

## From Sea to Shining Sea: A New Model for Gathering and Keeping a Quality Teaching Staff

### Hiring and Retaining: The Challenge

Cindy Lohan remembers the thought she had when her husband, Marty, announced he was being transferred from south Florida to north Alabama. For three years, Cindy had been working out of her home as an AP U.S. Government and Politics instructor for the nation's largest online middle and high school, and she loved her job. "I wasn't getting a job transfer. I wanted to keep working for Florida Virtual School." It seemed reasonable enough. She taught from home in Florida. Why not continue to do so in Alabama?

Lohan broached the idea with her supervisor who approved the decision, making her the first Florida Virtual School employee to teach for the program from another state. After her move, other employees wondered if they could do the same. "I got all kinds of calls from other employees who were thinking about [moving]," Lohan notes. Veteran AP Calculus instructor Irene Payne had been working as an adjunct employee for FLVS for three years when she and her husband decided to move. "We had lived in Florida for 30 years, and we'd always wanted to retire to Arizona." She loved her job and agreed to become a full-time instructor—if she could work from Arizona. Her supervisor at the time said, "Why not?"

Why not, indeed? The teaching profession is continually challenged with high attrition rates and a shortage of new teachers coming into the field. According to the Digest of Education Statistics, "Overall, school enrollment is projected to set new records every year from 2006 until at least 2014."<sup>1</sup> At a time of rising enrollments and shrinking NCLB-qualified instructors, administrators are scrambling

to craft better policies to recruit and retain good teachers.

The Digest reports that 75% of teachers are women and, of those, 39% are under 40. For women under 40, who are likely to have or begin having children and, just as likely, are the secondary vs. primary income source, a spouse's job transfer takes priority. Unfortunately, the transfer may also be the impetus for leaving the teaching profession altogether.

There are other reasons teachers leave the profession, of course. One national study (MetLife, 2006) found that older teachers are more likely to leave than younger ones. Their reasons? Among other things, one significant factor was "not having adequate time for classroom instruction." With the advantage online learning offers of flexible time for each student, it is a great match for experienced instructors who want to make most of just such an opportunity. These are the teachers we need to keep.

Every loss of a quality, experienced teacher is a loss on several levels. Obviously, the training and development dollars invested go with the teacher. The teacher's years of experience are also lost. Irene Payne had been teaching for 22 years when she struck the agreement to work full time from Arizona for FLVS.

Across the country, hiring and recruiting has become an aggressive playing field. Every summer, principals race to find good teachers for the coming school year. As urban populations mushroom, finding teachers to fill slots in overcrowded schools is a problem. Likewise, rural areas with dwindling enrollments due to population shifts cannot compete with larger salaries in urban areas.

<sup>1</sup> (Thomas D. Snyder, 2006-07)

Given these challenges, Linda Peters, Chief Human Resources Officer for Florida Virtual School (FLVS) knew that in order to maintain FLVS's growth rate of approximately 30%, she would eventually have to recruit outside of Florida.

However, Peters wasn't sure if the benefits outweighed the costs. She had many questions about managing things like insurance, worker's compensation laws, myriad state tax laws, or criminal background checks. The more she and her team researched, the more they realized they were running into a maze of questions. "We needed to determine if the cost of doing business, the value to the organization, the exposure to the different liabilities of hiring and maintaining out-of-state employees was worth continuing."

### **Weighing the Costs**

With FLVS's soaring growth rate, Peters knew she needed to identify benefits that most appealed to candidates, within and outside Florida. "You can only sell so much sunshine and beach," reports Peters. Getting people to move for a teaching job is a major challenge. However, the opportunity for teachers to have some flexibility in their schedules is very appealing, so Peters knew she had that card to play. Still, there were significant challenges to bringing those teachers into the fold.

For example, Florida has no state income tax. How could FLVS handle payroll for teachers who lived in states where a state or local income tax was required? State, city, and local taxes vary widely all over the country, and the payroll department must figure those numbers when they are calculating all other payroll deductions, such as health insurance or TSAs.

"There were all kinds of things we had to start considering," reports Peters. "Our HR and Finance teams collaborated closely on questions about payroll taxes, workers comp and unemployment insurance. We were so blessed to have two teams that worked so well together on this effort."

The homework was formidable. For instance, hiring laws are different in every state, which meant that the two teams had to investigate and analyze every state's laws regarding worker's comp, unemployment, local payroll taxes, state income taxes, and more.

The payroll decision was one of the easier ones. "We finally made the determination that the out-of-state employee would be responsible for deducting their own taxes," Peters notes. This put the onus on the employees who want the benefit of working outside of Florida, making them responsible rather than burdening payroll with what could literally grow to hundreds of different payroll calculations.

Worker's comp was not so easy. "We had to contact every state where we had employees, find out the requirements for that state, and make sure we had policies in place. It was quite an undertaking," says Peters. Each time an employee from a new state was added, the investigative process had to be repeated. For small organizations with just a few employees, this is an easier task, but FLVS already had hundreds of employees when the process began. Peter's team began to look for a worker's comp plan that would cover all 50 states. "It looks like we may have found a company that will cover all but two states, and we already have plans in place for those states."

Unemployment insurance was a similar challenge. "Sometimes there are plans that are unique to certain states," says Peters. Each state, again, had to be investigated and plans put in place. For health insurance, Peters' team learned that FLVS's HMO plan was not valid out of state, so employees who relocate must switch to the PPO plan. Irene Payne reports that the PPO plan luckily had an affiliation with provider offices in Arizona, so she can actually use local offices to file claims or resolve issues.

Liability was also a big issue. "In Florida, should we have an employee who finds him or herself on the long arm of the law, we are notified within 24 hours by the [Florida] Department of Law Enforcement. That doesn't happen for out-of-state employees, so we had to figure out...how are we going to cross this bridge?" Peters contacted a friend at a nationwide corporation with many out-of-state employees. She learned that many national organizations outsource to companies that provide thorough criminal background checks. Florida Virtual School decided to follow suit and added this clause to their policy: "As a condition of employment, out-of-state employees will have a criminal background check conducted by HR four times each fiscal year. The cost for these checks will be the responsibility of the employee."

In the end, the research conducted by Peters' team and the finance team led to new, flexible policies that benefit employees, while protecting the organization. Official FLVS policy, as of July 1, 2007, permits out-of-state hiring for FLVS. The only caveat is that all out-of-state employees must be full-time in order for the organization to realize a reasonable return on the extra investment of hiring external to Florida. Also, all FLVS teachers must either hold or be eligible for a Florida certification.

Before organizational hiring managers can offer a position to someone outside of Florida, they must obtain approval from the HR department in order to ensure that FLVS indeed has secure policies in place for that state. Internal candidates who want to relocate outside of Florida must submit a request 90 days prior to relocation. Each request is assessed individually to assure compliance with federal and state laws, and to see whether or not insurance benefits will need to be reconsidered.

### **Realizing the Benefits**

With the exception of hiring adjuncts from other states, Peters reports that the

benefits of doing the research and putting the policies in place to hire outside of Florida have far outweighed the costs. "It gives us an advantage in recruitment. Other districts are out [across the country] looking for candidates, but the candidate has to move." FLVS now has teachers in 22 states.

For current FLVS teachers who need to move elsewhere for whatever reason, the pressure to find another job is eliminated, and FLVS doesn't lose good employees.

Ironically, Cindy Lohan's husband, Marty, was transferred twice again after their move to Alabama—once to Dallas and finally back to Florida. "We didn't have to worry about losing income. Marty was allowed to have different career experiences to become a better engineer, and I got to continue a job that I loved. Can you imagine if I'd had to get recertified in each state?" Instead, her challenge was simply in "learning to connect the wires for computer setup really fast," she says with a smile. The students never missed a beat and didn't lose a teacher with whom they'd already built a relationship.

Irene Payne reports similar advantages. Had she not be given the flexibility, FLVS would have lost a teacher with 22 years of experience who simply loves to teach, "It's what I was born to do." Still, much as she loves teaching, she and her husband had other dreams. When Payne's husband suffered a stroke, they both knew they needed to make a move. "It had been a lifelong dream of my husband's to live in Arizona and when the stroke happened, it made me realize that we needed to go—you know, that realization that there's only one life to live."

The flexibility of Irene's job provided the added benefit of simply being able to arrange time with her husband. "I love it in Tucson. I plan to [continue teaching with FLVS] until I'm ready to retire." It's a win-win for all. Also, because Irene is in a different time zone from Florida, there is

an added benefit to students who like to work later at night.

There are some disadvantages for teachers. "You know that you won't be able to apply for jobs that aren't remote," Lohan notes, referring to jobs that required being Orlando-based, where Florida Virtual School is headquartered. There were, however, still opportunities for her. She applied for and received a promotion to a Curriculum Specialist position while she lived in Dallas.

Lohan was aware that distance could be an issue when she was required to come in for staff meetings. "I tried not to make it an issue by being willing to stay at a friend's home. Even though I knew I was entitled to reimbursements, I was happy to save the organization money whenever possible." Calculating travel guidelines and establishing clear expectations and procedures for out-of-state staff is yet another road that FLVS had to navigate.

Being remote also translates into less opportunity to socialize with colleagues. FLVS employees who live close to one another typically get together for occasional social gatherings. Some even work together a few times a month at local cafes or restaurants. Lohan and Payne both remark that this is simply something you have to accept, but they took full advantage of the times when they did fly in for meetings to socialize with colleagues after hours. Payne says that she comes to town a little early to join her colleagues for one of their work mornings at a local restaurant.

Overall, the flexibility that the remote teaching job provided for Lohan was something she had longed for in her previous job as a classroom instructor. "I would have loved to have participated in a job share or some kind of alternative schedule, at least for a time, when I had my first child," says Lohan. "District offices are happy to do that in summer when they think outside the box for teacher

schedules." But creative scheduling is usually not an option the rest of the year. While full-time teachers at FLVS work a full 40+ hour week like any other teachers, and while they still require dedicated time to focus on their work with students, the potential to create a schedule that works around the needs of the family as well as the students is a huge benefit indeed.

For students, there are also great benefits. Other than the one vacation day she took for the moving day, Lohan's move was invisible to students. "My students had no idea. It really didn't matter to them." Once they did begin to realize that their teacher was in another state, it was simply a matter of interesting conversation. "Some had relatives in the area, or they would tell me their own moving stories."

Students also benefit from the fact that FLVS can hire from the cream of the crop, nationwide, or they can retain outstanding teachers when families need to move. When students can interact with teachers across the country or even abroad, they gain the added benefit of new geographical and cultural perspectives. They may learn things, even in passing conversation, about that teacher's corner of the world. In the process, they also learn something about the way the global workforce operates. This is 21<sup>st</sup> century learning at its best.

## References

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