

Human capital: How to attract, retain and motivate staff?

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One of the main challenges facing think tanks around the world is: how to identify, attract and retain high quality human capital. Executive directors have a clear responsibility in facing of this challenge and they share frequent questions:

- **Where to search for qualified researchers?**
- **What incentives can organizations offer to attract those researchers and other human resources?**
- **What incentives to offer the staff in order to maintain competitiveness regarding other employment niches?**

The causes of this problem vary according to the context of each country but they could be grouped as to whether they are context challenges or internal challenges of the organizations.

How to identify and attract human capital?

Some context challenges are:

- **Scarce offer for qualified personnel in the market.** In other words, there are not enough competent professionals in the market. Because universities in their country do not offer the right careers, because the quality of graduates is poor, because there are few graduates who are rapidly captured by the private sector or because there is a 'brain drain' to other countries.
- **Weak knowledge about think tanks and low interest to work in organizations outside academia, government or party.** It is often linked with the low profile of think tanks in developing countries, and with the prestige associated with academic or public service careers.
- **Lack of a career path involving think tanks.** In part, the lack of a 'think tank culture' and interest to work at them has to do with the informality of the political system and a professional environment which rewards personal relationships in the search for decision maker positions. In developed countries, the think tank constitutes a key step in any young political entrepreneur career; thus some of the more promising graduates of the better universities opt to work in think tanks for salaries much lower than their colleagues can obtain in the private sector. In other cases, working for a think tank is a perfect way to develop new analytic tools, or it is the perfect place to return to after years of study in a foreign country and dive into the details of the national reality.

How to retain human capital?

Some challenges to organizations are:

- **Lack of a strategy for human capital.** Few think tanks know which is the most appropriate team for them. For example: which is the adequate balance among generalists and specialists, the size of the support team versus those who produce projects, the relationship among seniors and juniors, communicators and researchers, etc.?
- **Limited opportunities for professional development.** Few think tanks have the capacity (time and funds) to invest in their researchers and support teams. It is possible, therefore, that promising young people choose to work in other organizations, or search for postgraduate studies.
- **Remuneration (monetary and non-monetary) is not competitive.** Inevitably, think tanks belonging to civil society cannot compete with the private sector nor with the public sector (in general) regarding remuneration. Under pressure by limited funds or by a center's own structures (for example, some centers linked to universities must utilize remuneration scales which can be restrictive; some think tanks are research or consulting associations which maintain a certain level of independence in the raising and utilization of funds, etc.).
- **Lack of a strategy for training/development of staff capacities.** Frequently, it is costly for think tanks to offer good training opportunities owing mainly to a scarcity of time for seniors to train juniors and a lack of specific funds allocated to courses, workshops, etc.
- **Difficulty in the offer of good monetary incentives.** The pressure on the staff to search for funds is no often accompanied by compensation for their success; overhead and funds with no specific allocation often do not allow for bonuses or prizes. How to develop a policy of monetary increases, prizes and promotions when the organization is overly financed by projects?
- **Complexity in the management of non-monetary incentives.** Even though one can resort to alternative incentives such as a day off per week/month, good offices or equipment, time flexibility, mentoring culture (possibility of being linked with experts in a thematic who officiate mentors) the management of those incentives is often costly. How to distribute these incentives? Who implements and controls them? How to ensure equity when they are awarded?

Below, we systematize a series of policies and ideas which policy research institutes can carry out to attract, retain and motivate their staff.

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Identification of quality researchers (juniors y seniors)

- **Collaborate with universities to improve the quality of graduates**

Agreements. ARU Foundation (Bolivia) has established agreements with three renowned local universities. Through permanent contact with Deans and Directors of Studies, top students are identified and interviews are organized.

Training. ARU has also put into practice a “**Training month.**” Through an agreement with the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, researchers of the Foundation are provided with a program to train students regarding work in research institutes, what is an opportunity to identify potential members of the organization.

Call for awards: “ARU Fellowship”. With the objective of supporting the training of researchers, ARU has made an agreement with a Bolivian top university which provides a fellowship of 50% for a Masters at the institution, with ARU Foundation financing the remaining 50%. To assign this fellowship, ARU organizes courses with the most renowned economics universities in the country in order to identify, through a test, the three best students of each university. They are selected for an internship of three months with the Foundation. After three months, their performance is evaluated and three individuals are selected to remain for one year working with the organization, at the end of which one person is selected for the Master.

ASIES (Guatemala) maintains relationships with a private university as well, from which they recruit top students in Economics, Law and Political Science. These students receive initial contracts to carry out surveys or interviews and, according to their performance they are promoted to assistant researchers and, successively, acquire other responsibilities. This agreement is also beneficial for universities which desire their students to carry out theses and internships.

- **Contract globally¹.** If it is acknowledged that there are not enough quality researchers in the local market, a research institute should consider incorporating professionals from other countries. This strategy allows for identification of top candidates, and to ensure that salaries offered are not limited to the local market as well. Some abilities (for example, economic or political analysis, management, communication) are easily “transferable” from one context to another and, in any case, the particularities of the local context can be learned (if necessary). As an example: Cynthia Sanborn, Director of the Pacific University Research Center of Perú (CIUP) is American.
- **Visiting Fellows.** Consists on inviting researchers (national or international) based outside the country to spend some time at the organization and work on subjects of interests to both parts. Outgoing Ministers are ideal candidates for

¹ For in-depth information see: “A new idea: not to fund think tanks”, <http://onthinktanks.org/2011/11/20/a-new-idea-do-not-fund-think-tanks/>

these positions since the think tanks can provide a space to reflect on their experiences and produce innovative content for the organization.

Fedesarrollo (Colombia) represents an attractive place for very senior profiles who have been in government and wish to spend time “thinking”. Among others, it offers a pleasant working environment: a good location, a comfortable library, etc. Thus, when an important person of the public sector leaves their position, Fedesarrollo is proactive in searching and offering them a program for work. The case of Roberto Junguito (Ambassador, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of the Treasury and Director of Fedesarrollo from 1974 to 1978) represents a successful case when attracting senior profiles.

Attracting quality researchers (juniors y seniors)

Contract strategies

- **Full-time staff.** CIPPEC (Argentina) contracts full-time staff (except in specific cases when individuals are contracted part-time for organizing a specific event or participate in a single project). In a market characterized by high levels of informality, finding a civil society organization in which to work as full-time staff is attractive for researchers, particularly for juniors.

Regarding the **senior profiles**, some strategies and benefits which policy research institutes may implement and offer are highlighted:

- **Competitive salaries.** Without a doubt, salary is a key incentive for staff.

CIPPEC carries out an annual study of the market to ensure its competitiveness in the more senior levels (but not exclusively). To this end, it collects information on salaries in the public sector, private sector, and other civil society and academic organizations.

- **Agreements with the public sector.** Establish independent ‘chairs’ for the study of specific subjects which allow for funds for researcher’s repatriation.

Benefits package

- **Compatibility of the institution’s jobs with other jobs that add value to the organization.** The most extended case is that of compatibility with the work as graduate and post-graduate teacher.
- **Flexibility and autonomy of the decision-making agenda**

As well as providing a fixed salary, ARU motivates the more senior profiles to generate their own consultancies aligned with the subjects the researchers are working on at the Foundation, including an overhead for the institution. It does not establish limits regarding the number of projects.

- **Time and office attendance flexibility**, which contributes to the compatibility of work at the institution and other sources of income, and/or improving the quality of life (less travel time, opportunities for extra work activities outside the office, etc.).

- **Support system to improve work quality**

Fundraise. Although the responsibility regarding fund raising is shared among the institution and the Directors of the various programs, CIPPEC through its Institutional Development area actively supports fundraising for projects that Directors and different Programs wish to carry out.

Working team. For researchers accustomed to individual consultancies, counting on a trained working team is a major support which also allows them to attend to several projects simultaneously.

- **Support for boosting the image and exposure of the researcher**

CIPPEC counts on a renowned Communications team, proactive and successful when publishing articles and opinion notes by its senior researchers in national newspapers with the highest readership, and when setting up interviews or appearances in audiovisual media.

- **Opportunity for political insertion.** For the more senior profiles, working with an institution whose work is recognized in the world of policy makers, provides an opportunity for being permanently in contact with decision makers. Eventually this access to the world of politics can be used as a platform to reach public sector positions.
- **Vacation.** As well as vacation according to seniority within the institution, CIPPEC offers a “CIPPEC week,” which consists of adding one vacation week from December 24th to 31st.
- **Other benefits.** Better benefits such as quality medical insurance, extended maternity/paternity leave in relation to other working environments can be considered.

Staff motivation. Monetary incentives (independent of salary)

Compensation system

Acknowledgment of extraordinary performances through a sum of money is a useful tool to keep organization staff motivated.

- **Bonus.** CIPPEC counts on a bonus system to acknowledge extraordinary performances in the various programs or areas of the institution (this reward is tied to the economic possibilities of the organization). At the beginning of the year, annual performance evaluation indicators for each program or area are

agreed upon, in order to assess who qualifies for a bonus. Directors of each program decide how to distribute the amount received among the members of his/her team.

Another possibility is to award a bonus with no annual criteria, rewarding various achievements during the year.

- **System of points.** Another choice is to create a system of points related to certain indicators which can later be exchanged by researchers for more money or vacation.
- **Career development within the organization.** For junior researchers to know about growth opportunities, it is recommended that the institution clearly define its salary levels and mobility criteria. Once defined, it should be explained to all staff members, in order for each one to know the requirements and criteria which define promotions or salary raises.
- **Reward for publications.** Fedesarrollo offers a monetary incentive to those researchers who publish papers in international magazines.
- **Support for presentation of papers in international conferences.** Fedesarrollo provides funds for travel and stay for young researchers selected through a call for papers in strategic international conferences for the organization.

Monetary support for training

A research policy institute can organize or reward its staff with training to develop personal abilities or knowledge which will serve the needs of the organization.

Training programs. It is recommended that the organization provides a training program included in its annual budget: assign a specific line within the budget, define which profiles and achievements will be rewarded and what kind of training will be provided.

- **Support for post-graduate studies.** Every semester, Fedesarrollo finances (by direct refund) a semester for one assistant who is studying for a local Masters. Assistants apply for themselves and only one is selected considering his/her performance in the institution.
- **Discounts for doctoral programs.** Fedesarrollo discounts U\$D 5,000 for research assistants admitted into a doctoral program in Economics by one of the 40 universities which the institution considers the most important (US, UK, France and Spain). In return, once the researchers have finished his/her thesis, they must spend at least one summer working at Fedesarrollo. If this is not complied with, the funds must be returned.

- **Learn from other institutions.** Participation by staff members in trainings provided by other organizations, including international ones, can be funded. It is recommended that the things that the trainee learns are shared with the staff or with those interested. If a university offers short courses (for example, with special guests) and Fedesarrollo is interested in their researchers participation, quotas and prices are negotiated for the staff.
- **Other abilities.** ASIES obtains funds for its coordinators to attend English courses. Also, it has signed agreements with international companies which train their coordinators in public speaking and in speaking with the media.

Staff motivation. Non-monetary Incentives

- **Mentor programs.** Some institutes promote young researchers to work with one or more senior researchers, in order to learn in-depth about various policy issues, receive support for their abilities, techniques, research methodologies, and ideas and advice about their professional careers (post-graduate studies, etc.).

ARU Foundation carries out a program with its own Executive Director as a mentor.

Replacement with training. ASIES has achieved a positive process of transference and assessment as part of the more senior to the juniors, through which responsibilities have been transferred to young professionals, with the seniors undertaking an external consulting function.

- **Contact with the world of politics.** As mentioned before regarding the case of senior profiles, policy research institutes are an attractive place for those researchers who wish to approach the political world.

CIPPEC organizes a cycle of talks for its staff, called “**Politics from the inside**” which consists on inviting current or past policy-makers to share their experiences, anecdotes, etc., about their trajectory through the public sector or political parties (for example, recently three CIPPEC’s ex members shared with the staff the experience of having participated in an election campaign, the experience of being candidate to a position, or as team leader).

ASIES also organizes visits by Ministers to the institution, as well as parliamentary session’s attendances, or access by staff to offices in Congress.

- **Practical experience with high levels of responsibility.** In general, policy research institutes provide an opportunity for their members to assume responsibilities and tasks which would require more experience and expertise if working in other environments (the public sector, for example). In the case of CIPPEC, this includes a certain autonomy in the management of the working agenda and an integral participation in the activities of the projects as well,

which reduces the gap between the prominence of directors and other team members.

- **Support for complementary income.** ASIES supports its young researchers who obtain a Bachelor's degree chair in a university. In that way, aside from receiving additional income they remain up dated and motivated to undertake Masters studies.
- **Opportunity for publishing or giving media interviews.** Institutes can support their researchers' exposure to the media or the publication of articles (Directors must not be the only ones to have this opportunity).

In addition, the researchers' effort can be acknowledged by allowing them to publish papers produced under their signature (and not only that of the institution). Or they can reward extraordinary performances through the allocation of working time to finish a book or another publication.

- **Resources.** The level of available resources (computers, Internet connection, research support, consults regarding communications or links with politicians, etc.) and other working conditions in the organization are important to maintain a good working environment.
- **Citations and acknowledgments in internal newsletters.** If applicable, certain achievements can be highlighted (policy influence, agreement on a high-budget project, publication in top media, a successful event, etc.) in internal publications of the institution.

Some institutes hold an annual election among staff to select the institution's top member for that year.

- **Inclusion in strategic institution meetings.** Some institutes reward their members' achievements by inviting them to Board meetings or Steering Committee meetings (or similar bodies) in which decisions which will guide the path of the organization are discussed. They can also be invited to make presentations about a successful project in which they are working.
- **Training**

Bridge for continuing studies in foreign universities. Policy research institutes are often a good place to go through before applying for post-graduate fellowships in renowned foreign universities. Also, members who wish to study in a foreign country usually count on support of the executive directors and senior researchers through contacts and letters of recommendation.

Make the most of one's own expertise. CIPPEC makes the most of its human resources' expertise by organizing internal workshops in order for the staff to remain current regarding communication abilities, writing, web 2.0, policy influence and production of policy briefs, to name a few. In addition,

participation by staff in online or face-to-face courses developed by other programs is promoted.

Introduce the organization. Additionally, training in features of the organization, particularly for new recruits, are provided, assuming that this will result in a deeper sense of belonging and comfort by staff regarding the institution, at the same time improving its performance: main activity of the organization, internal structure, working rules, available resources, etc.

- **Other talks of interest.** CIPPEC holds a cycle of talks “**Understanding ourselves while talking**” through which talks by experts in subjects related to the development and personal well-being of the staff are organized. Top people in some area (science, sports, politics, art) are invited to share their experiences, with the objective of creating a different space of exchange and enjoyment.