

US Report of Findings on Missionary Retention

December, 2003

Background for the Study

The purpose of this study was to look at the policies, practices and services of agencies with career missionaries (3+ years of service) serving overseas in cross-cultural ministry, and the impact of those practices on missionary retention. By studying retention, we studied more than just the opposite of attrition. Retention looks at how long people stay with the agency. It also takes into consideration at what point in a person's career people leave and for what reasons (potentially preventable or unpreventable reasons). An additional purpose of this study was to follow-up the world-wide study on missionary attrition conducted in 1997 and reported in the book Too Valuable To Lose, which was edited by Bill Taylor, executive director of the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance. That study was called Reducing Missionary Attrition Project (ReMAP). This present study is different, however, from the first in that the focus of this study is on missionary retention.

This study on missionary retention was a 22-nation project where 592 agencies representing more than 38,700 missionaries participated. The study was directed by a steering committee of 5 people: Drs. Jonathan Lewis, the international coordinator from WEA, Detlef Blocher, research coordinator from Germany, Seth Anyomi from Ghana, Barbara Griffith from Australia, and Jim Van Meter from the USA. The survey was drafted by the steering committee and finalized by the country coordinators from the participating countries at a specially convened meeting at the High Leigh Conference Center near London, England, October, 2002.

For the US study, 555 US mission agencies, which supervise US personnel serving overseas, were selected from the data bases of the Mission Handbook, and Operation World.

Limitations of the study.

78 (or 14%) of these US mission agencies responded. Though this was less than hoped for, the findings are noteworthy for consideration and further study. This study represents the educated and experienced perspectives of mission agency leaders, which is only one important perspective in the total picture of the world missions movement. To study the perspectives of missionaries and the local people being served and to meet the standards of statistically based research proved to be an impossibility given the magnitude of the 22-nation study.

The 78 reporting USA agencies represent:

- 15,087 USA missionaries
- 27 denominational agencies
- 51 non-denominational agencies
- with an average size of 193 missionaries
- average agency age or number of years sending missionaries: 58 years
- 46 agencies had 1-99 missionaries
- 16 agencies had 100-199 missionaries
- 11 had 200-499 missionaries
- 5 had 500+ missionaries

Some Definitions

Retention is the ability of a mission agency to keep its missionaries. Retention is more than the opposite of attrition. Retention takes into consideration who the people are in the agency, how long they have been with the agency, at what point in a person's career a person leaves, and the reasons for that leaving. It is believed that the practices and policies of an agency relate to the longevity of service of its personnel, because they are expressions of how personnel are treated. Studies have shown that there is relationship between how personnel are treated and their longevity.¹

In this study, the term “**total retention**” refers to the total number of people remaining in an agency each year. People will leave an agency each year, and the reasons for their leaving would include all reasons, preventable or unpreventable, voluntary or involuntary. **The total retention rate (RRT)** means the percentage of all of the people in an agency retained each year, knowing that those that left during the year would have left for any reason, including preventable or unpreventable.

The “**preventable**” **retention** refers to the people an agency retains during the year, when only those who left for potentially preventable or voluntary reasons are taken out of the picture. **The preventable retention rate (RRP)** is the percentage of people retained each year, after those who left for potentially preventable reasons, like personal, agency, work or team-related reasons or dismissal by the agency. In some ways, this rate may be the most important rate, when an agency wants to try to increase its retention rate. By reducing the number of people leaving for preventable reasons the overall retention rate of the agency will increase. If the “preventable” reasons for people leaving can be addressed and changes made, then there is the potential for increased retention and longevity of personnel.

¹ Best Practices in Organization Development and Change, Carter, Giber, and Goldsmith, eds, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001, p. 302.

The term “**unpreventable**” retention refers to the people remaining to serve the agency, after other people had to leave for “unpreventable” reasons, like normal retirement, death in service, loss of visa, expulsion from the country, disability due to illness, appointment to a leadership position in the agency, or completion of a pre-determined, limited length of assignment. The “**unpreventable**” retention rate (RRU) means the percentage of people an agency retains during the year, when only those who left for unpreventable, unavoidable reasons are taken out of the picture. It is the percentage of people retained each year, after those who left for unpreventable reasons.

Because this was a survey of mission practices, mission administrators were asked to respond to the survey. This report, therefore, reflects the mission administrators’ assessment of their practices. **It is important to note that these are the findings of the participating agencies, and may not necessarily reflect all US agencies.** We are indeed grateful for the cooperation of these agencies; it is believed that these findings can be helpful to the broader community of mission agencies.

Some General Findings Among US reporting agencies

**Codes of reference for the following findings: *confidence level of 90%,
confidence level of 95%, *confidence level of 99%**

A. Total Retention Rate (RRT)

1. The average annual total retention rate (RRT) for all reporting agencies is 94.56%. This means that when an agency keeps 94.56% of its people each year, over a 10-year period, it keeps 57% of its people and loses 43%.***
2. For denominational based agencies, the RRT is 95.41%, which means they retain 62.5% of their people over a 10-year period.***
3. For non-denominational agencies the RRT rate is 93.67%, which means they will retain 52% of their people over a 10-year period.***

B. Preventable Retention Rate (RRP)

1. When only people leaving for potentially preventable reasons were considered the average annual preventable retention rate (RRP) for these US agencies was 97.95%. For those reporting denominational agencies the RRP was 99.06 % versus 96.22% for non-denominational agencies. Of those who left denominational agencies, 20 % left for potentially preventable reasons, whereas 60% of those leaving non-denominational agencies did so for potentially preventable reasons.***
2. The number of missionaries leaving for preventable reasons is increasing over the past 20 years. (1.69% per year during the period from 1981-1985 versus 2.17% per year during the period from 1995-2000.)***

C. Background Findings

1. The average length of service for those who have left in 2001-2002 is 12 years of service.
2. An average of 7.5% of a missionary's support from these agencies is allocated for retirement.
3. Agencies allocate on the average 24% of their missionary personnel to the unreached peoples (countries which are less than 1% Evangelical).
4. Agencies allocated on the average 26% of their personnel in the areas of evangelism and church planting in countries with more than 1% Evangelicals.
5. Agencies allocated on the average 22% of their personnel to serving ministries which support existing churches (Bible teaching, pastoral, etc)
6. Agencies allocated on the average 14% of personnel to social and community work.
7. Agencies assigned on the average 13% of their personnel to service ministries (translation, missionary children's education, aviation, administration, etc.).
8. When US agencies were asked to list the top 4 **factors that contribute most** to missionaries attaining their objectives, 75 of the 78 agencies answered:
 - a. Development of good relationships/team (32 agencies)
 - b. Commitment to the ministry (27 agencies)
 - c. Effective leadership with good supervision and accountability (25)
 - d. Clear objectives, goals and expectations that are agreed upon (24)
9. When the agencies were asked to list the **factors that most hinder** missionaries from attaining their field objectives, 74 of the 78 agencies responded:
 - a. Lack of finances (30 agencies)
 - b. Family issues (28 agencies)
 - c. Relationship problems (27 agencies)

Comparison of the high and low US retention agencies

Agencies were asked to give statistics of the number of people who have joined and left their agency over the past 3-20 years, in order to determine the retention rate for their agency. 70 of the 78 agencies provided Retention Records of which 65 yielded statistically significant retention rates (a margin of error of less than two standard deviations).

To discover those findings, which most directly relate to the retention of the missionaries in these reporting agencies, the organizational data submitted were correlated with the agencies' retention rates based on potentially preventable attrition rate (RRP). The assumption was that, when an agency had a high retention rate (RRP), those agencies were doing some noticeably good things that should be highlighted and given attention. The agencies were then divided into 6 groups from highest to lowest according to their

calculated retention rate (RRP). The highest group of 11 agencies was then compared with the lowest group of 11 agencies to identify the differences in the practices between the two.

1. 2% of people in high retention agencies leave for potentially preventable reasons, versus 7.5% in low retention agencies.
2. 2.2% of people in high retention agencies leave annually for unpreventable reasons (like retirement, loss of visa, etc) versus 1.2% in low retention agencies.
3. Over the past 20 years, the number of people leaving for potentially preventable reasons in high retention agencies has remained stable (.1%-.3%). In low retention agencies, the percentage of people leaving for preventable reasons has increased from 5.8% from 1981-1985 to 8.7% from 1996-2000.
4. Over a 10-year period, the high retention agencies keep 78% of their people and low retention agencies keep 38% of their people.
5. The average **length of service** for those who left high retention agencies during the period 2001-2002 was 22 years, versus 10 years for low retention agencies.**
6. High retention agencies allocated 9% of missionary support for **retirement** versus 5.8% for low retention agencies. (The 9% represents only the average for 7 high retention agencies. 4 high retention agencies left this blank).
7. When retention is looked at in terms of the **percentage of personnel allocated** to various types of ministries, there are some differences.
 - a. Surprisingly, high retention agencies assign more people to work among the unreached peoples, a work which would tend to produce greater turnover of personnel (31% vs 19%). With more than 30% of their people assigned to work among the unreached, the high retention agencies still keep their numbers up.
 - b. 23% of personnel from high retention agencies are ministering in evangelism and church planting versus 32% from low retention agencies.
 - c. High retention agencies assign 25% of their personnel to work in support of existing churches versus 20% coming from low retention agencies.
 - d. High retention agencies allocate 11% of their personnel to social and community work versus 5% from low retention agencies.
 - e. The biggest difference is in the allocation of personnel to services like translation, missionary children's education, administration, etc. High retention agencies assign 10% to these ministries, whereas low retention agencies assign 23%. Are these kind of ministries more prone to turnover?
8. When the **selection criteria** as a whole was compared, high retention agencies placed more weight on the selection criteria for screening purposes than low retention agencies.** High retention agencies placed a significantly greater weight on:
 - a. Previous church ministry experience.**
 - b. The demonstration of mature Christian character and spiritual disciplines of prayer and devotional life.*
9. High retention agencies spend 6 weeks in orientation, whereas low retention agencies spend 3 weeks.*

10. When **spiritual factors** (prayer support backing, prayer emphasis in the agency, and ability to deal with spiritual warfare) were considered together, high retention agencies tended to rate themselves higher than lower retention agencies.
11. When **personal care and family issues** were considered together with the agency's **communication, re-entry and debriefing practices**, high retention agencies rated themselves higher than the low retention agencies.*
12. The high retention agencies rated themselves higher for the **home office** services offered (communication with the field, encouraging home church involvement, pre-field screening, pre-field orientation, prayer, re-entry programs, and debriefings) than lower retention agencies. **

Some Differences between Large and Small Agencies

The 65 agencies with reliable retention rates were divided into two groups:

1. 30 large agencies (100 or more cross-cultural workers) with an average size of 434 missionaries.
2. 35 small agencies (less than 100 workers) with an average size of 41 missionaries.

A set of correlation analyses was conducted for each group, examining how responses to the survey questions related to the total retention rate (RRT), preventable retention rate (RRP) and length of service. The following are significant correlations that resulted, showing differences between the large and small high retention agencies:

Some Correlations with the Large Agencies

A. Practices that correlate with total retention (RRT)

High total retention rates (RRT) in large mission agencies are associated with:

1. agency age*
2. the screening factor “demonstrates mature Christian character and discipline (prayer and devotional life)”.*
3. less number of personnel with just high school qualifications.***
4. less preventative member care** (This was unexpected. See explanation at bottom of next page)
5. less “people our missionaries serve are becoming followers of Christ”** (this was unexpected).
6. less pastoral care at a field level** (this was unexpected)
7. effective use of project finances*

B. Practices that correlate with preventable retention (RRP)

For large agencies, high “preventable” retention rates (RRP) are associated with:

1. the screening factor “knows and is committed to agency principles and practices”**
2. the screening factor “previous ministry experience in a local church”*
3. the screening factor “meeting health requirement through a psychological assessment”*
4. the screening factor “firm and stable prayer support”**
5. less resources allocated for preventative member care** (this was unexpected)
6. satisfactory health care services*
7. adequate sustained financial support**
8. effective use of project finances**
9. screening out unsuitable persons*
10. formal debriefing during home assignments*

C. Practices that Correlate with Length of Service

Large high retention agencies that give weight to the following items have missionaries who, on the average, have more years of service with the agency. Length of service is related to:

1. marital contentment*
2. previous ministry experience in a local church**
3. annual performance/ministry reviews**
4. documented and adequate procedures for handling complaints.**
5. missionaries’ commitment to their ministry**
6. missionaries developing leadership among the people they serve**
7. satisfactory schooling opportunities for children*
8. satisfactory health care services**
9. risk assessment and contingency plans in place.**
10. formal debriefing during home assignments*

Three items related to member care (numbers A4, A6 and B5) had negative correlations and these were unexpected. It may be that, because these are large high retention agencies, their policies and practices are reducing their need for preventative member care. This would be supported by the fact that large high retention agencies tend to give more emphasis to screening in order to prevent unsuitable persons from going to the field (A2, B1-4, C1-2). These practices, coupled with annual reviews (C3), debriefings (C10), and procedures for handling complaints (C4), could explain the decreasing need for resources to be specifically devoted to preventative member care. It would be important to get feedback from the missionaries themselves, to see if this is also their perspective. In contrast, smaller high retention agencies had positive correlations with member care issues (see next section on correlations for high retention small agencies).

Concerning the negative correlation of A5, “people our missionaries are serving are becoming followers of Christ,” this was also unexpected. Perhaps this is because these are older agencies, who may have come to the point in their philosophy of ministry to focus more on leadership development and less on evangelism, as evidenced by the strong correlation between length of service and developing leadership among the local people (see C.6).

Some Correlations with Small Agencies

A different set of practices appears to be associated with high retention for small agencies.

A. Practices that Correlate with Total Retention (RRT)

High total retention rates (RRT) are:

1. negatively correlated with agency age. The younger small agencies have high retention rates than older small agencies.**
2. negatively correlated with the percentage of personnel involved in service ministries (translation, missionary children’s education, aviation, administration, etc).*
3. related to selecting people who demonstrate mature Christian character and discipline (prayer and devotional life)*
4. negatively correlated with meeting physical health criteria (this was unexpected)**
5. negatively correlated with meeting psychological health criteria.*** (This was unexpected. See comment at the bottom of the next page.)
6. negatively correlated with percentage of personnel meeting only high school qualifications**
7. related to the percentage of personnel having bachelor degrees*
8. related to mission agency’s own orientation program*
9. related to missionaries being included in major decisions related to the field*
10. related to effective communication between sending base and field**
11. related to policies that are well documented and understood*
12. related to people our missionaries serve are becoming followers of Christ*
13. related to missionaries developing leadership among the people they serve***
14. related to missionaries experiencing a sense of fulfillment in their ministry**
15. related to home churches being encouraged to be involved in the life and ministry of their missionary*

B. Practices that Correlate with Preventable Retention (RRP)

For small agencies, high “preventable” retention rates (RRP) are associated with:

1. lower percentages of personnel involved in service ministries (translation, missionary children’s education, aviation, administration, etc).*
2. lower percentages of personnel meeting only high school qualifications***
3. lower ratings for screening to meet psychological health criteria.** (This was unexpected. See comment below)
4. effective communication between sending base and field**
5. policies that are well documented and understood*
6. missionaries knowing how to handle spiritual warfare*
7. the church on the field valuing the ministries of our missionaries**
8. missionaries who are developing leadership among the people they serve***
9. project funds being used effectively*

C. Practices that Correlate with Length of Service

Smaller high retention agencies that give heavy weight to the following practices have missionaries who on the average return after more years of service with the agency. Length of service is associated with:

1. the more missionaries the agency has (size of agency)**
2. less psychological health testing.* (This was unexpected. See comment below)
3. time and money spent on preventative member care**
4. missionaries being included in major decisions related to the field*
5. the vision and purpose of the agency being shared throughout the agency**
6. plans and job descriptions being clearly communicated*
7. free flow communication to and from leadership*
8. effective communication between sending base and field**
9. effective pastoral care existing at a field level**

Small high retention agencies don’t give as strong of an emphasis to screening criteria as the large high retention agencies do. Rather, they give a strong emphasis to communication practices (C4-8), and preventative member care (C3, C9), which are all positively associated with length of service. Unexpectedly, giving weight to physical examinations (A4) and psychological health assessments (A5, B3 and C2) is associated with lower retention. A possible explanation for this is that the missions with excessive attrition over a period of say 10 to 15 years (as captured by the RRT and RRP figures) have recently (perhaps since the first ReMAP study on attrition) tried to address the problem by increasing their attention to health and psychological screening. So even though **current** practice is assessed as high, **previous** practice (that “caused” the attrition) may have been low. The large missions are more likely to use these two practices for a longer time and therefore it is associated with better retention for them.

Though small, these agencies still have a positive correlation with size. Those agencies that are increasing numerically have higher retention rates, giving support for the need of a critical mass of people and for the continued need for recruitment. By contrast, large high retention agencies don't have that correlation, suggesting that at a certain point (more than 100 members), the agency practices carry more weight than the number of people, when it comes to retention.

Small agencies also had a negative correlation with the agency age. This suggests that the older small agencies have a negative correlation with total retention, whereas younger smaller agencies correlate positively with total retention. In order for smaller agencies to grow, focusing on the practices that the reporting high retention small agencies emphasize may be a strategy for smaller agencies to get over the hump into a growth mode.

Factors Affecting Missionary Effectiveness

Agencies were asked two open-ended questions about missionary effectiveness. First they were asked, "Which factors **contribute most** to your missionaries attaining their **on field** objectives?" The agencies responses were:

1. Development of good relationships/team (32 agencies)
2. Commitment to the ministry (27 agencies)
3. Effective leadership with good supervision and accountability (25 agencies)
4. Clear objectives, goals and expectations that are agreed upon (24 agencies)

Second, agencies were asked, "Which factors **most hinder** your missionaries attaining their **on-field** objectives?" They answered:

1. Finances (30 agencies)
2. Family issues (28 agencies)
3. Relationship problems (27 agencies)

Questions for further discussion

1. Apart from the high retention agencies, people are continuing to leave for preventable reasons (personal reasons, work or team related issues, dismissal), and that number has been gradually increasing over the past 20 years. Because these are "potentially preventable" issues, what can agencies do to reverse that trend, and thereby increase their overall retention rate?
2. Agencies experienced a lot of difficulty in filling out the survey, which is perhaps the reason for the low percentage of returns. Many agencies reported that they were unable to fill out the survey, and some did but did not fill in the last page of the survey, which asked for detailed records. That raises the question, "Are agencies keeping records in such a way that will allow them to know the retention issues? Do agencies know the career and developmental issues of their people?"

Do agencies know the issues their people are struggling with? Do the records allow them to get to the specifics, so that the issues can be addressed? Do the records reveal the potential preventable reasons for attrition in their agency?

3. Why are we losing people in their prime of service? The average length of years of service for those who left in 2001-2002 was 12 years of service. That is after two terms of service, just when people are ready to enter that phase of “unique contribution” in their ministry. Why are people leaving at that point in their missionary career? What can agencies do to address this, to increase the longevity of service?

Conclusion

This is the first known study of its kind. The findings are worthy of serious consideration, as we move into the 21st century, and build upon the advancement that has been made to fulfill the great commission of our Lord. Due to the limitations of the study, these findings are suggestive for US agencies in general. However, for the participating agencies themselves, these findings may be considered definitive and prescriptive. It is the hope and prayer of those who have labored so many hours on this ReMAP II project, that these findings will prompt both further studies and actions which will increase the quality of services in our US mission agencies, enhance the effectiveness of the missionaries themselves, and thereby further the advancement of the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Sincerely submitted by,

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