



PROFESSIONALIZING THE STAFF EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The Jewish camp experience intends to offer campers, parents, and staff enjoyable summers to remember for a lifetime. However, over the past several years, fewer Jewish college students and young adults have chosen to return to work at camp. We believe that one of the major factors in the inability to retain staff falls largely on a lack of professionalization in the summer camp staff experience.

After the conclusion of the summer in 2022, “likelihood to return” rates of staff members were at only 39%, as reported by FJC. This was lower than the rates of the previous two summers. In addition, “overall staff satisfaction” rates were reported at only a two percent increase from 2021, after dropping following summer 2019. Finally, the belief in professional growth and development while working at camp also significantly dropped (13%) from 2021 to 2022.

The reality reflected in these numbers is that the number of staff returning to camp is dwindling. Professionals in this field are aware that this is likely due to a combination of problems. However, professionalizing the job experience for camp staff is something that all camps have the capability to do, and this can look different for each camp depending on its resources.

While camp provides staff with highly valuable work experience, it can often be difficult to explain this to employers outside of the camp space. Thus, smaller solutions to the professionalization problem revolve around providing staff members with the language and skills required to market camp job experiences to future employers. Larger scale solutions can include providing outlined internships to staff members during both the summer and the offseason. One of the most effective recruitment and retention strategies that camps can use with their staff is incentivizing employment by offering new job titles and positions. This can provide staff with a belief and expectation that, within the camp work environment, there is opportunity for professional growth and development.

This report is meant to serve as a resource for camp directors and their teams to use in order to professionalize their camp’s staff’s experience. Provided are examples of possible internships that camps may offer to staff members, as well as outlining ways to better prepare them for future career opportunities. In creating this resource, we hope that camp leadership can use and adapt it to fit their camp’s needs, thereby combating the professionalization and staff retention problem.



IMPROVING EMPLOYER PERCEPTION

BACKGROUND

The camp community is very aware of how their experience working at camp can transfer into other workplaces. Despite the valuable skills staff gain and develop at camp, prospective employers do not always fully understand these benefits and are therefore less inclined to hire former camp staff as opposed to applicants whose work histories are more traditional.

Ten years ago, Anne Archer Yetsko published [an article](#) through the American Camp Association listing reasons businesses should hire former camp staff. Despite this effort, it is clear that camp experience is still seen as less worthy than other forms of experience. This view, held by both firms and staff alike, comes at the expense of the greater camp community, which loses wonderful

staff members who seek career advancement and new jobs in the summer. We believe this is an opportunity to work with the wider camp professional network, particularly with ACA, to improve public perception of camp work.

CURRENT PERCEPTION

One issue with the perception of the value of camp experience is that it is seen both as too specific and too broad. The skills that staff members gain at camp are not considered transferable. It is important to show both employers and staff alike that the skills they hone in on at camp can be applied outside of camp. For example, time management, cooperation, communication, and logistic experience are all part of working at camp, so we recommend publicizing this and similar information about former camp employment. Camp experience is also seen as non-specific, building little expertise. We recommend efforts to show that camp does build experience. As previously mentioned, camp skills are seen in some ways as specific to the camp environment, but it is also important to show that the notion that there is little to be gained at camp – an idea which is not uncommon among hirers – is incorrect.

Despite the clear benefits of hiring camp staff, employers are unaware and therefore neglect to value this experience. Thus, there is less career-building value to a summer spent on staff at camp, so prospective staff, as well as returning staff, take new jobs and internships instead of working at camp. With these individuals devaluing their camp experience in response to employers' non-valuing, a cycle forms. This cycle of staff attrition harms the camp community in many ways. Staff lose the chance to gain important skills as they focus more on how their experience appears on their resume as opposed to how they can use their experience on the job. Campers lose strong, knowledgeable counselors who leave camp in pursuit of more “professional” opportunities. Camp stops functioning as efficiently because experienced staff stop coming back, leaving newer people to take over.

CURRENT SITUATION

As part of our initiative to professionalize the camp staffing experience, we suggest a campaign to improve public perception of camp experience. With less than 4 in 10 staff members intending to return following the 2022 season, it is crucial that the camp community adapt to the reality of the labor market for young entrants. In 2021, Rakshitha Arni Revishankar [wrote](#) for Harvard Business Review about the importance of internships in job searches. With internships taking on more of a role than ever in employer hiring decisions, applicants are forced to put their career aspirations first. It would be naive to assume that this does not pierce the camp bubble, so we, and similar camp

professional organizations, must be more effective in marketing camp experience to employers and employees alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As explained in this report, FJC should build on past efforts, including those of ACA's Anne Archer Yetsko, to engage employers and to ensure that they understand the value of a summer spent at camp. In conjunction with the internship-at-camp portion of our initiative, we ask the wider camp community to collaborate on this point, ensuring that their staff have open career prospects because of their camp experience, not in spite of it. To ensure that camp can retain staff, it must engage in a multifaceted approach to professionalizing the camp experience; we assert that although camp already builds skills, it is important to present this effectively to an outside audience. In addition to creating more opportunities for specialized internship roles at camp, we recommend that camp try to shift employers' opinions in favor of camp experience. This would reverse the cycle which causes staff to leave camp, preserving and ultimately professionalizing the camp experience from within.



INTERNSHIP IDEAS

There are many different options for summer internships that staff members may be interested in at camp. This is a non-exhaustive list of internship templates that can be altered to fit the needs of each individual camp. These internships can be pursued in addition to or instead of a traditional counselor position at camp, and we recommend camps work with potential interns to find the best way to make these internships work.

CAMP PHOTOGRAPHER/VIDEOGRAPHER

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Taking photos and/or videos of campers, staff, and activities throughout the camp season.
- Managing relevant audio/video equipment.
- Creating promotional content.
- Compiling a record and/or database of all photos/videos taken.
- Editing all photos/videos as necessary.
- Uploading content to social media, websites, and other forms of communication.

Fields of Interests:

Media, Journalism, Art, Photography

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Managing all social media accounts that a camp may use, including but not limited to: Snapchat, Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter.
- Updating all social media platforms throughout the year.
- Promote upcoming camp fairs and/or events.
- Engage the community by responding to comments, setting up polls, uploading weekly, answering questions, and engaging with other social media pages.
- Communicating time-sensitive announcements to campers, staff, alumni, and prospective parents.
- Tracking and compiling data metrics to analyze social media engagement.

Fields of interest:

Media, Communications, Journalism, Public Relations

RECRUITMENT INTERN

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Tracking current enrollment and prospective campers/staff.
- Creating and implementing marketing media.
- Planning and coordinating informational sessions for campers and/or staff.
- Planning and coordinating year-round activities to engage campers, staff, and prospective families. These could be online.
- Planning and coordinating a camp booth at career fairs at universities.
- Leading or assisting with recruitment phone-a-thons.
- Assisting with the hiring process.

Fields of interest:

HR, Recruiting, Administration

INTERVIEWER

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Shadowing counselor interviews.
- Assessing counselor candidates.
- Managing and organizing counselor resumes/applications/profiles.
- Tracking prospective counselors
- Coordinating and scheduling interviews.
- Being a good judge of character.
- Understanding the camp's hiring needs.

Fields of interest:

Human Resources, Recruitment, Administration, Business, Management

COMPLIANCE OFFICER

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Completely understanding all the rules/regulations of childcare.
- Completely understanding all ACA guidelines
- Double checking paperwork/logs in each department.
- Shadow health inspectors/directors.

Fields of interest:

Law, Inspection, Compliance

SOCIAL WORK

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Serving as a general resource for mental and emotional health for campers and staff.
- Leading sessions on self-care and camper care for staff during staff training.
- Shadowing social workers during the camp season.
- Updating and managing camper databases (such as CampMinder) as needed.
- Attending camp conferences.
- Assisting with pre-screening campers before the camp season.

Fields of interest:

Social Work, Psychology, Psychiatry, Counseling

ALUMNI OUTREACH

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Engaging alumni through social media and programs.
- Assisting and coordinating fundraising programs.
- Updating alumni databases.
- Updating email databases.
- Reaching out to alumni with children who could be eligible campers.
- Developing and implementing alumni gifts.

Fields of interest:

Development, Communications, Hospitality

INFIRMARY ASSISTANT

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Assisting with daily medication distribution.
- Assisting with triage of campers & staff medical issues.
- Assisting with lice checks and treatment.
- Helping to clean and disinfect cabins, dining halls, and/or other spaces as needed.
- Following and enforcing COVID-19 procedures.
- Updating and managing participants' medical records.
- Organizing supplies & storage in the infirmary.

Fields of interest:

Medicine, Nursing, Health, Management

STAFF CARE INTERN

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Assisting with the planning and execution of staff week.
- Gathering and distributing snacks to staff.
- Planning staff development, bonding, and recreational activities during staff week and throughout the summer.
- Scheduling staff training throughout the summer.

Fields of interest:

Project Management, Event Planning

BUDGETER

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Reviewing a camp's budget, either during the summer or off-season.
- Reviewing supply requests and calculating funding changes.
- Proposing and analyzing ideas for fundraising.
- Supervising inventory-taking.

Fields of interest:

Finance, Accounting, Management, Economics, Actuarial Science, Mathematics

INTERNATIONAL LIAISON

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Being the point person for the concerns of international staff members and relaying to an appropriate supervisor.
- Helping international staff find phone plans and other necessary things that may not be immediately thought of.
- Compile resources for international staff members to help integrate them into the camp community.
- Coordinate homestays for days off.

Fields of interest:

International Relations, Travel Coordination, Hospitality

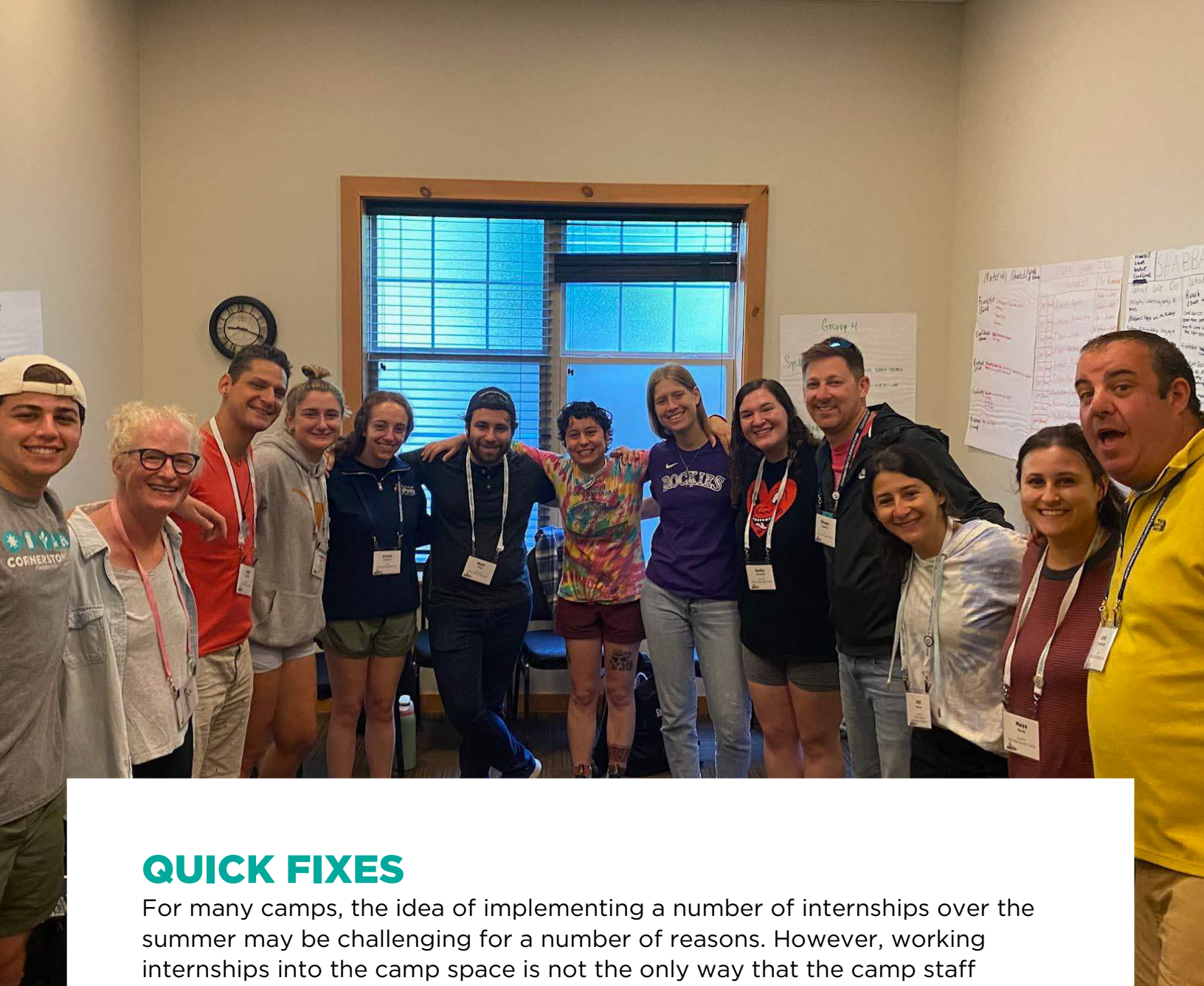
NATURE SPECIALIST

Primary responsibilities may include:

- Proposing projects for the camp landscape.
- Planning and running nature electives for campers and staff.
- Planning and running camp field trips, hiking, etc.
- Educating staff and campers about their surroundings.
- Executing initiatives to keep the campground clean.

Fields of interest:

Parks and Recreation, Natural Sciences, Conservation



QUICK FIXES

For many camps, the idea of implementing a number of internships over the summer may be challenging for a number of reasons. However, working internships into the camp space is not the only way that the camp staff experience can be professionalized. Additionally, just because a camp may not be able to offer internships does not mean that their staff members should lose the opportunity for professional growth while working at camp. We propose ways that camps can offer professional growth, skills, and opportunities to staff members that may be easier to immediately incorporate into staff development.

OFF-SEASON INTERNSHIPS

For some camps, the summer is so hectic that there may not be room for additional work to be done while the camp is in session. Offering counselors internships during the year, with the intention that they will return the following summer, is one way to avoid this while still adding a more professional aspect to camp. Pre-camp task ideas for interns include:

- Collect & manage staff forms
- Send pre-camp emails to staff and/or families
- Outreach events
- Social media
- Camp t-shirt design or other graphic design
- Plan and oversee pre-camp curriculum for returning campers
- Compile and organize a program bank of existing camp programming

RESUME WORKSHOPS

Staff members gain many important skills for their future careers while working at camp, and there are a lot of opportunities for camps to help support staff members in marketing those skills. Resume workshops can be held virtually or in person and can be led by older staff members or members of the year-round camp team. These workshops may include:

- Example resumes from older staff members
- Pre-written job descriptions for camp positions with language for staff to use on resumes, job applications, etc.
- General resume tips

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

Camp communities provide a wealth of opportunities for networking and professional development. While camps may not have resources available to build infrastructure for internships, there are many opportunities for networking with camp alumni or camp families. Networking opportunity and examples include:

- Virtual job boards with postings submitted by members of the camp community
- Presentations by various professionals with internship or job opportunities for staff members
- Job fairs for staff members to attend during the year
- Mentor programs for staff members and camp alumni



CONCLUSION

It is readily apparent that the world of Jewish camp has recently experienced difficulties retaining staff. With many exiting counselors reporting that they do not see their experience at camp helping them to achieve career goals, we recognize the importance of professionalizing the camp staff experience so that there is a better return on their time investment

In order to achieve the goal of retention, we propose a comprehensive approach. We realize that changes to camp culture and structure will take time to yield results, so we recommend both long-term and short-term solutions.

A key reason why staff perceive their experience as less professional is because it is difficult to market to other employers. Since the jobs they seek do not value camp experience, rational applicants will focus on experience their preferred employers value. FJC is a leader in marketing camp experience to employers through the many leadership and employment opportunities it offers. If camps follow that example, staff would return to camp knowing the jobs they take are desirable to future employers. We also suggest that this work can be done in partnership with other prominent camp associations, particularly ACA. This action would be the most gradual in its efficacy and would ultimately have very long-lasting effects.

Another recommendation we have is that camps create and promote internship roles during the summer. This would allow staff to work at camp while gaining internship experience, which would look better on their resumes and can be leveraged during job application processes. Since this would professionalize the camp experience from within, it would be a relatively seamless transition, though it would still be more of a long-term solution as camps refine their internships and the possibilities of this offering.

Finally, we also propose some quick fixes for camps to enact in the immediate future. These would be short-term solutions, though they could still have long-run effects; they are the easiest to implement and could be deployed relatively rapidly. Offering some opportunities for the off-season would help

staff gain experience outside of the traditional camp environment, while also facilitating their return the following summer. Other suggestions include helping staff with their self-marketing, because helping staff to individually show that their experience is valuable would be an unobtrusive task that would also yield quicker results than the sector-wide shift we propose as a long-term solution.

Overall, we propose a wide range of solutions with different timeframes. We do this because we recognize that the issue of staff retention, with regard to professionalizing the camp experience, is very complex and cannot be solved with one measure alone. By providing camps with a variety of tools to adapt as they see fit for their own environments, we give them the chance to stop the exit cycle in the short term and reverse this trend in the long run. As our recommendations are implemented, we expect to see a higher rate of staff retention and a rise in the perception of professional development opportunities at camp.

