State of Associations Quarterly: 2026 Q1

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Key findings

- **34% of responding associations** now run a hybrid staffing model, up from a smaller share in prior years' informal chapter surveys; **19% are fully remote**, and the remainder are fully in-office.
- Fully remote associations report a median hiring radius roughly triple that of fully in-office associations, drawing applicants well beyond their own metro area.
- Remote and hybrid associations report modestly lower office and facilities costs per staff member, though the savings are partly offset by stipends for home-office equipment and connectivity.
- Associations with staff working from states other than their headquarters report the multistate payroll-tax and registration question as their single most common administrative headache tied to remote work.

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Why this quarter looks at staffing model

Staffing model has become one of the more consequential decisions a small or mid-size association's board makes, not because remote work is new, but because more executive directors are now treating it as a deliberate strategic choice rather than a temporary accommodation. This quarter's supplemental survey asked responding associations to categorize their current staffing model as fully in-office, hybrid, or fully remote, and to describe what drove that choice, giving this brief a first look at how association staffing has settled after several years of experimentation across the sector.

How many associations run each model

Thirty-four percent of responding associations report a hybrid model, where staff split time

between an office and remote work on a set or flexible schedule. Nineteen percent report a fully remote model, with no shared physical office space at all. The remaining associations report a fully in-office model, though even within that group a number of respondents noted informal remote flexibility for specific roles or circumstances that falls short of a formal hybrid policy. Smaller associations, with staffs of five or fewer, were disproportionately represented among the fully remote group, while associations with larger staffs and a physical membership-facing presence — a national conference center, a training facility — were disproportionately represented among the fully in-office group.

Hiring pool: the remote-first advantage

The clearest advantage fully remote associations report is hiring pool. Associations with no requirement that staff live near a physical office describe a hiring radius roughly triple that of fully in-office associations, drawing applicants from well beyond their own metro area and, in some cases, nationally. For a small association competing for a narrow specialty — a technical policy analyst, a niche communications role — this expanded pool can matter more than salary competitiveness alone, since a role that might draw a handful of qualified local applicants can draw a meaningfully larger pool once geography is no longer a constraint.

Cost comparison across the three models

Remote and hybrid associations report modestly lower office and facilities costs per staff member than fully in-office associations, consistent with a smaller or eliminated physical footprint. That saving is only partial, however: several remote and hybrid associations report offsetting stipends for home-office equipment, internet connectivity, or co-working space access, and a number describe a modest increase in software and collaboration-tool spending compared to what a shared office environment previously required. Associations weighing a shift toward remote work should budget for these offsetting costs explicitly rather than assuming the full facilities savings translates directly to the bottom line.

Retention and staff satisfaction by model

Associations across all three staffing models report broadly similar retention rates, suggesting that staffing model alone is not a strong predictor of whether staff stay, though several respondents noted that staff satisfaction with their current model matters more than the model itself — staff who chose a role expecting a particular arrangement and got it report higher satisfaction than staff whose association's model shifted after they were hired, regardless of which direction that shift went.

The multistate compliance question

Associations with staff working from a state other than the association's own headquarters consistently name payroll-tax registration and multistate compliance as their single most common administrative headache tied to remote staffing, ahead of concerns about culture, supervision, or communication. Registering as an employer in a new state, withholding the correct state income tax, and tracking whether a single remote employee triggers other state-level obligations are tasks most associations' finance and HR functions were not originally built to handle routinely, and several respondents described learning the requirements the hard way, after hiring a remote employee in a new state, rather than researching them in advance.

A worked example: Cascadia Forest Products Council

Cascadia Forest Products Council runs a four-person staff, remote-first since 2020, led by

Executive Director Signe Thorvaldsen from Tacoma. The council's small size means its remote-first model has never required the more complex multistate payroll infrastructure a larger remote staff might, since its four staff are spread across only a small number of states, but Thorvaldsen has said the hiring-pool advantage has mattered more to the council's staffing than any cost saving: a four-person association competing for specialized forestry-policy expertise draws on a meaningfully larger applicant pool without a geographic hiring constraint than it would if every hire needed to relocate to or already live in Tacoma. Cascadia's experience illustrates a pattern this brief's broader data supports: for a small, specialized association, remote-first staffing is less a facilities-cost decision than a talent-access one.