



Should I stay or should I go? The role of financial security, fair compensation, promotional and professional growth opportunities, and wage incentives

Employees who lack career advancement and receive inadequate financial compensation are more likely to leave their jobs (see **Figure 1**; De Smet et al., 2022). Peer employees receive less financial compensation than other professional helpers (Ostrow, 2024; **Figure 2**). Previously, we reported that ZipRecruiter ranked Iowa 42nd among 50 states in terms of hourly wage offers (Iowa: \$15.47 per hour), while Talent.com ranked Iowa 41st among 46 states (Iowa: \$16.85). Iowa peer worker wages are in the lowest wage quartile nationally (Coohey, Means & McCrory, 2024).

Research Questions

We examined whether financial security, fair compensation, promotional and professional growth opportunities, and wage incentives were related to peer workers' intention to leave their positions this year and whether a 10% pay bump would convince them to stay.

Methods

We surveyed all peer support employees in Iowa in 2024. The final sample included 180 employees with lived experience who provided direct support or services to peers. About 75% of participants were trained by IPWC.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows that most peer employees have at least some college education (83.9%), 72.8% of peers have more than one type of lived experience, and nearly 60% are parents of a child with a behavioral health challenge. **Table 2** summarizes participants' employment characteristics.

Most of Iowa's peer workers are experiencing financial insecurity (**Table 3**). Only 22.8% agreed that they have adequate income and financial stability. More than 65% of peers reported they did not have enough savings for an emergency.

Only about 42% of peer workers agreed that they were paid fairly for their work (**Table 4**). Most peer workers (82.8%) agreed that their organization provided opportunities for professional growth; however, less than half (43.9%) agreed they had opportunities for advancement. Despite these findings, most peer workers (78.4%) agreed they intended to stay in their position for the next year.

Most of Iowa's peer workers are experiencing financial insecurity.

Factors Related to Intent to Leave and Intent to Stay

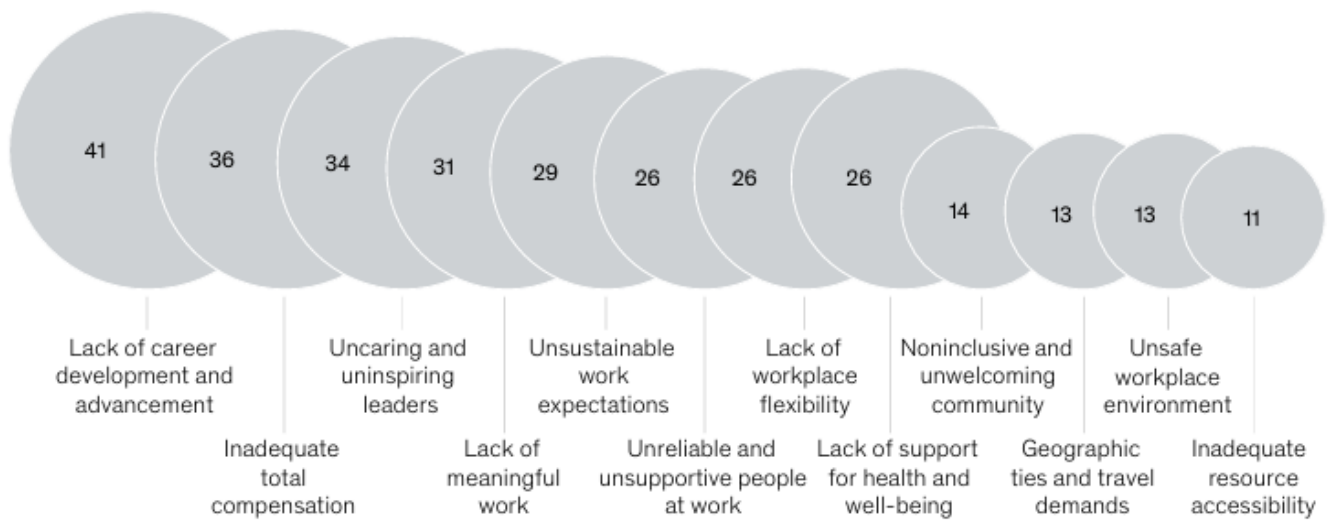
We found that fair compensation ($r = -.58$), promotional ($r = -.48$), and professional growth opportunities ($r = -.40$) were strongly related to intent to leave their position this year (**Table 5**). The same factors were related to the intent to stay, although these relationships were not as strong as those related to intent to leave—with one exception. Peer employees who reported being fairly compensated were more likely to report that they intended to stay ($r = .49$).

Table 6 shows that most peer workers (91%) reported that a 10% pay increase would increase their likelihood of staying in their position. In comparison, only 41.7% reported that a 10% pay increase at another organization would increase their likelihood of leaving.

Recommendations

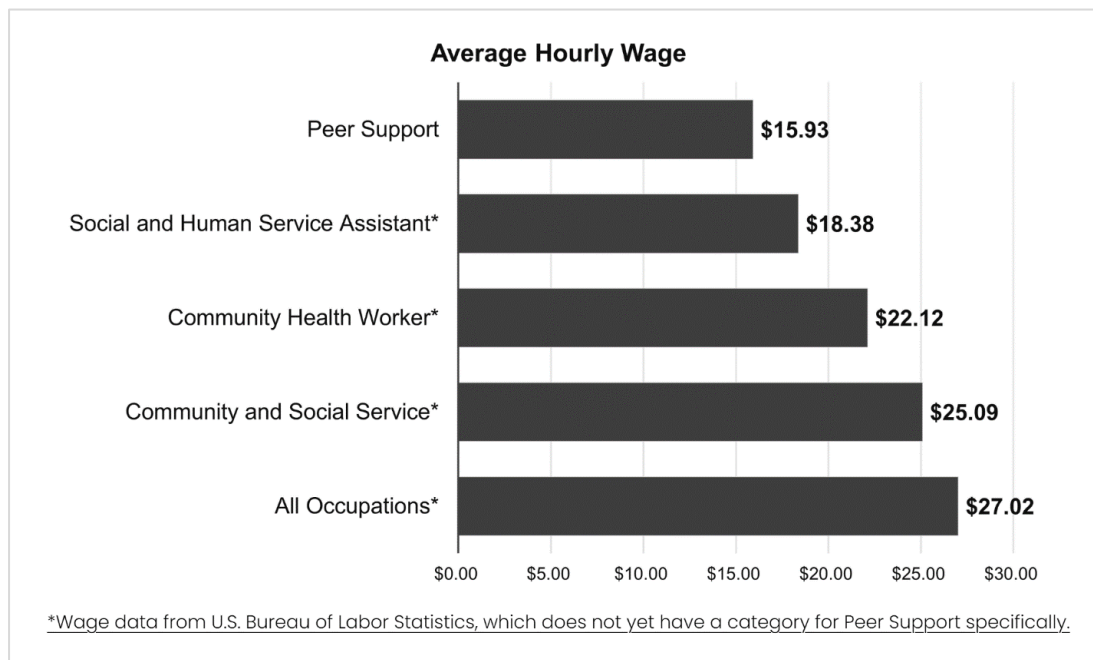
Organizations aiming to retain peer workers should prioritize offering professional growth and advancement opportunities, such as additional skills training. Additionally, organizations should evaluate their ability to increase peer worker compensation. A 10% pay increase would average around \$3,300/year for full-time peer employees.

Figure 1
Top Reasons for Quitting Previous Job, 2021 – 2022 (Percents)



Note. De Smet et al., 2022.

Figure 2
Average Hourly Wage by Occupational Classification, United States



Note. Ostrow, 2024. Ostrow added to Figure 2 “Peer Support” wages based on survey data from four states.

Table 1 <i>Demographic Characteristics (N=180)</i>		
	Number	Percent
Age		
18-24	5	2.8
25-34	24	13.3
35-44	44	24.4
45-54	56	31.1
55-64	41	22.8
65+	10	5.6
Gender identity		
Man	29	16.1
Woman	146	81.1
Prefer to self-describe	5	2.8
Education		
No high school or GED	1	.6
High school or GED	28	15.6
Some college	55	30.6
Associate degree	34	18.9
Bachelor degree	49	27.2
Graduate degree	13	7.2
Attended college		
No	29	16.2
Yes	151	83.8
Racial identity		
American Indian or Alaska Native alone	3	1.7
Black or African American alone	6	3.3
Hispanic or Latino alone	7	3.9
More than one race	5	2.8
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander alone	1	.6
White alone	158	87.8
Armed services		
No	167	92.8
Yes	13	7.2
Lived experience		
An adult in recovery from a mental health challenge alone	30	16.7
An adult in recovery from a substance challenge alone	3	1.7
A parent or caregiver of a child with a behavioral/mental health challenge alone	16	8.9
An adult in recovery from a mental health and substance use challenge	43	23.9
An adult in recovery from a mental health challenge and a parent or caregiver of a child with a behavioral/mental health challenge	36	20.0
An adult in recovery from substance use challenge and a parent or caregiver of a child with a behavioral/mental health challenge	52	28.9

Table 2 <i>Employment Characteristics (N=180)</i>		
	Number	Percent
Serve		
Adults - People with a mental health or substance use challenge	149	82.8
Families - Parents of a child with a behavioral health challenge	31	17.2
Employed in a peer-run organization or program.*		
No	83	46.1
Not sure	73	40.6
Yes	24	13.3
Years employed		
Less than 1 year	37	20.6
1 – 2 years	73	40.6
3 – 4 years	25	13.9
4 – 5 years	10	5.6
More than 5 years	35	19.4
Type of IPWC training completed		
Family peer support specialist	34	18.9
Peer support specialist	86	47.8
Recovery coach	35	19.4
Did not complete an IPWC training	43	23.9
Job level		
Direct service position	152	84.4
Management position	28	15.6
Hours worked per week		
Part-time (Less than 30 hours)	56	31.1
Full-time (30 or more hours)	124	68.9
Hourly wage		
Less than \$15.00	15	8.3
\$15.00 to 17.49	61	33.9
\$17.50 to 19.99	45	25.0
\$20.00 to 24.55	12	6.7
\$25.00 or more an hour	6	3.3
Prefer not to answer	41	22.8
Health insurance		
No	84	46.7
Yes	96	53.3
*Peer-run programs were defined as those in which peers oversee operations and hold leadership positions, and most staff and volunteers identify as peers with lived experience.		

Table 3*Financial Security (N=180)*

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?	Percent							Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Some-what agree	Agree	Strongly agree		
I have adequate income.	15.6	15.6	12.8	16.7	16.7	17.8	5.0	3.77	1.86
I have adequate credit	8.9	12.2	10.0	20.0	11.7	21.7	15.6	4.41	1.91
I have financial stability.	11.7	11.7	15.0	22.2	16.7	16.7	6.1	3.95	1.75
I have enough savings for an emergency.	30.6	18.3	16.7	8.9	10.0	11.7	3.9	3.00	1.89

Note. Strongly disagree was coded 1, and strongly agree was coded 7.

Table 4*Fair Compensation and Professional Growth and Promotional Opportunities (N=180)*

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?	Percent					Mean	SD
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
Fair compensation						3.11	1.19
I am rewarded fairly for the amount of effort that I put in.	12.8	17.2	27.2	28.3	14.4	3.14	1.24
I am rewarded fairly, considering the responsibilities that I have.	13.3	17.8	27.2	30.0	11.7	3.09	1.22
My organization pays me fairly for my work.	14.4	13.9	30.0	30.0	11.7	3.11	1.22
Professional growth opportunities						4.01	0.81
My organization ...							
Makes sure I have ongoing opportunities for growth, such as workshops and trainings.	1.7	5.0	10.6	45.6	37.2	4.12	0.91
Provides me with opportunities to improve my skills and knowledge.	1.7	3.9	11.1	50.6	32.8	4.09	0.86
Helps me fill in some of the gaps in my learning or skill development.	1.7	5.0	17.2	46.7	29.4	3.97	0.91
Provides the means (money, time) for me to attend workshops and trainings.	3.3	8.3	16.1	45.0	27.2	3.84	1.02
Promotional opportunities						3.31	0.97
I have the opportunity for advancement in my organization.	8.9	20.6	26.7	35.6	8.3	3.14	1.11
I am (not) in a dead-end job. (R)	5.6	12.2	28.3	33.3	20.6	3.51	1.12
I can get ahead in my organization.	11.1	12.2	27.2	37.8	11.7	3.27	1.20

Note. (R) = This item response was reverse-coded. Strongly disagree was coded 1, and strongly agree was coded 5.

Table 5*Intent to Stay/Leave Organization (N=180)*

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?	Percent					Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree		
Intent to stay at organization						4.02	0.82
I do not intend to leave my job in the next year or so.	3.9	5.0	12.8	30.6	47.8	4.13	1.07
It is unlikely that I will actively look for a different job in the next year.	5.0	5.0	14.4	31.7	43.9	4.04	1.11
I am not thinking about leaving my job at the present time.	8.9	10.0	11.7	23.9	45.6	3.87	1.33
Intent to leave organization						1.96	1.04
I often seriously consider leaving my current job.	41.1	30.6	15.6	8.3	4.4	2.04	1.14
I intend to leave my job in the next year or so.	45.6	31.1	13.9	4.4	5.0	1.92	1.11
I have started to look for other jobs.	47.2	30.0	11.1	7.8	3.9	1.91	1.12
<i>Note. Strongly disagree was coded 1, and strongly agree was coded 5.</i>							

Table 6*Relationship between Predictors and Outcomes (Correlations)*

	Intent to Stay	Intent to Leave
Financial security	.19*	-.25**
Fair compensation	.49**	-.58**
Promotional opportunities	.34*	-.48**
Professional growth opportunities	.28**	-.40**
* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.		

Table 7*Wage Incentives on Intent to Stay and Leave (N=180)*

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?	Percents						Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree		
A 10% wage/salary increase at my current organization would increase the likelihood I would stay at my organization.	2.2	5.0	1.7	12.2	39.4	39.4	5.00	1.18
An offer of a 10% wage/salary increase at another organization would increase the likelihood I would leave my organization.	14.4	28.9	15.0	21.1	13.9	6.7	3.11	1.49
<i>Note. Strongly disagree was coded 1, and strongly agree was coded 6.</i>								

References

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