

## Open Letter to IT Leadership

The UC Women in Tech Committee wishes to start an honest conversation with you about how UC can better support and retain technology staff.

### CURRENT STATE OF UC IT

#### **In the post-pandemic world, staff are increasingly stressed and have more options than ever to take jobs elsewhere.**

In the virtual or hybrid work world, the increased demand for technology has required staff to support new technologies almost “overnight;” to do more and offer more technology, but stop nothing; and like everyone, to make huge adaptations in their personal lives. Staff are burning out, quitting their jobs, taking jobs with more flexibility, looking for better or different opportunities.

The world absolutely changed in March 2020. Work will never be the same. UC’s high standard of excellence depends in part on expert and dedicated technology staff. But it is not clear that UC has yet truly changed its approach to work and to supporting and retaining the best technology staff for continued excellence.

#### **There are bigger workloads and people feel like they never get a break.**

The UC WIT Committee has been a source of strength and support for our community throughout the pandemic. We hear especially from staff who are struggling with school and daycare changes, as well as the stress of supporting the transition back to onsite work. They share the common anxieties and concerns that so many are experiencing during this atypical time for humanity.

But since the winter holiday break, our conversations turn more and more to the issue of increasing work stress impacting members’ job or function as a team member. As staff leave, those who remain just take on bigger workloads, back filling colleagues who have left and supporting the transition back to onsite/hybrid work. Perhaps of deeper concern, is the fact that more staff report feeling a lack of enthusiasm and energy for their work – feeling like they never get a break.

UC needs to be able to recruit and retain top IT talent. Of course, employees should expect to work hard, tackle challenges, and rise to the occasion when necessary. At the same time, let’s envision a culture that supports them, does not perpetually overwork them, and helps them better manage their work and personal lives. We want to retain the prestige of UC being a highly desirable place to work, which will give us the edge in attracting and retaining great IT talent! We can likely all agree that there is no going back to how we worked before the pandemic. This excerpt from the CUPA-HR article [Higher Education Workforce Challenges and Opportunities](#) posted on the EDUCAUSE website in July 2021 sums up our current state:

*“Returning to ‘business as usual’ is not the strategy that will help us recruit, retain, and engage talented colleagues who could quickly be whisked away by the corporate sector, another college or university, or other local employers that adopt more forward-thinking approaches to work and commitment to their employees.”*

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

#### **Let’s create a new approach to work to retain talented staff and maintain UC excellence.**

We hope to start a conversation around UC about what we can all do to truly change how we support staff in this ever-changing work environment. Here are a few ideas to begin the conversation. Most don’t require

funding, but rather a change in mindset. Perhaps culture shift can begin by selecting just a few things from the list and adding in others in time.

### Prioritization with People First

- **Prioritization.** Clearly prioritize effort and make decisions to *not* do some work. Priorities should be made with staff attrition and burnout in mind, and to provide staff the time to focus.
- **Project staging.** Consider the timing and dependencies of strategic initiatives, reorganizations, system rollouts, and policy changes so that the same teams are not juggling too much at once.
- **What's working.** Leaders and managers new to UC or to their roles should take time to learn about all the work and programs already available that they may build upon. Avoid reinventing systems and programs that actually work well.
- **Burnout.** Show explicit leadership support for concrete changes to address burnout. Acknowledgment of the challenges with staff is welcome but ultimately hollow if, as often occurs, nothing actually changes.

### Flexibility

- **Leadership commitment.** Recommit to the schedule flexibility introduced in 2020 with the [ITLC commitment to alternative work arrangements](#), including the ability to work out-of-state so UC can stay competitive for the best staff.  
*“According to a [2021 report](#) from the Conference Board, corporate CEOs are acknowledging that recruiting, engaging, and retaining talented employees is core to their business strategy. U.S. CEOs also noted that the COVID-19 crisis has helped identify opportunities for change, flexibility, collaboration, and better use of technology. The report also highlights that the pre-pandemic model with 5-7% of employees working remotely will change to 20-40% post pandemic.”* (EDUCAUSE: CUPA-HR, July 2021)
- **Flexible schedules.** Increase or support continued flexibility in schedules, hours, and location where work occurs. Recognize that the key to retaining staff now is supporting their personal preference about where they work and, if possible, the times of day. This approach may help everyone focus more on productivity than being tied to a typical Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. mentality. Schedule flexibility is also key for caregivers, whether families juggling care for children or aging loved ones.
- **Family friendly.** Be sure to ask questions of women to fully understand and address their challenges and needs. Ensure that policies, practices, and language extend the same family flexibility and expectations to other genders.
- **Downtime expectations.** Clarify expectations for when people are available. Turn off notifications in Slack after work hours. Email or Slack sent outside of work hours should be queued to send later. Respect time zones for remote employees.

### Open Communications

- **Staff engagement.** Actively invite staff to help plan this new workforce culture, including iterations and adjustments. Be sure to engage women and people of color. Many have been disproportionately adversely impacted during the COVID-19 crisis due to childcare and other responsibilities. Implement practices that help staff feel seen and heard.
- **Authentic communications.** Be careful in communications to not write platitudes but to strive for authenticity. Be sincere and follow through. Be the model of the changes so urgently needed. Commit to making an explicit change and inviting other leaders to join you!
- **Listening and transparency.** Practice transparency and regular communications to keep staff in the loop to help lower anxiety. Set up listening sessions, alternating with town-hall type information-sharing sessions. Promote a culture of feedback, and create regular opportunities for staff to be able to be open and create space where critical or negative comments aren't taboo.

## Support for Teams

- **Equity for remote/on-site.** Model and encourage equity between on-site vs. remote employees including alternatives for informal mentoring, ‘facetime’ with leadership, planning career paths for remote employees, equipment refreshes, and desktop support.
- **Personal time.** Protect summer vacations and schedule events during prime work months rather than family time, that is, avoid June through August.
- **Thinking time.** Support mental health days once per quarter or as needed based on your ‘read of the room.’ We are not suggesting a day off work necessarily, we are suggesting a day at work where people are unburdened of demand. Where people have time to reflect or to just be quiet and still. Our society is over busy and ambitious at times, and the pandemic has exacerbated this.
- **Cross training.** Support professional development and business continuity by cross-training teams and where possible backfilling with temporary staff so no team is called to do too much for too long.

## Time Management

- **Less busy work.** Look for ways to reduce busy work. Perhaps reevaluate time-tracking systems if that data is not used. Or simplify approval processes. Not every action needs to be a committee decision.
- **Mindful scheduling.** Follow mindful business practices around scheduling meetings and allowing for production time. Consider whether routine (weekly/monthly) meetings are needed. Create a culture change that accepts cancellation of meetings if agendas are light.
- **Fed 50.** Adopt shorter meeting times, e.g. meetings that are 25 vs. 50 minutes. Or consider the “Fed 50” used at some federal agencies: starting a meeting 5 minutes after the hour, and ending it 5 minutes before the hour, e.g. 9:05 AM – 9:55 AM).
- **Friday light.** Make Fridays meeting-light, allowing staff to work individually, or connect less formally with colleagues. This also creates more opportunity for our staff organizations and communities of practice to come together, or to allow staff to schedule personal-care appointments.

None of us know exactly what the post-pandemic workplace will look like, but we can imagine a few of the components. We would welcome the chance for staff to partner with leadership in developing new positive approaches for shaping this environment which will, of course, evolve as our understanding evolves of how we can best work in the hybrid/remote workspace.

[University of California Women in Tech \(UC WIT\)](#)