

Understanding Turnover Among Pathologists' Assistants: Drivers, Impact, and Opportunities for Retention

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Introduction:

Turnover among laboratory staff not only affects workforce stability but also contributes to increased operational costs, workflow disruptions, and strain on remaining staff. A recent Q-Probes study reported that Anatomic Pathology had the highest median laboratory turnover rate (14.3%), highlighting retention as an important workforce issue (1).

Although burnout has been widely recognized as a contributor to healthcare turnover, less is known about the factors influencing turnover among Pathologists' Assistants (PAs). Understanding why PAs leave positions, what encourages them to stay, and how turnover affects pathology departments is essential for developing effective retention strategies. The objective of this study is to illustrate patterns of PA turnover, identify variable contributors to retention, and examine the perceived impact of turnover on pathology practice.

Materials and Methods:

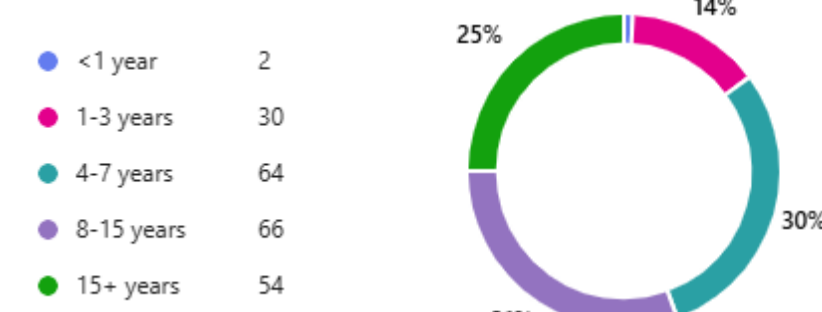
An anonymous survey was distributed to PAs, primarily through Pathologists' Assistant Facebook Groups and other social media channels, over a three-month period to assess job history, reasons for leaving prior positions, and factors influencing retention. Respondents were asked to identify primary and contributing factors in job transitions, as well as key elements supporting long-term job satisfaction.

Results:

Overall, 216 current (205) and former PAs (11) completed the Pathologists' Assistant Workforce Survey between April and June 2026. Of the current PAs, 155 identified as full-time, 8 as part-time, 20 as lead/senior PAs, 10 as travel/locum PAs, and 12 as holding a management/administrative role.

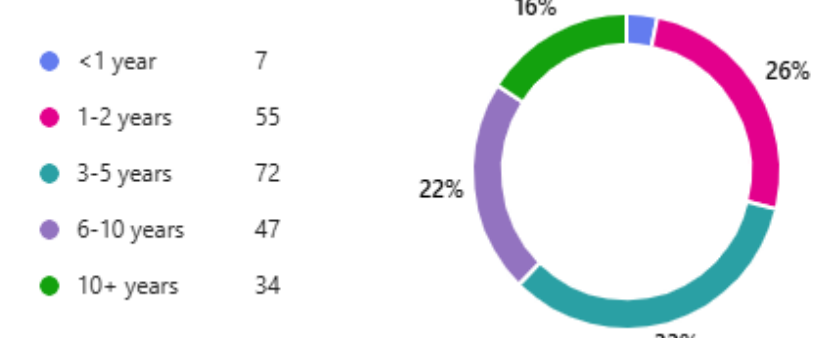
1. Workforce Profile

Approximately 86% of respondents had been practicing PAs for over 4 years, with 56% having more than 7 years of experience.



2. Turnover Patterns and Career Mobility

The results show that, on average, PAs hold between 2 and 3 jobs in their career lifetime, reaching peak tenure at 3 to 5 years.

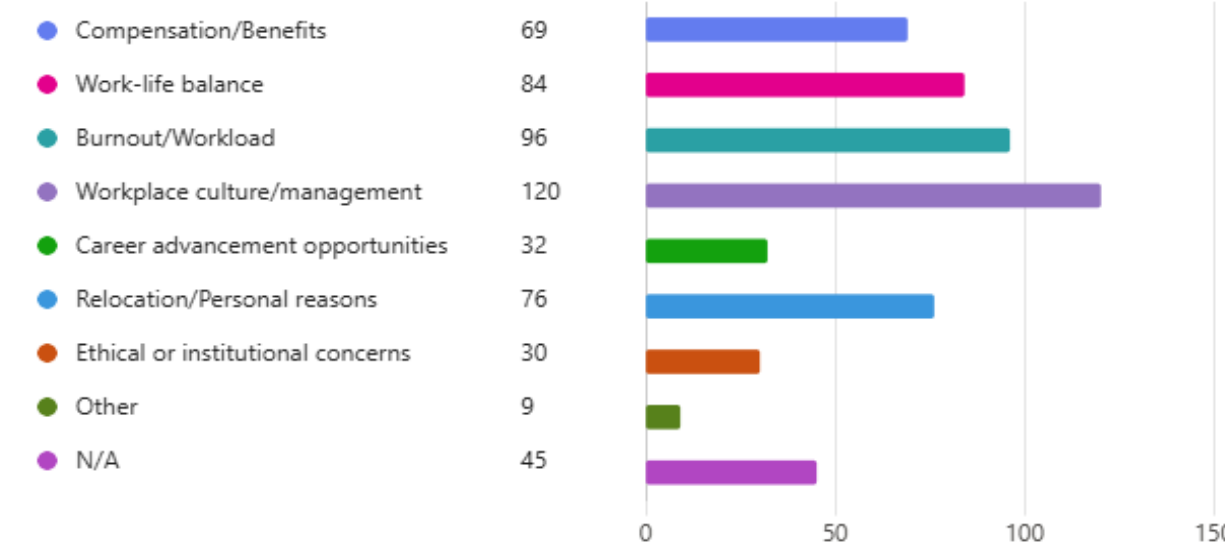


3. Most Common Reasons for Leaving Previous Positions

Respondents who had held more than one position in their career lifetime were asked to select their primary reasons for leaving prior positions.

When allowed to select multiple reasons:

1. Workplace culture/management (23%)
2. Burnout/workload (19%)
3. Work-life balance (16%)



When forced to select only one factor:

1. Workplace culture/management (37%)
2. Relocation/personal reasons (19%)
3. Burnout/workload (14%)



Key Takeaways:

- **87%** of respondents are **current, full-time PAs** and/or in leadership roles.
- **Most have held 2 or more jobs** as a PA (76%).
- The most common tenure per position was **3-5 years**.
- The most common reason for leaving was **workplace culture/management**.

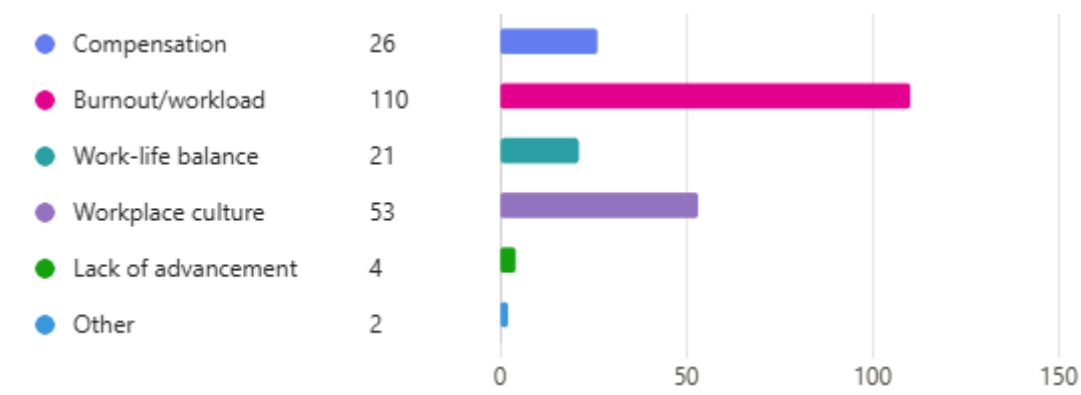
Results:

4. Perceived System Drivers

When asked what they believe contributes most to PA turnover overall, 51% of respondents suggested that burnout/workload is the primary driver of PA turnover. However, those who left past PA positions cited workplace culture/ management as the most important factor in their decision to leave.

Perceived cause overall:

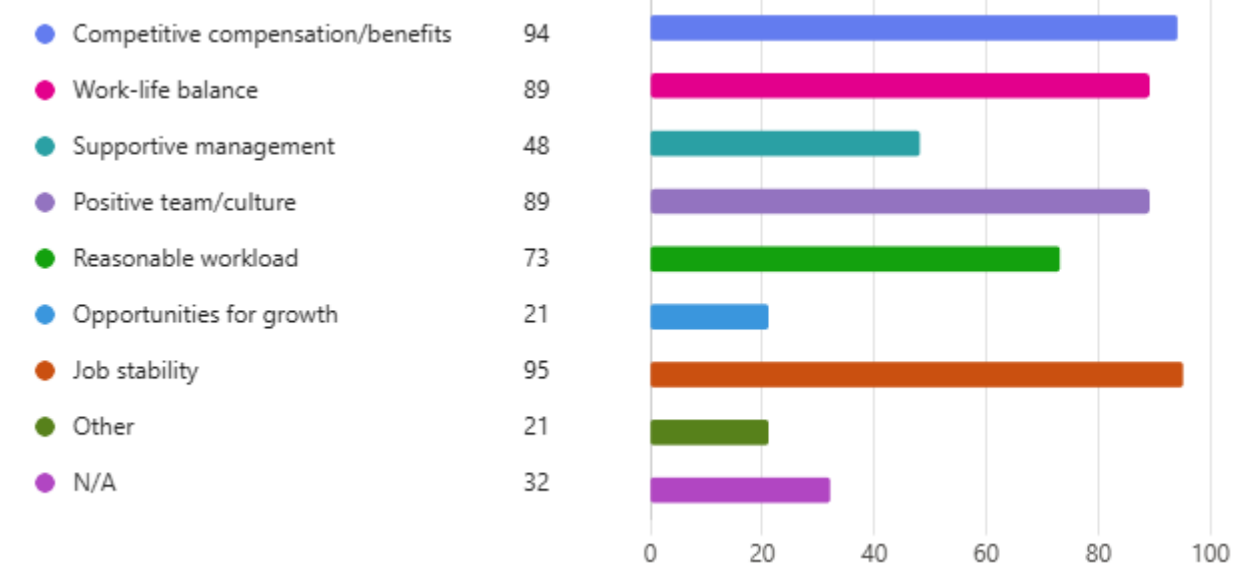
1. Burnout/workload (51%)
2. Workplace culture/management (25%)
3. Compensation (12%)



5. Retention Factors

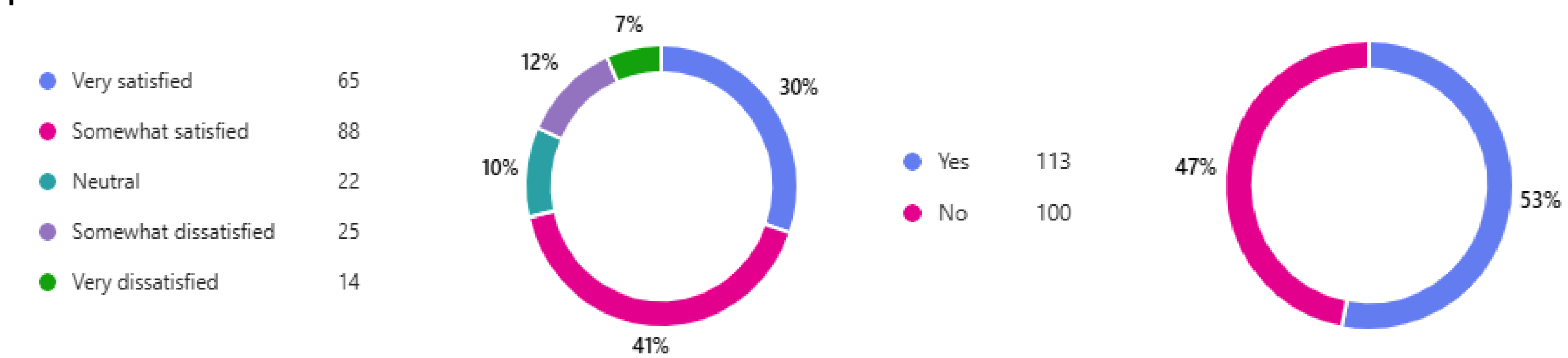
Respondents who have stayed in a position long-term (≥3 years) were asked to identify what factors contributed most to their staying. The top five most important retention factors were:

1. Job stability (18%)
2. Competitive compensation (18%)
3. Positive team culture (17%)
4. Work-life balance (17%)
5. Reasonable workload (14%)



5. Satisfaction vs. Turnover Risk

Respondents were asked to gauge their satisfaction level with their current position from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. Overall, the results were positive, with 153 of 214 respondents (72%) indicating that they were satisfied in their current position.



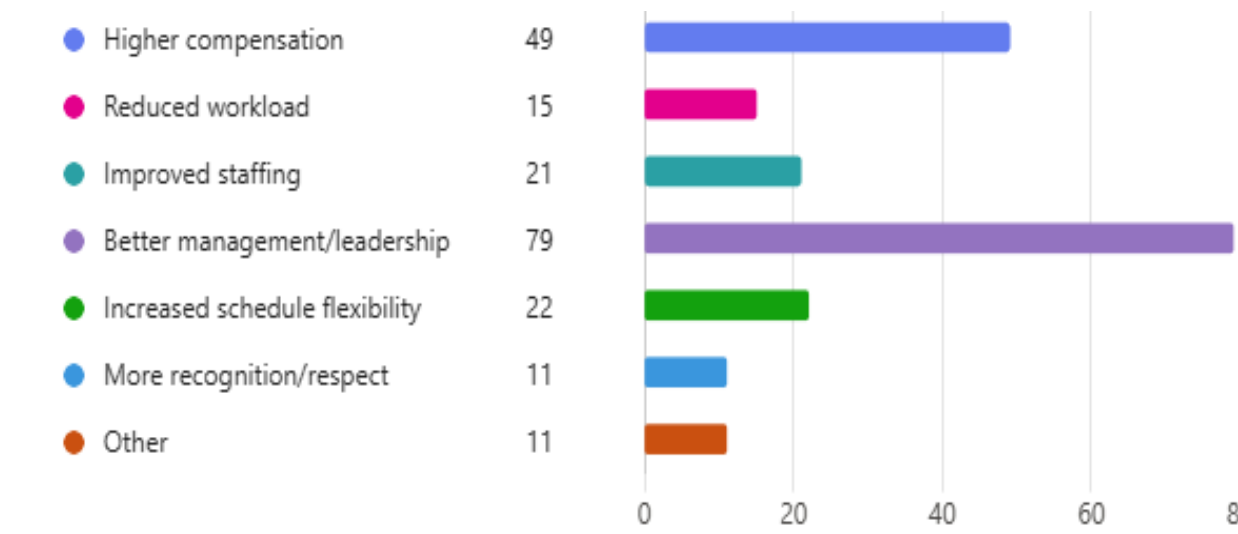
However, while most suggested high satisfaction with their current jobs, when asked whether they had seriously considered leaving their position in the past year, 53% answered that they had.

6. Preventability of Turnover

When asked whether meaningful changes could have convinced them to stay, 82% of applicable respondents selected 'yes' or 'maybe'. Indicating that the majority of turnover is potentially preventable.

What would have made people stay:

1. Better management/leadership (38%)
2. Higher compensation (24%)
3. Increased schedule flexibility (11%)
4. Improved staffing (10%)
5. Reduced workload (7%)



Key Finding:

Burnout and workload were viewed as the primary contributors to PA turnover overall, while workplace culture and management were the most common reasons respondents left individual positions.

These findings suggest that burnout may create dissatisfaction, but workplace culture and leadership influence whether employees ultimately choose to stay or leave.

Discussion:

Although respondents viewed burnout and workload as the primary contributors to turnover across the profession, those reflecting on their own career decisions most often identified workplace culture and management as the reason they left individual positions. This suggests workplace culture and leadership may influence whether burnout ultimately results in turnover.

Open-ended responses reinforced these findings and provided additional context. Respondents frequently described burnout and excessive workload as consequences of chronic understaffing, noting that employee departures placed increasing demands on the remaining team members. Poor leadership, ineffective communication, lack of recognition, and feeling undervalued were recurring themes, highlighting the importance of organizational culture in retention. Many respondents emphasized that improving staffing levels, strengthening leadership, and cultivating a supportive work environment would have a greater impact on retention than compensation alone.

Respondent Perspective:

"Constantly having to train new people while the workload was very high was so difficult... people would leave because the workload was too high, making it even harder on those of us left behind."

Another important finding was the disconnect between job satisfaction and turnover risk. Although 72% of respondents reported being satisfied with their current position, more than half had seriously considered leaving within the past year. These findings suggest that employee satisfaction alone may not accurately reflect retention risk and highlight the importance of proactive leadership, communication, and workplace collaboration.

Conclusion:

Burnout and workload were identified as important contributors to PA turnover; however, this study suggests that workplace culture and leadership plays a critical role in determining whether employees ultimately remain in or leave a position. Importantly, most respondents indicated they would have stayed—or may have stayed—if meaningful organizational changes had been implemented.

Perhaps the most encouraging finding was that 82% of respondents indicated they would have stayed, or may have stayed, if meaningful organizational changes had been made. Collectively, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that many drivers of turnover are modifiable and that investments in leadership, workplace culture, adequate staffing, employee recognition, and workload management may significantly improve retention and help break the cycle of burnout and attrition.

These findings suggest that retention efforts should extend beyond compensation and focus on strengthening leadership, improving workplace culture, ensuring adequate staffing, and supporting employee well-being. By addressing these modifiable factors, pathology laboratories may improve retention, reduce the operational and financial burden of turnover, and promote a more stable and engaged PA workforce.

References:

1. Novis DA, Nelson S, Blond BJ, Guidi AJ, Talbert ML, Mix P, Perrotta PL. Laboratory Staff Turnover: A College of American Pathologists Q-Probes Study of 23 Clinical Laboratories. Arch Pathol Lab Med. 2020 Mar;144(3):350-355. doi: 10.5858/arpa.2019-0140-CP. Epub 2019 Jul 17. PMID: 31313958.