and universities to hire current students as interns and recent graduates as full-time employees ([Apalachee Regional Planning Council \(FL\)](#))

Advice from Executive Directors



John Egelhaaf, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, on recruiting staff from diverse disciplines and updating the application and outreach process:

Last year we had an opening for a planner who would occupy the primary seat on the EDD side of the office. I attempted to picture the person we were trying to attract and knew they would come from a new generation of recent grads with a new set of priorities that motivate their careers. With that understood, I went with a less traditional route and wrote a job description directly to them. I also decided that I would de-emphasize planning and lift up the ways that our work intersects with the most pressing issues of our time, and how they can be a part of solutions to them. I didn't speak in "planner code" but was explicit about the fact that the cornerstone of our work is listening to people, gathering data, and developing solutions.

I spread the posting across an extremely broad range of disciplines: landscape architecture, economics, social science, data science, communication, journalism, and of course, planning. The posting was clear about our interest in talking to people with diverse educational and professional backgrounds. We had success with this approach and our hire was fresh from graduate school and has a Bachelors in Economics and Masters in Business Analytics.

Tyler Ferrell, Region III Planning and Development Council (WV), on hiring international staff:

I've sponsored employees through the H1-B visa process. Since most RPCs can qualify an employee outside of the lottery system, it's a great program that really allows organizations to recruit and retain high-performing employees. In a previous role, I sponsored an Indian national after he attended an American university. Now, we have an engineer out of Lahore, Pakistan that we are sponsoring to bring into the organization.



Welcoming and Collaborative Workplace Culture

EDDs are placing a strong emphasis on creating a welcoming and vibrant workplace culture to attract and retain enthusiastic staff. Central to this approach is the cultivation of a sense of belonging, where employees feel valued and connected to their colleagues and the EDD's broader mission which makes them feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to the organization's direction.

Recognizing and celebrating employees' birthdays, work anniversaries, and personal milestones serve to strengthen bonds and boost morale. Moreover, EDDs are prioritizing the recognition and appreciation of employees' efforts by rewarding them for their contributions. Whether through monetary incentives, bonuses, or non-monetary rewards such as employee recognition programs, districts are celebrating the hard work and dedication of their staff.

EDDs are also offering a variety of activities, social events, and professional development opportunities to foster camaraderie and skills enhancement. Staff community service activities help with teambuilding, while simultaneously provide an opportunity to give back to the local communities the EDDs serves. Finally, some districts are prioritizing the holistic well-being of their employees by offering wellness programs, fitness facilities, and health-related initiatives. By providing resources and support for physical and mental well-being, EDDs can demonstrate a commitment to the overall health of their staff that takes care of the mind and body.

Try This! Examples from Peer EDDs:

- Identify and publicize organizational values, such as the CHAMPIONS model: Cheerful, Hardworking, Achieve, Mindful, Passionate, Integrity, Optimistic, Nimble and Selfless ([*Lincoln Trail Area Development District \(KY\)*](#))
- Institute a wellness program and/or offer amenities that make it easier to exercise at work, such as a fitness room and showers on-site ([*Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission \(IA\)*](#)) and ([*South Eastern Regional Development Agency \(UT\)*](#))
- Pay staff for time volunteering at local charitable organizations ([*South Eastern Council of Governments \(SD\)*](#)) or organize general team volunteer activities and opportunities ([*Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission \(IA\)*](#))
- Offer "uniform" purchases that cover the cost of clothing up to a certain amount and EDD logo embroidery to allow staff to personalize outfits they would like to wear ([*Region 1 Planning and Development Council \(WV\)*](#)), or allow a choice in the type and style of embroidered clothing available ([*Region XII Council of Governments \(IA\)*](#))



Advice from Executive Directors



Doug Baum, Northeast Michigan Council of Governments, on making staff feel welcome and part of a team:

We have built a sense of family here because everyone's input is important, and everyone is part of the planning and direction of the organization. Staff have expressed their appreciation for this work culture to others in the community and it has driven people to contact us regarding employment opportunities before we even post positions. One of our mottos is "Family First." As managers and supervisors we get busy, but employees respect and appreciate it when you recognize important dates like a birthday or annual work anniversary. If the employees are happy, treated with respect, and provided with the tools they need to be successful, they're happy with their job. Sometimes, it's really just about how you treat people.

Rachelle Howe, Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission (IA), on promoting health and wellness:

Our organization has developed a wellness program that focuses on the mental, physical, financial, and social health of our staff. We host training sessions on financial planning, encourage drinking more water, promote walking meetings, and have workout equipment on-site. Because many people don't exercise because they feel they don't have the time, we've given employees 15 minutes to add to a break or lunch to recreate. Many do yoga or take a walk outside or on the treadmill.



Flexible Work Arrangements

Many EDDs are evolving to the needs of their workforce by offering hybrid work and work-from- arrangements which allow employees to balance in-office and remote work according to their preferences and job requirements. Some EDDs have fully remote positions, while others require office work at least a few days a week. This approach acknowledges the diverse needs of employees while providing a supportive environment for those requiring flexibility. EDD leadership should identify and categorize positions in the organization that can be conducted fully remote, on a hybrid schedule, or require full-time in-office time and use these categories to aid their hiring processes. In addition to remote work options, some EDDs are implementing flexible scheduling to accommodate personal appointments, family needs, and other obligations. Some districts have implemented compressed workweeks and shorter Fridays to allow for more leisure time and to recharge, with the dual purpose of improving productivity and job satisfaction.



Try This! Examples from Peer EDDs:

- Offer flexible scheduling and hybrid working, such as three days in the office, two days remote ([*Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments \(ME\)*](#))
- Institute a compressed workweek, such as four 9-hour days Monday-Thursday and one 4-hour day on Friday ([*South Eastern Council of Governments \(SD\)*](#))
- If your organization does not allow for general remote work, still provide staff with laptops to work from home in case of bad weather, family responsibilities, or another legitimate reason ([*Region XII Council of Governments \(IA\)*](#))
- Allow employees to establish their own working hours on extended workdays, such as on days with evening meetings out in communities ([*Northwest Regional Planning Commission \(VT\)*](#))

Advice from Executive Directors



Cheryl Lee Hills, Region Five Development Commission, on building a trusting and performance-based work environment:

Hire adults and treat them like adults. Meaning: It's a performance-based workplace. Give them all the tools they need, autonomy, and trust. We can offer flexibility to self-manage work and home life - so we do.

The culture of the team is to step up and assist when an employee calls out for a hand. Privately and publicly praise employees when they excel. This approach is not for everyone, but it's working well for "this bus."



Employee Benefits and Opportunities

EDDs provide a comprehensive array of employee benefits, including health insurance, life insurance, retirement plans, educational stipends, and reimbursement for health-related expenses such as gym memberships or childcare. These benefits not only work to attract and retain top talent, but also contribute to employees' overall financial security and well-being. Some EDDs, however, are going beyond these benefits by offering scholarship or tuition assistance programs and encouraging staff to pursue further education. Others promote participating in professional development opportunities such as attending national conferences or virtual learning sessions offered by NADO or other organizations that train regional economic development staff. This support has enhanced employee skill sets and helped to foster loyalty and long-term commitment to the organization.

Additionally, EDDs are easing the financial burden on employees by offering reimbursement for work-related expenses such as cell phones, internet, or specialized software. Allowing employees to choose their professional development training and tools needed for their job empowers staff to take ownership of their own career development.



Try This! Examples from Peer EDDs:

- Explore opportunities to offer tuition assistance to support professional development ([Montana Business Assistance Connection](#)) or a scholarship program to attract the next generation of employees to your EDD ([Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission](#))
- Provide staff with all the resources they need to do their work at home or on the road, such as a laptop, tablet with cellular service, earpieces, dual monitors, and desk risers ([Region 1 Planning and Development Council \(WV\)](#))
- Give staff flexible time off by detaching paid holidays from calendar ([Northwest Regional Planning Commission \(VT\)](#))
- Adopt a policy that allows staff to donate sick time to colleagues who may need it ([South Eastern Regional Development Agency \(UT\)](#))
- As an executive director, advocate to your board on behalf of staff regarding issues such as raises, more leave, and longevity pay to make your organization more competitive as an employer ([Eastern Oklahoma Development District](#))

Advice from Executive Directors



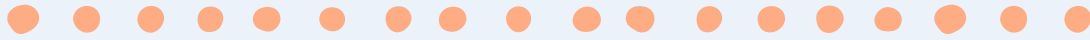
Brian Obert, Montana Business Assistance Connection, on offering tuition assistance:

We have our first staff member who is using a tuition assistance program that helps to pay for our staff to gain their Masters in Public Administration or Masters in Nonprofit Administration. Besides using this opportunity as an attraction and retention benefit, we think this gives our organization some additional clout in our conversations with the Chief Administration Officers in our cities and counties. We also think this creates more awareness about the role and duties of organizations like ours with staff at the universities which can create additional opportunities to attract talent directly.



Dawn Hegland, Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission, on developing a scholarship program to attract talent:

I have been talking with the few colleges in Minnesota who offer urban and regional planning degrees and most are clearly focusing on urban issues that often aren't applicable to the rural work we do. Most colleges are only graduating a small number each year too and most of those young people want to go work in cities, not in rural places. In response, we created a scholarship to encourage a student from our region to attend a college to get a planning degree. We shared this opportunity with colleges and with all our local high schools and posted information on our website and social media. In 2022, we had a local student apply who graduated from high school in 2023. We hired her as a summer intern last year and awarded her a \$2,500 scholarship that she can reapply for annually and we have just hired her again as an intern for this summer.



Researched and written by Brett Schwartz, Associate Director, NADO Research Foundation

Special thanks to the EDD executive directors and staff who shared recommendations, advice, and examples from their organizations, many of which are included in this brief.

This resource is offered through the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), managed by the NADO Research Foundation to build the capacity of the national network of EDDs. To learn more, visit: www.nado.org/EDDCoP. The EDD CoP is made possible through an award from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (ED22HDQ3070106). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this resource are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

