ATTRITION STUDY
RESEARCH REPORT

July 2019
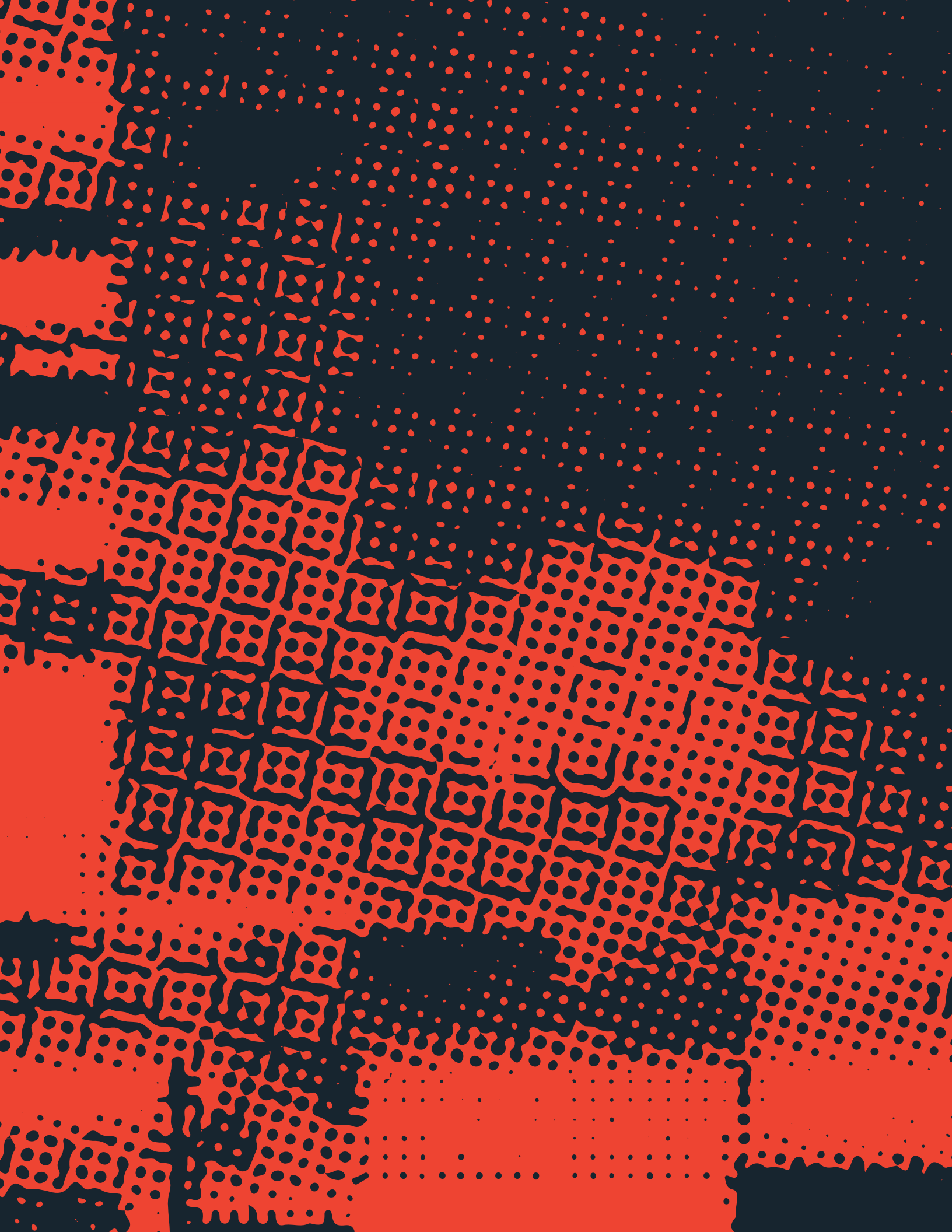
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Michael VanHuis

Attraction and retention of workers is a priority in every workplace, whether in the secular field or in ministry. For those giving their lives to the work of gospel proclamation they have a heightened sense of the weight of the task before them. We want to ensure that we are good stewards of the people serving within our organizations. In addition, we want to help them be as effective as possible as they serve in some of the most difficult places in the world. We hope to not only see ministry flourish—churches planted and hope extended—but also we want to see missionaries and their families growing and thriving in their mission context.

Missionary attrition will not be eliminated. As previously mentioned, the missionaries serving around the world deal with difficult and extreme situations. Of course, this greatly affects their lives. But we must also consider the added effects of issues that we all deal with and how those have a role to play in life transitions. Whether that be personal health, family issues, the needs of our children, or more education to serve differently, the normal challenges of life can be great to handle. As stewards of these missionaries, our role in missions leadership is to shepherd, love and provide the best possible services to them. Whether we are helping them work through a difficult issue on the field or transition back home, they should feel supported and loved. Transition will take place, but how we serve our missionaries through these transitions will profoundly be the measure of our stewardship.

MICHAEL VANHUIS
Vice President of Strategic Initiatives

WHO TOOK PART

Fourteen mission agencies originally confirmed intent in participation; eleven agencies ended up providing data. As we built the study, we sought to gain not only data on attrition numbers, but also to garner reasoning behind the missionaries' transition from the organization. When we interacted with the agencies, we discovered a wide range of systems for analyzing attrition. Some had very basic human resource practices for documenting separation, while others had more robust systems to seek information from the field, home office, and the worker on why the transition was taking place. We sought to provide a tool for data collection that would allow those without a system to create one and for those with a more mature data set to be able to transfer information easily.

For more information and tools that you can use to evaluate attrition at your agency go to https://www.missionexus.org/attrition-study-2019/.

From these eleven organizations combined, 348 people returned from the field over the course of 2018. They also sent 295 new missionaries to the field in the same period of time, which led to a net loss of 53 missionaries from service. Of those that left the field, 65 (19%) retired from missionary services.

	UNITS	TOTAL
PEOPLE	221	348
MARRIED	127	254
SINGLES	94	94

SURVEY COMPLETION*

221 — *TOTAL UNITS REPRESENTED*

127 — *MEMBERS SUBMITTED A REASON*

136 — *HOME OFFICES SUBMITTED A REASON*

106 — *FIELD LEADERS SUBMITTED A REASON*

*Some organizations submitted limited data due to legal issues, limitations with staff, organizational procedures, or misunderstanding of the new process.

SUMMARY
DATA OVERVIEW

From Year 2018

**DIFFERENT REASONS
FOR ATTRITION**

45 *POSSIBLE OPTIONS*

36 *OPTIONS SELECTED*

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS BY REVENUE

■ Less than $1 Million *1 Organization*

■ $1 Million–$3.9 Million *1 Organization*

■ ■ $4 Million–$9.9 Million *2 Organizations*

■ ■ $10 Million–$39.9 Million *2 Organizations*

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ $40 Million and above *5 Organizations*

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS BY STAFF SIZE

■ Less than 50 Employees *1 Organization*

50–99 Employees *0 Organization*

■ 100–249 Employees *1 Organizations*

■ ■ ■ ■ 250–499 Employees *4 Organizations*

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ More than 500 Employees *5 Organizations*

Fig. 1

MAIN REASONS FOR ATTRITION

65 Natural
29 Other
22 Health
4 Dismissal
20 Family
11 Field
9 Interpersonal
13 Organizational
48 Career
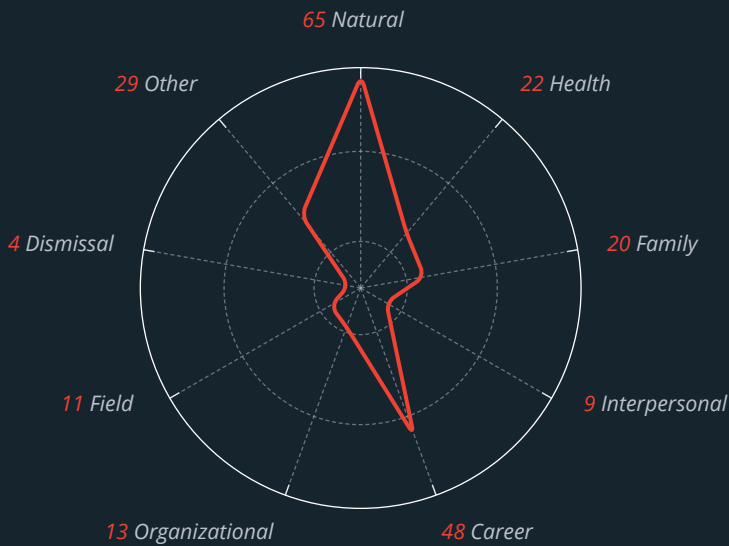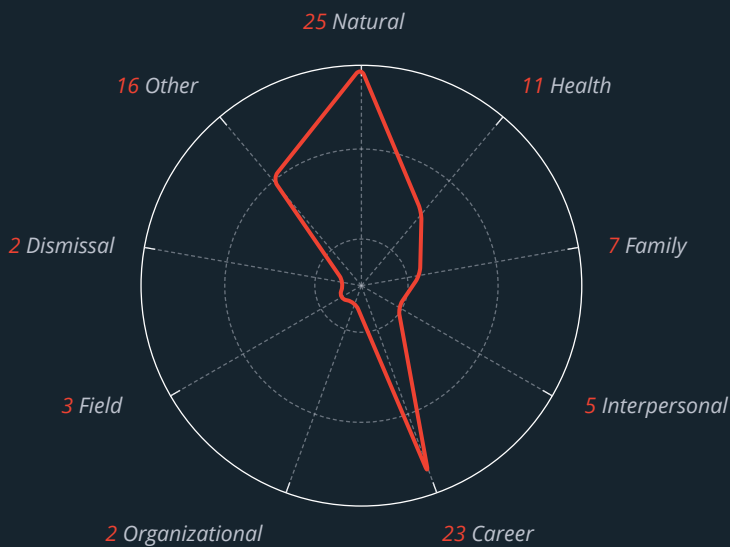
REASONS FOR ATTRITION

Natural Causes (Completed Assignment, Retirement)
Health (Emotional, Physical, Children's Health)
Family (Children's Education, Marriage, Family Concerns)
Interpersonal (Problems with Field/Local Leadership)
Career (Education, Agency Transfer, Job Satisfaction)
Organizational (Disagreement, Support Issues)
Field (Visa Issues, Political Crisis, Closed Field)
Dismissal (Termination, Job Performance)
Other (Personal Concerns, Unknown, Inactive)

Top Reasons Subcategories

Natural — 43 Retirement
Career — 10 Change in Calling within Ministry
Health — 11 Physical Health
Family — 12 Third Culture Kid Issues

SINGLES ATTRITION REASONS

Fig. 2

25 Natural
16 Other
11 Health
2 Dismissal
7 Family
3 Field
5 Interpersonal
2 Organizational
23 Career

Top Reasons Subcategories for Singles

Natural — 17 Retirement
Health — 7 Physical Health
Career — 6 Agency Transfer

MARRIED ATTRITION REASONS

Fig. 3

40 Natural
13 Other
11 Health
2 Dismissal
13 Family
8 Field
4 Interpersonal
10 Organizational
25 Career

Top Reasons Subcategories for Married

Natural — 31 Retirement
Career — 9 Agency Transfer
Family — 8 Child Health/Special Needs/Education

BABY BOOMERS
VS. MILLENNIALS

The retiring mission force

19%
OF ALL 2018 ATTRITION WAS ATTRIBUTED TO PEOPLE RETIRING FROM MISSIONARY SERVICE . 65 OUT OF OF 348 PEOPLE.

U.S. POPULATION 65 YEARS AND OLDER

22.1% 2050

15.6% 2017

8% 1950

This is a significant increase from 1950, when only eight percent of the population was 65 or over.

39 YEARS OLD
MEDIAN AGE IN 2020

It's not only the American population that is aging — the global population is, too. By 2020, the median age of the global workforce is expected to be 39 years, up from 33.8 years in 1990.

3Mil.
PEOPLE AGED 100+ YEARS

Additionally, it is projected that there will be over three million people worldwide aged 100 years and over by 2050.

SIGNIFICANT DATES

1999
Baby Boomers peaked at 78.8 million living adults.

2019
For the first time Millennials outnumber Boomers.

2020
65 year olds and older will make up 16.9% of the US population.

2028
Generation X is projected to pass the Boomers in population.

2030
All Boomers will be older than 65 years old.

2036
Millennial population is projected to peak at 76.2 million.

WE HAVE ENTERED THE GREATEST SHIFT IN GENERATIONAL MISSIONARY SERVICE

GENERATIONAL CHANGE

These two charts from the Pew Research Center show the significant changes that will take place over the upcoming years. As we assist baby boomers into a position of retirement are we prepared to fill their roles with up and coming millennials? We must seek out creative ways that we can encourage boomers to remain engaged in our organizations as mentors, advocates, and mobilizers.

Projected population by generation

In millions
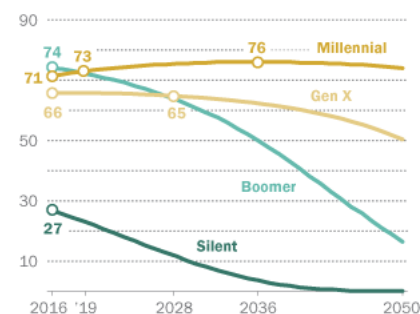
Note: Millennials refer to the population ages 20 to 35 as of 2016.
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of U.S. Census Bureau population projections released December 2014 and 2016 population estimates.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The Generations Defined

The Millennial generation
Born: 1981 to 1996
Age in 2016: 20 to 35

Generation X
Born: 1965 to 1980
Age in 2016: 36 to 51

The Baby Boom generation
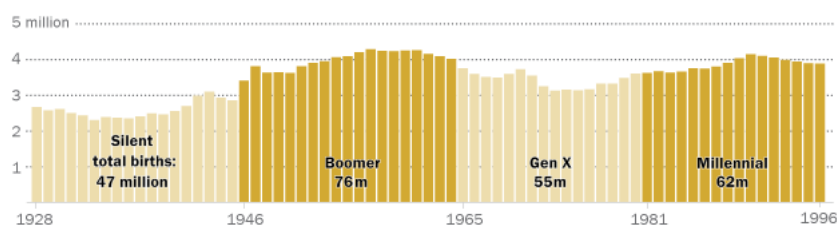*Born: 1946 to 1964*
Age in 2016: 52 to 70

The Silent generation
Born: 1928 to 1945
Age in 2016: 71 to 88

The Greatest generation
Born: 1901 to 1927
Age in 2016: 89 to 116

Births underlying each generation

Number of U.S. births by year and generation

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Center for Health Statistics.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

As this great shift takes place within our agencies, we need to be creative and innovative in our approach to these faithful workers. How can we continue to steward and utilize the knowledge and experience of the boomer generation within our agencies and leverage it to impact the local churches of North America? Can we maximize their passion and experience to raise up a new generation of workers and help churches engage with the growing diverse diaspora communities within their cities? Can new strategic partnerships be created between our agencies and local churches to leverage this great asset in a unique way, and at the same time can we offer rest and ongoing purpose to those in transition?

In addition, we need to be proactive in our planning for the handoff of ongoing global projects to younger missionaries. Perhaps we can utilize missionaries planning for retirement to help coach their replacements to see their work endure. One of the most common requests of the millennial generation is mentorship. We must seek to find ways to intentionally connect our new missionary recruits with seasoned veterans to help them learn from the experiences of those that have already served. There are so many unique ways we can leverage this generational shift in mission service. Now is the time to proactively pull together boomers and millennials in our agencies to discover opportunities to connect these generations. This really could be one of the greatest chances for the transition of generational knowledge and experience.

ATTRITION
PERSPECTIVES

◆

A Call to Alignment

The data from the survey showed that perspectives on attrition varied for everyone involved. This demonstrates that new emphasis needs to be prioritized within agencies to increase communication between the missionary, the field office, and the home office. It doesn't serve us well to all have different perspectives for why people have left; we need to have a clear perspective. This will allow us to care for our staff members more effectively, to address any issues—systemic or localized, and to minimize wider impact upon team members or field partnerships.

Below are the top selected causes for each perspective:

MISSIONARY

- 36 Selected Natural Causes (25 Retirement, 6 Completed Assignment)
- 32 Selected Career (10 Agency Transfer, 10 Change in Calling)
- 16 Selected Family (6 Marriage/Family Concerns, 5 TCK Education)

HOME OFFICE

- 40 Selected Natural Causes (30 Retirement, 5 Completed Assignment)
- 27 Selected Career (9 Change in Calling, 7 Agency Transfer)
- 19 Selected Health (8 Emotional/Mental Support, 7 Physical Health)

FIELD TEAM

- 38 Selected Natural Causes (28 Retirement, 8 Completed Assignment)
- 20 Selected Career (8 Agency Transfer, 5 Change in Calling)
- 16 Selected Family (9 TCK Needs/Education, 4 Marriage)

PERSPECTIVES ON DEPARTURE

Each row of the table represents the combined data from one unit.

Column headers (top): *Natural Causes* · *Health* · *Family* · *Interpersonal* · *Career* · *Organizational* · *Dismissal* · *Field* · *Other*

18% SHARED PERSPECTIVE

● *Missionary vs.* ● *Home Office*

Missionaries shared the same reasons for attrition as the Home Office eighteen percent of the time. Out of 23 reasons given for attrition, 19 were different.

17% SHARED PERSPECTIVE

● *Missionary vs.* ● *Field Team*

Missionaries shared the same reasons for attrition as the Field Team seventeen percent of the time. Out of 24 reasons given for attrition, 20 were different.
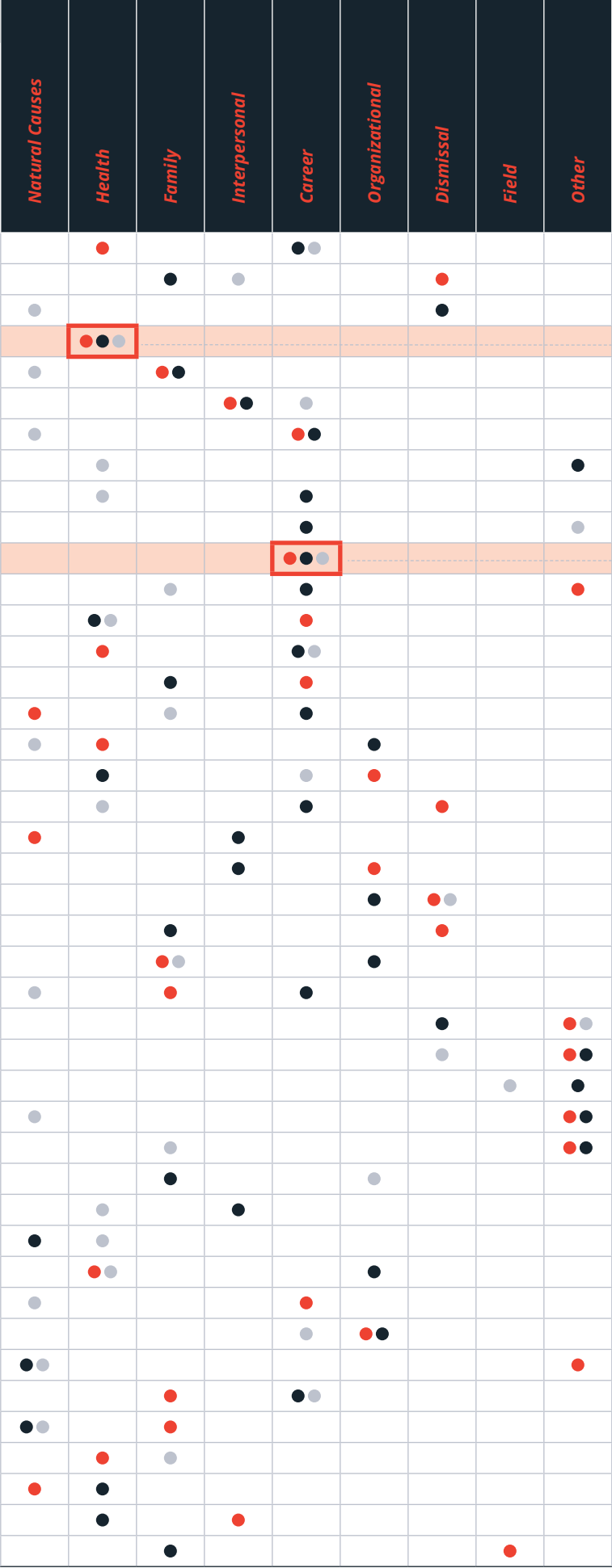
14% SHARED PERSPECTIVE

● *Home Office vs.* ● *Field Team*

The Home Office shared the same reasons for attrition as the Field Team fourteen percent of the time. Out of 29 reasons given for attrition, 25 were different.

13% SHARED PERSPECTIVE

● *Missionary vs.* ● *Home Office vs.* ● *Field Team*

Missionaries shared the same reasons for attrition as the Home Office and the Field Team thirteen percent of the time. Out of 8 reasons given for attrition, 7 were different.

2 Missionaries shared the same or similar perspectives as both the home office and field team.

SINGLE VS. MARRIED PERSPECTIVES

64%
OF SINGLES SHARED SIMILAR PERSPECTIVES WITH EITHER THE HOME OFFICE OR FIELD TEAM VERSUS

54%
OF MARRIED WORKERS

Singles gave the same main reason for departure as either the home office or the field team more often than married workers.

This may be because perspectives on departure differ between spouses.

● Missionary Perspective   ○ Home Office Perspective   ● Field Team Perspective

THREE YEAR ATTRITION
SUMMARY

Attrition Data Over Three Years

As shown below, eleven organizations netted 40 new missionaries to the field. The obvious reality is that the mobilization of new missionaries must outpace the rate of attrition in order for our agencies to endure. This is especially apparent in light of expected increased retirement numbers over the upcoming years. Proactively engaging with current missionaries to keep them healthy and on point along with seeking innovative approaches to mobilization must be top priorities for North American mission agencies.

	2016 Field Staff			*2017 Field Staff*			*2018 Field Staff*			*2016–2018*
	New Staff	*Attrition*	*Varience*	*New Staff*	*Attrition*	*Varience*	*New Staff*	*Attrition*	*Varience*	*Varience*
Organization 1	136	100	36	134	57	77	113	68	45	158
Organization 2	35	8	27	16	21	-5	13	34	-21	1
Organization 3	19	32	-13	16	22	-6	18	18	0	-19
Organization 4	36	62	-26	39	29	10	32	55	-23	-39
Organization 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	-16	-16
Organization 6	18	24	-6	19	28	-9	17	22	-5	-20
Organization 7	12	12	0	9	13	-4	13	11	2	-2
Organization 8	9	2	7	1	0	1	0	2	-2	6
Organization 9	72	45	27	62	39	23	55	48	7	57
Organization 10	40	53	-13	46	83	-37	34	60	-26	-76
Organization 11	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	10	-10	-10
TOTALS	**377**	**338**	**39**	**342**	**292**	**50**	**295**	**344**	**-49**	**40**
							Total Missionary Gain Over Three Years			**40**
							Total Sent Over Three Years			**1014**
							Total Attrition Over Three Years			**974**

TOTAL **GAIN**

*Among Organizations with
More than $40 Million Budget*
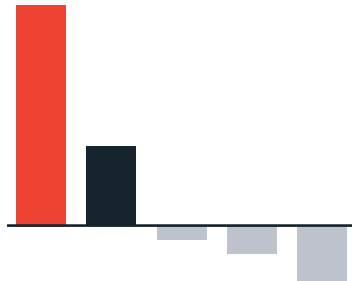
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_____ -10: Organization 11
_____ -20: Organization 6
_____ -39: Organization 4

TOTAL **GAIN**

*Among Organizations with
More Than 500 Employees*
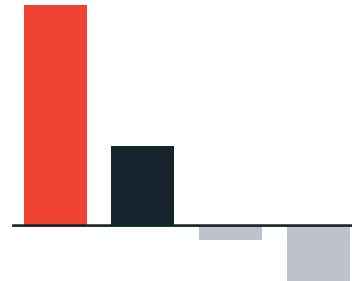
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_____ -10: Organization 11
_____ -39: Organization 4

TOTAL GAIN
OVER 3 YEARS # 40 MISSIONARIES

Three agencies had a net gain of 221 new missionaries, yet when combined with the data from the other organizations in the study the total net gain was 40 missionaries. In the 2019 Missio Nexus CEO survey, 43% of the 120 CEOs who took part saw gains in the missionary force over the past three years, and only 15% saw a decrease.

TOTAL SENT
OVER 3 YEARS # 1014

A thousand new missionaries going to the field is worth celebrating! And this number is only a percentage of all missionaries from North America and around the globe that having willingly left home, family, and friends to proclaim the gospel around the world. Do we hope to send even more? Yes! But we also praise God for those who have surrendered their lives for the Great Commission.

ATTRITION
OVER 3 YEARS # 974

Additionally, almost a thousand people in our study group have served in hard, isolated, and difficult places out of great obedience. As we seek to understand their reasons for departure, we are deeply grateful for their acts of sacrifice and selflessness.

Take advantage of other resources and reports on the Missio Nexus website. CEO studies, mobilization studies, attrition tracking tools, and more are available to members.

NEXT
STEPS

Michael R. VanHuis

Retirement, health issues, family needs, interpersonal team issues, cultural struggles, global tension, and high-risk situations will always be with us. These things cannot be eliminated in the line of service in which we work and serve as missionaries.

In light of this, we must proactively lead our organizations, deeply caring for those serving within them. Attrition will take place. Yet, the more personal and relational we are in handling every unique situation will help to create a positive outcome of each transition. From candidate school through the end of service we need to provide individualized care for each worker. This intentionality will lead to more healthy processes, longer terms, and God-glorifying transitions.

Know your workforce
The more that you globally understand who is in your pipeline, who is going to the field, and the status of those serving, the more effectively you can manage each step of the process and meet each need as it arises. The most valuable of all your assets is your staff.

Ensure that your process has lots of heart and not just process
Make sure that you have people who are gifted as shepherds and pastors involved in every part of the entire process of missionary care. Systems give us a framework, but personalized care will define the outcome.

Celebrate service
Celebrate each new missionary and celebrate each person leaving the field. Whether they have served two weeks or twenty-five years they have gone out in obedience and sacrificed in service. Don't let anyone leave with just an administrative handshake; let them know they are valued!

Measure and track
Systematic tracking will highlight trends that can determine the future of your organization. Often, we track the easy things like revenue, but often areas that take a little more intentionality are the more critical areas to track. It is critical to not only know who is coming and going but why that is taking place. Both quantitative and qualitative data are essential to gaining strategic knowledge.

Seek alignment between the missionary, the office, and the field
Leaders who are responsible for caring for missionaries need to be in sync with each other and those they are responsible for. It takes time, but when the missionary, their field leadership, and the home office are all extremely clear on what is happening and why a transition is necessary, situational difficulties could be radically transformed and resolved. This may cost time and money, but the end result far outweighs any expense.

Thank You to Our Participating Organizations
(Alphabetical Order)

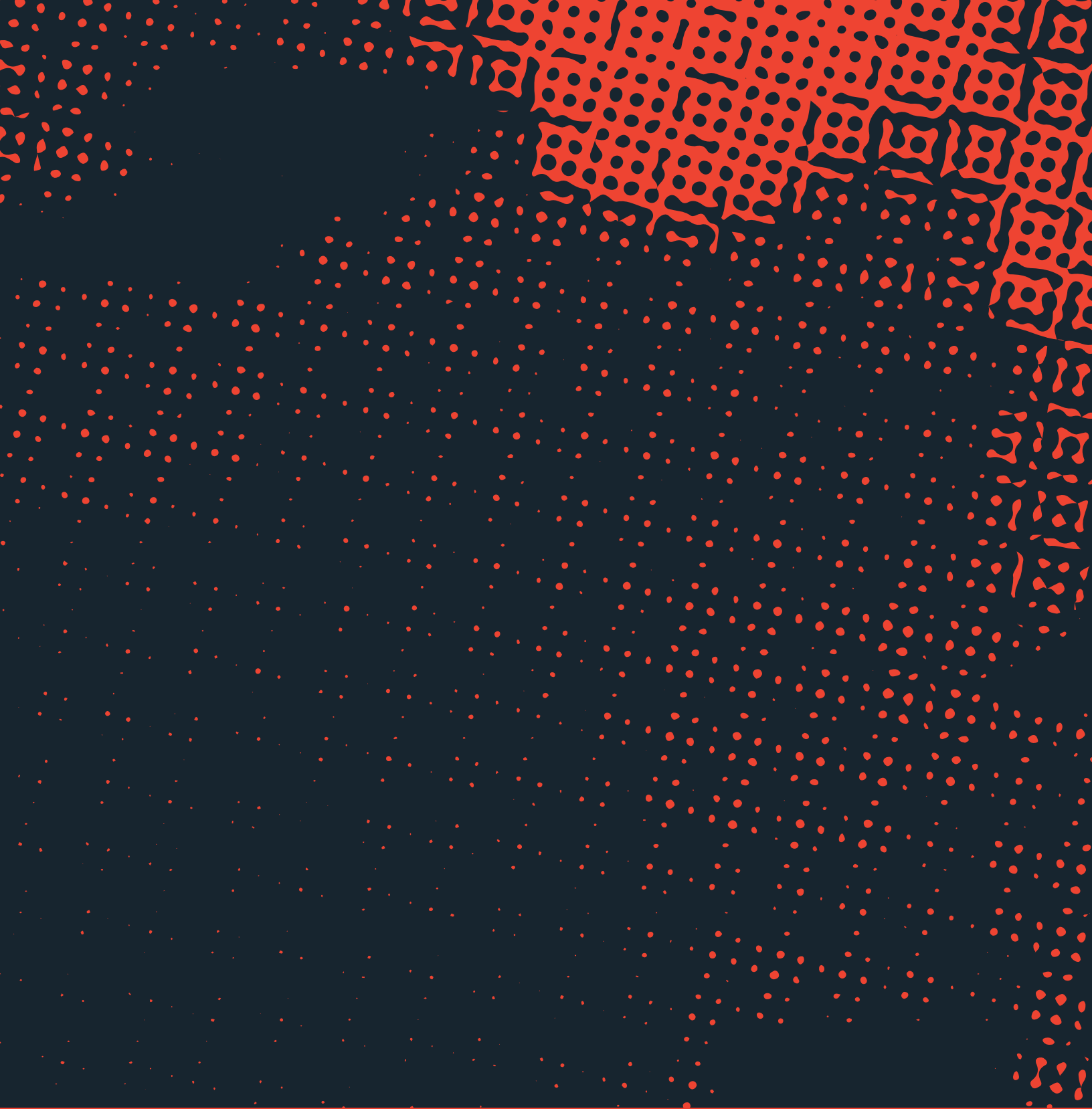|			
ABWE	MAF	SIM	Village Missions
Crossworld	Pioneers	TEAM	WYCLIFFE
East West	SEND	UB Global	

Find more reports online at MissioNexus.org/research.

Mission Agency Senior Leader Compensation Study – June 2019