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firms can better retain top talent.

**Jason Bramwell** • Apr. 25, 2024



While an overwhelming majority of accounting professionals have a strong desire to stay at their current firm in the next five to 10 years, according to a new report released on Thursday by the Pennsylvania Institute of CPAs (PICPA), CPAs are still leaving in droves for greener pastures—whether to another firm or opportunities outside of the profession. So, why are so many heading for the exits?

PICPA received survey responses from 323 accounting professionals nationwide who have zero to 15 years of public accounting experience and have left their firm or profession within the past five years. For the purposes of its report, [\*CPA Talent Retention 2024: Keeping Your Best Performers\*](#), PICPA called these professionals “career changers.” The survey respondents were asked to complete the statement, “My desire

to stay at my previous firm or in the accounting field would have increased if ...” by

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1. There were higher salaries. (39.7%)
2. There were more flexible work options around hours and location. (35.6%)
3. Entry- and mid-level employees were clearly valued by senior management. (33.5%)
4. Leadership balanced workload among staff more evenly. (32.1%)
5. There were better time-off packages. (31.9%)
6. There were better benefits offered (e.g., extended parental leave, sabbatical, increased PTO). (30.4%)
7. There was more personalized support and focus on my professional development. (30.1%)

“While our findings support much more nuance and opportunity to improve retention than simply ‘paying more and expecting less,’ the profession still has work to do on increasing financial incentives. Progress is being made, but accounting is a pay-laggard among most financial professions,” PICPA said in the report. “Firms have to pay quality talent what they are worth or expect to lose them. Your firm is in a compensation competition for the best talent with many professions—not just accounting. Salary acceleration paths need to be implemented.”

PICPA provided the following five tips to approaching salary increases with your top performers:

1. Be open, honest, and frequent with your discussions.
2. Provide alternatives to higher salaries, such as bonuses, lifestyle benefits (like memberships or reimbursements), flexible schedules, remote work opportunities, additional paid time off, and promotions.
3. Conduct regular salary reviews.
4. Develop clear criteria.
5. Give them the big picture by explaining how decisions are made.

The good news, according to PICPA's findings, is that accounting professionals want

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public accounting, with 73% stating they would like to stay with their current firm.

- Career development is a critical factor for retention, with 85% of respondents saying their firm actively supports their career development and 78% saying their firm offers interesting career opportunities.
- Still, the No. 1 response to the question "What would increase your desire to stay at your firm in the accounting field?" was "there were higher salaries" (46.9%), followed by "my working hours were capped at 40 or 50 hours per week" (42.3%) and "there were better benefits offered" (37.4%).

One critical factor to improving retention at accounting firms is focusing on the "whole person"—personalizing each professional's reason to stay, PICPA said.

"There is no 'one size fits all' approach," the report says. "When employees feel appreciated and valued for their efforts, they will not only stay with your firm, but they will also become brand ambassadors. In developing a whole person retention strategy, your firm should consider the support needs of each professional from a variety of different perspectives."

Some of these include:

- Financial
- Emotional
- Physical
- Social

Some whole person retention options your firm may want to consider, according to PICPA, include the following:

- Clear paths to promotion or equity

- 401(k) matching

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- Adoption assistance
- Mental health workshops/counseling
- Paid bereavement leave
- Mental health days
- Sleep pods/areas
- Public recognition
- Mentorship from partners
- Four-day or shortened work week
- Spa passes
- Gym memberships or fitness classes
- Tuition reimbursement
- Massage chairs
- Exercise equipment or swag
- On-site vaccine shots
- Stand-up or treadmill desks
- Biometric screenings
- Unlimited PTO/sick days
- Paid industry certifications
- Art/music/theater/sports pass
- Paid volunteer days
- Game room
- Themed spirit days
- Bring your pet to work days
- Fun weekend rental car
- Dinner/grocery delivery
- Complimentary lunch and delivery to office or home
- Rotating on-site services

While talent retention can be extremely expensive, it's not as expensive as retaining

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accounting graduates and CPA exam takers, the need for firms to fundamentally move away from the traditional “pyramid” model to a more robust “pentagon” model, better leveraging automation, artificial intelligence, and outsourcing is also critical to long-term success, according to the report.

This shift reduces reliance on a broad base of entry-level talent, allowing firms to focus on hiring fewer, but better retained staff while fortifying the middle managers with higher compensation and more diverse career opportunities, PICPA said. This approach not only can help meet client needs effectively but also aligns with salary expectations and improves work-life balance, ensuring high-quality work without compromise.

“We want to make sure that the ‘current talent’ group does not become ‘career changers,’” said PICPA CEO Jennifer Cryder in a statement. “This report aims to guide accounting firm leaders toward effective strategies that we believe, when properly implemented, will enhance both retention and firm performance.”

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