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## Longevity of an expeditionary field instructor

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Liz Kirk currently lives in the Niagara region in Ontario and recently became a certified forest therapy guide. Her work as a wilderness trip guide and outdoor educator lasted into her late 30s. Her volunteer experience includes the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) and Get Kids Paddling. To help address limited mentorship opportunities in the industry, she was instrumental in the development of the Ontario Wilderness Leadership Symposium (OWLS) that began in 2015.

How valuable is the experience of an expeditionary leader over age 30 in Canada? The literature suggests that outdoor leaders with a higher quantity of experiences, both in individual and professional contexts, show substantial differences in decision-making and overall judgement when compared to novices with limited to no experience in the field (Galloway, 2007). One field instructor states, "As you get older, you get better at knowing how you work and what you need. You know yourself a bit more and so, just depending on the situation, deal with things differently" (Kirk, 2013, p. 66). Even if organizations value the mature decision-making and risk management experience of older outdoor professionals, high rates of turnover of these individuals are extremely common. Therefore, recruiting and retention of front-line employees is regarded by many program directors as "their greatest concern" (McCole, 2004, p. 328).

Use of the term career in relation to work in the outdoors is relatively recent (Allin & Humberstone, 2006). Despite opportunities for a diverse

range of professional development, the profession "generally acknowledged ... that it lacks a clearly defined career structure" (Allin & Humberstone, 2006, p. 135). Factors like a significant lack of mentoring opportunities and inadequate support to encourage longevity in younger professionals, combined with "limited opportunities for employees to advance up the career ladder," contribute to frequent replacement of individuals employed at the "field" staff level (Thomas, 2003, p. 59).

It remains unknown how many passionate outdoor professionals entering the field today earnestly intend on making this demanding lifestyle a long-term venture. Kirby (2006) suggests that working in the outdoors attracts "inherently transient" individuals, bound to move on from this type of work within a relatively short period of time, regardless of other factors. Field instructors may frequently be perceived by their employers as unlikely to demonstrate long-term commitment to their jobs. This is supported by the fact that individuals, who begin this work in

their twenties, frequently leave front-line field instructor positions to pursue a different career in human services or exit the discipline entirely (Kirby, 2006).

Perhaps due to a desire to share their love of the outdoors with others, many field instructors report altruistic reasons as among the most important for choosing this job (Marchand, 2009). Many individuals who apply for this work are “talented and passionate and eager to feel they’re doing something worthwhile” (Ferguson, 1999, p. 11). Most field instructors report personal growth as an important benefit of the job and many view “making a difference for students” and “living in the wilderness” as factors that are often positively valued in this role (Marchand et al., 2009, p. 368). From qualitative research on field instructors working in wilderness therapy settings in Canada, the job was seen initially as the perfect combination of one’s areas of skill and love of being outside in the wilderness environment, not to mention a “dream job” (Kirk, 2013 p. 63).

Outdoor professionals may find the satisfaction of the job so great, that they willingly opt to overlook things like the high intensity of such work, the lack of significant income opportunities, and the inability to have a permanent home or simple amenities of life (Ross, 1989), for at least a little while. Despite this, older, experienced, educated, and resilient outdoor professionals are “too often expendable” (Ross, 1989, p. 34) and risk exploitation, since “there seems to be no shortage of new people keen to enter the [profession]” (Thomas, 2003, p. 59). However, hiring and maintaining a staff of caring, dedicated, knowledgeable, interested and committed individuals is “fundamentally important to the viability of the organization” (Erickson & Erickson, 2006, p. 6).

### Demographics

Many of the individuals who begin work as outdoor professionals are “young, educated, single, and Caucasian” (Kirby, 2006, p. 79). A candidate hired as a full-time field instructor may

be required to have first aid training, a specified amount of wilderness guiding experience, and be a college graduate from an outdoor recreation program or related discipline (Russell & Hendee, 2000). Also known as “wilderness leaders,” “guides,” “outdoor instructors,” or “field staff,” teams of field instructors are usually responsible for providing direct care to participants, teaching wilderness living skills and ensuring the safety of the group, while effectively managing all aspects of multi-day remote wilderness expeditions. Kirby (2006) asserts that “only a limited range of individuals would consider work as a field staff fulfilling and enjoyable,” and attempting to find individuals from outside the standard demographic with similar sentiments would be difficult (p. 68).

Field instructor demographics show noticeable trends over time. Front-line work in the outdoors began from a “historically male-dominated culture and philosophy,” apparent through military inspired values such as physical competence and the common presence of male leaders (Allin & Humberstone, 2006, p. 136). Men and women are now more equally represented in field instructor roles and in some cases, women even outnumber men (Marchand, 2010). However, when examining comparative longevity, male respondents in one survey had reportedly worked as field instructors for an average of six months longer than females (Marchand et al., 2009). Employed in the 1980s, field instructors were commonly in their late 20s and early 30s (Birmingham, 1989), but today the average age is more around the mid-20s. Regarding education level, approximately 60% to 70% of current field instructors have a baccalaureate degree, commonly related to adventure education, recreation or social sciences (Marchand et al., 2009; Marchand & Russell, 2013). This represents an increase, as compared with the early 1980s, when those with undergraduate degrees numbered less than 40% (Birmingham, 1989).

Kirby (2006) suggests that the strong emotional bonds that develop between field instructors may be due to “the rather narrow demographic that characterizes this group of workers” (p.

78). Due to work in remote locations, the social network of field instructors may be largely comprised of young adults who work for the same or another nearby expeditionary wilderness program. Remaining with the same organization for several years, front-line staff may develop strong networks of support and common understanding within their peer instructors. A system of social support that is formed through communication with others, either personally or professionally, can assist field instructors in effectively managing the demands arising from their work (Kirk, 2013).

### **Work-Related Challenges**

Why do so few people in Canada seem to continue this work into their late thirties? Most field instructors “understand the challenging nature of continued employment in the profession,” yet how long each intends to remain in this type of work when they begin is commonly unknown (Thomas, 2003, p. 54). Disappointment surrounding the reality of the job and exhaustion from the increasing demands related to the lifestyle required for this work may unexpectedly motivate high quality field instructors to quit (Marchand, 2009).

Physical limitations or injuries may make the role unmanageable. The same could be said regarding limited and repetitive food choices. The grueling nature of the work can lead to field instructors who are burnt out and exhausted, both physically and emotionally, by the end of their first year. One study participant revealed she was often “absolutely spent because of all those relationships and asking kids questions and being fun and funny and engaging” (Kirk, 2013 p. 96).

Factors prompting one’s intention to turnover may also arise outside the work context. These factors could include strain on one’s intimate relationships, difficulty creating new relationships with non-coworkers, or a feeling of being “disconnected” or “missing out” on time spent with friends and family (Bunce, 1998; Marchand et al., 2009, p. 368). Perhaps personal goals to have a less intense work schedule and more free

time available motivate frontline employees to quickly move on to other fields where work and non-work aspects of one’s life are more easily combined (Marchand et al., 2009). Combining a career in the outdoors with the family responsibilities of motherhood was termed “particularly problematic” by female outdoor instructors in a study by Allin (2004, p. 64).

Leading remote trips in the backcountry may provoke feelings of isolation in field instructors. In Marchand et al.’s (2009) study, 48% of field instructors surveyed were single, only 9% were married, and 22% reported that their work had contributed to a breakup with an intimate partner. Another study found that a majority of participants were single (63%), while 12% were married and 25% in a relationship (Marchand & Russell, 2013). Field instructors who identified themselves as married or in a committed, long-term relationship reportedly felt more challenged with time and schedule constraints associated with their job than single individuals (Marchand et al., 2009).

Financial difficulty is another factor encouraging turnover. Early departures from those with post-secondary degrees may potentially stem from a realization of one’s monetary worth or an apprehension about getting trapped in a continually undervalued profession. Moneywise, some individuals feel “it’s not very easy to have what you need” and there’s a perceived expectation that field instructors would “live at a lower standard” (Kirk, 2013 p. 65).

What if concerns like those mentioned above were more commonly acknowledged and addressed by Canadian managers and directors of organizations within the outdoor profession? As a comparative example from elsewhere in the world, I will discuss Outward Bound New Zealand.

### **Outward Bound New Zealand**

When I visited in 2008, one of the managers informed me that the average age of their field instructors was 33. The 2021 Instructor Application form states that the average age of instructors is

30 years old, indicating this trend of retaining experienced field instructors has held constant for well over a decade. What is it that makes this example so different from the Canadian organizations that seem to have very few field instructors over 30 on their team?

The high value placed on their field instructors is written explicitly. The organization's website states "Our instructors are exceptional people" and their instructor application form states "Our instructors are integral to the high quality of the courses." The standard work schedule is also clearly laid out online, which includes 4 days off during course time, at least 5 days off between courses, not working more than 9 days in a row and getting 5-6 weeks off, twice a year.

During my visit to New Zealand in 2008, it became clear that this organization was reportedly having trouble with staff turnover: no one wanted to leave! I was informed that the institution had just invested over two years into gathering employee feedback during the process of reviewing their mission statement, organizational values, and program offerings. Each field instructor committed to a three-year contract upon being hired, but many continued to stay in a front-line role within the organization for a much longer period. Not only that, but Outward Bound New Zealand had been awarded the title of Best Place to Work in New Zealand (against organizations of a similar size) multiple times due to "a clear, strong vision, a real sense of community amongst its employees, a commitment to grow and develop its people, and a culture of high performance" (Scoop Independent News, February, 2008).

Outward Bound New Zealand is just one example where prioritizing growth, support and development of their front-line employees can create a strong team culture. For example, by providing community-based, on-site staff housing for the field instructors, as well as their families, the sense of isolation and disconnection of their instructors can be reduced. With a strong commitment to similar goals, it is my hope that this same effect and "problem" with turnover can happen in other places too.

### **Revolutionizing Field Instructor Staffing in Canada**

Can front-line work as a field instructor in Canada be perceived as a sustainable and meaningful long-term career choice? Organizations focused on staff retention would be able to reap the rewards of investing effort and resources into advancing the training and experience of their front-line employees. Retaining experienced field instructors means having staff who are better suited to deliver a higher quality program and make more appropriate risk-management decisions in a medical crisis (Galloway, 2007). The longstanding high rates of turnover in front-line field instructors in Canada signal a need for change in the profession. If organizations are serious about recruiting and retaining experienced staff that are high performing and committed to the organization, then organizations must invest the necessary resources to implement or adapt current policies and procedures to most effectively accommodate the needs of these individuals. The rewards are theirs to be gained.

### **Suggestions for Increased Longevity of Field Instructors in Canada**

High rates of staff turnover incur both direct costs, from continuous selection, hiring, and training of new employees, and indirect costs, such as lost knowledge, disruption of workflow, and reduced staff morale or uncertainty for those who remain (Kirby, 2006; Marchand et al., 2009). However, if managers were to play a more significant role in helping individual employees address the work-related problems they perceive, field instructors may be prevented from leaving the profession earlier than desired. Implementation of a diverse set of strategies to build supportive and sustainable work communities will be imperative to address the diverse work-related demands facing front-line employees (Thomas, 2003). If organizations offering wilderness-based expeditionary programs insist on providing high quality instruction from a dedicated, experienced and professional field staff team, they must adopt specific hiring and incentive practices to encourage this (Ross, 1989).

**Prioritize Opportunities for Debriefing.** The primary purpose of debriefing is to “allow participants to integrate their learning, thus gaining a sense of closure or completeness to their experience” (Hammel, 1993, p. 231). Usually verbal in format, debriefing can also take non-verbal forms such as journal writing, drawing, or taking time to be alone (Gass, 1993). Informal debriefing opportunities may occur during one’s time off or during moments shared between coworkers while still in the field or driving together to and from work (Kirk, 2013).

Since it may be difficult for field instructors to find appropriate times for debriefing during work hours, building a formalized and consistent debriefing process into the program policies allows field instructors to discuss incidents or ongoing issues in a confidential, professional manner. A formalized process could take the form of a phone call or a face-to-face meeting. If a front-line employee requires additional support, an efficient channel to access whatever is needed should be provided. An organizational culture that deliberately prioritizes debriefing is seen as essential to being effective as a field instructor (Kirk, 2013).

**Provide Honest Onboarding Processes.** First impressions made during the recruitment and onboarding phases may be important factors in longevity as a field instructor. Providing new employees with a clear and complete understanding of their job responsibilities, as well as establishing an early familiarity with members of the community with whom they will work, could reduce rates of burnout and turnover in recently hired employees (Marchand & Russell, 2013). Improvements to this initial training period could include increasing the time one spends shadowing an experienced instructor, alternating responsibilities in the field with other venues, such as the office or a base camp, and taking steps to ensure new field instructors are always beginning work within an experienced team and are not paired with other novice instructors until they feel more comfortable in this role.

**Provide Mentorship and Meaningful Feedback.** When mentorship is made a priority, newer field instructors can more easily feel part of the team and like they have someone experienced to ask when questions arise. According to Parsons (1992), “the cost of establishing and maintaining a mentorship program is insignificant” when compared to the low productivity of alienated new employees and the cost of recruiting replacements” (p. 8). If a formalized mentorship program is not already in place, individual employees should be encouraged to independently seek out mentors within the profession.

Especially when front-line employees are working with demanding clients in a multi-day expeditionary setting, the importance of offering positive feedback and individual recognition should not be overlooked by managers (Thomas, 2003). One field instructor said, “when you had someone you trust give you sincere feedback, it was invaluable” (Kirk, 2013, p. 105). Lack of constructive feedback from managers may be viewed by field instructors as a problem. One study participant saw a lack of collaboration with the managers as a negative aspect in the development of both the program and the individual employees, suggesting there wasn’t enough reflection done to make the team stronger and the experience better (Kirk, 2013).

**Provide Paid Instructional Clinics and Professional Development.** Over time, most outdoor professionals get involved in various certification courses and workshops. Participating in continual professional development to upgrade one’s skills and knowledge is an important way to combat feelings of stagnation in one’s work. Opportunities for professional development and training outside the immediate work context are considered important to maximizing an employee’s longevity (Thomas, 2003). Teschner and Wolter (1984) suggest that staff burnout is more to do with “an absence of ongoing personal growth” (p. 19) and less as a result of long working hours and high demands. Supporting employee participation in paid instructional clinics is a clear example of an organization’s investment in the professional development of their front-line staff.



**Create a Culture of Respect, Understanding and Openness.** It is imperative that the voices of front-line employees are heard by management. When issues are brought up, managers must take action to adequately address the needs of front-line workers, or risk losing these employees. Dissatisfaction may build over time for field instructors perceiving that “nothing’s changing” and that “the company wasn’t really addressing the issues” brought to their attention by the workers on the front-line (Kirk, 2013, p. 98). Several study participants mentioned feelings of not being heard or giving forth recommendations that were “falling on deaf ears” or “on ears that just really didn’t get it” (Kirk, 2013, p. 99). One participant stated “I remember really clearly feeling frustrated because I wasn’t listened to” (Kirk, 2013, p. 99).

A sense of disconnection from management was perceived by some field instructors to reflect a lack of support and feeling of alienation from the rest of the organization. Several participants stated that feeling unheard by management strongly influenced their eventual intentions to leave the position. One participant stated he’d had enough of “people not understanding the seriousness of what we are doing out here and what we need, in spite of requests and saying what’s going on” (Kirk, 2013, p. 101). Another participant attributed his perception that he was “bringing up concerns and being more or less ignored” by management toward his decision to leave the position (Kirk 2013, p. 101). A third participant attributed strengthened feelings of intent to quit from the frequent sense that whatever was requested from management, “that thing was never coming” (Kirk, 2013, p. 101).

Involving field staff in major decision making and in the development of policies and programs could help to increase retention. It has been found that such involvement allows staff to develop a stronger sense of ownership and acceptance, acquire a voice, and feel empowered (Mulvaney, 2011). More than just the nature of the work itself, Parsons (1992) suggested other significant variables such as relationships with colleagues and one’s sense of influence will af-

fect one’s sense of job satisfaction. Developing a culture of respect, where the work done by front-line workers is understood and valued at all levels of the organization, could reduce an employee’s feelings of being unappreciated and undervalued. Front-line summer camp staff who reported that they felt like a valued member of the team also reported greater group cohesion, resulting in greater investment in their work (Bailey et al., 2011). Therefore, giving front-line staff the opportunity to share their input and ideas for restructuring the program can help them to feel as though they are an important part of the organization and that their opinion matters.

**Offer Scheduling Alternatives.** A common complaint made by field instructors is the difficulty posed by the work schedule. Those endeavoring to settle into a longer-term job or career in the outdoor profession may face limited options when attempting to find a living situation that will accommodate their specific needs and preferences. Atypical scheduling of work shifts for field instructors often leads to inconsistent and segmented relationships with friends and family. In Thomas’ (2001, 2003) research on outdoor educators, common contributors to work related stress were identified most frequently as long work hours and time away from home, as these factors could lead to a perceived lack of stability or permanence in one’s relationships.

Perceptions that an employee’s work schedule is threatening their relationships outside of the workplace could be addressed by adopting creative approaches such as varying one’s work schedule, periodically spending paid time out of the field, or diversifying one’s work-related tasks (Marchand et al., 2009; Ross, 1989). Individualized revision of employee work schedules would ensure one’s time spent in the field is balanced by what one perceives as adequate time to maintain a healthy and sustainable living situation outside of work (Marchand et al., 2009).

**Change the rhetoric about turnover.** A Canadian field instructor recalled once being told by her manager, “It’s a dead end job. People who do your job, they do it for a little while and then they

move on, nobody does that for very long. You're a dime a dozen" (Kirk, 2013, p. 64). In Canadian organizations, the idea of this role as unsustainable is commonly accepted thinking among management as well as many field instructors themselves. One front-line employee stated, "Ever since I've worked in the field, people always speak to the fact that there's always a high turnover. Everyone knows that" (Kirk, 2013, p. 130). Front-line employee turnover is viewed as "huge," "quick," "inevitable," and "pretty fricking high" (Kirk, 2013, p. 65). One participant claimed, "every organization I've worked with has a high turnover rate" and he considers working three years or more as "very rare" (Kirk, 2013, p. 65). With this common rhetoric, is it any wonder that front-line instructors tend to leave an organization after only a short time in the role?

**Improve Financial Compensation and Recognition.** Front-line employees must be more appropriately compensated for the high levels of risk and responsibility they take on and the remote, challenging conditions they endure week after week. Additions like sick days, paid vacation, flexible scheduling options and health benefits could contribute to significant increases in employee job satisfaction, as well as organizational commitment and longevity. Outdoor leaders do not find monetary gains to be the most important reason for their job choice, but pay is frequently seen as a reflection of worth and thus, feeling underpaid may lead to frustration and turnover (Marchand & Russell, 2013). Further research needs to be done to determine what baseline pay structure field instructors consider adequate financial compensation for their work and what fiscal initiatives would motivate them to remain longer in their roles.

Staff retention was perceived by some study participants to be derived in large part from employees feeling valued, "taken care of" and "invested in" by the organization, as opposed to feeling "taken advantage of" (Kirk, 2013, p. 101). One field instructor stated, "In order to have retention of front-line staff, there has to be some sort of recognition of experience. You can't expect me to work a really hard job like this without a

raise, without any change to things" (Kirk, 2013, p. 101).

Financial compensation that increases in line with the rising cost of living is an important part of feeling valued, however this is not the only aspect (Kirk 2013). Career counselling initiatives that examine "a plan of development" focused on "growth, appreciation, investment in people," were also seen as significant and positive from a front-line employees' perspective (Kirk, 2013, p. 102). One example where a participant recalled feeling valued by the organization was when the manager "sat down and figured out a plan of how [he] was going to improve [him]self for work" (Kirk, 2013, p. 102).

A sense of making professional progress, shown by increased responsibility, tools, knowledge, power and influence, is also important to avoid a sense of stagnation in front-line field instructors. For example, getting a promotion to senior staff could lead to significant gains in experience, learning and professional growth. Field instructors mentioned their appreciation for the "opportunity to learn in new circumstances, new positions" and experienced "excitement at the prospect of growing professionally, doing something new" (Kirk, 2013, p. 76).

## Conclusion

Despite the common sentiment that turnover is inevitable, some field instructors manage to remain in this role for several years or even much longer. Important questions remain to be answered regarding the effectiveness of organizational initiatives focused on staff retention. Field instructors of all types are an understudied population and may be frequently overlooked due to the transient nature of their jobs and the uniquely remote context in which they work.

In conclusion, a non-linear career path is expected for this kind of work and that aspect of the outdoor profession may never change. The rates of pay for frontline work may never become competitive with some other fields. However, it is my hope that it will become more feasible and

accessible for frontline outdoor professionals to continue doing what they love for as long as they want, with the necessary support and adjustments made by their employers.

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