

Washington State Legislative Service Project: Staff 2013

Full Report – Spring 2014

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The Legislative Service Project examines the views of key individuals involved in the Washington State Legislative process to determine how changes to this process have affected legislative civility. Study participants include legislative and agency staff, registered lobbyists and legislators who served during the 1990 to 2013 legislative sessions. Participant responses provide insight into the legislative process, public perception of the process, the dynamics of legislative civility and member interactions, and issues having an impact upon work performance from the perspectives of staff, lobbyists and legislators. The ultimate goal of the Legislative Service Project is to improve the current Washington State legislative process and better prepare the next generation of leaders for public service in the Evergreen State.

Legislative Service Project – Staff 2013

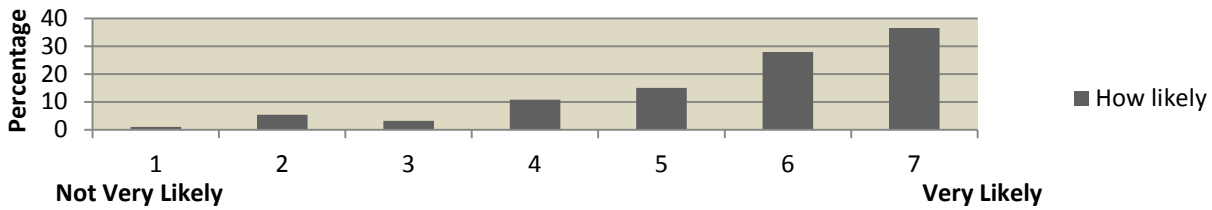
The staff portion of the Legislative Service Project focuses on Washington State legislative and agency staff members who worked in Olympia during the 2013 legislative session. Staff members were contacted by e-mail and provided a web link to participate in the research anonymously. Survey questions included the specific areas of: legislative public image and effectiveness, civility and working relationship, leadership/management styles, and work/sleep performance effects. Of the 397 staff members originally contacted by e-mail, 126 potential participants inquired with follow-up questions and discussions; ultimately, 93 staff members participated in the research.

Over 90% of the survey participants were legislative staff, with just over 50% of them being nonpartisan staff. The participants were highly experienced, with over 50% of them having over 10 years' legislative process work experience. Almost 2/3 of the participants were female. About half of the participants identified more closely with the Democratic Party, with the other half being evenly split between the Republican Party and self-described independents. Participants' preferences regarding fiscal policy issues were evenly distributed along the liberal to conservative continuum. In contrast, their preferences on social policy issues were heavily weighted toward the liberal end of the continuum.

Overview of staff responses on significance of the legislative service experience

*As seen in previous surveys conducted by the **Legislative Service Project**, the staff participants continue to find their work highly meaningful. They noted that prior public policy-related education, public affairs experience, and prior knowledge of the political process best prepared them for their current position.*

If you had the opportunity to go back in time and re-live your life, how likely would you be to once again choose to work for Washington State? Average 5.64



What were two jobs or life experiences which you believe *best prepared* you for your current position?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Formal education
- Experience and knowledge of the political process
- Prior similar work experience

Public perception of government

When evaluating previously recommended ways to improve citizens’ perception of state government, staff participants rated “improve communication to citizens” as the easiest to implement and that being able to “complete legislative work during the regular session” would create the greatest effect. The recommendation which was rated as producing the greatest difference between level of effectiveness and level of implementation difficulty was “improve communication to citizens.” The recommendation which was rated as most difficult to implement but capable of producing the greatest effect was “focusing on budget completion first.”

The results of previous legislative surveys recommended the following ways to improve citizens’ perceptions of state government. For each item please indicate how effective the item would be to improve citizens’ perceptions of state government and how difficult it would be to implement.

Effectiveness	Recommendation to Improve Citizens’ Perceptions of State Government	Implementation Difficulty	Difference
Average	Low (1) – 7-point scale – High (7)	Average	
4.36	Complete legislative work during the regular session	3.27	1.09
4.08	Work for the good-of-the-state and not be driven exclusively by personal/partisan agendas	3.59	0.49
3.87	Increase civility between/among legislators	3.31	0.56
3.85	Increase citizen education concerning the legislative process	3.38	0.47
3.77	Improve communication to citizens	2.43	1.34
3.57	Increase transparency of the legislative process	2.91	0.66
3.52	Increase citizen involvement in the legislative process	3.51	0.01
3.44	During the legislative session, focus on budget completion first	3.69	-0.25

In your view, what is one other action the Washington state legislature can take to improve its image?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Improve communication and engagement of citizens
- Increase government efficiency
- Work in a bipartisan fashion

Legislative effectiveness

When evaluating previously recommended ways to improve legislative effectiveness, staff participants rated “limiting how many committees a legislator can serve on” as the easiest to implement and that “party leaders encourage working cooperatively across the aisle” would create the greatest effect. The recommendation which was rated as producing the greatest difference between level of effectiveness and level of implementation difficulty was “increase legislative nonpartisan professional staff/resources.” The recommendations which were rated most difficult to implement and least effective were “increase the length of the session” and “change the rule timelines so bills move faster,” respectively. Participants in the survey attribute the large number of legislative special sessions to an inability of legislators to work together, poor budgeting routines, and insufficient use of allotted time. In order for work to be completed during the regular session staff tend to believe that the best actions would be for legislators to focus on passing the budget first and being willing to bargain and compromise. While some staff feel that one solution is to lengthen the regular session, they do not comprise the majority.

The results of previous legislative surveys recommended the following ways to improve the overall effectiveness of the legislative process. For each item please indicate how effective the item would be to improve legislative effectiveness and how difficult it would be to implement.

Effectiveness	Recommendation to Improve Legislative Effectiveness	Implementation Difficulty	Difference
Average	Low (1) – 7-point scale – High (7)	Average	
3.79	Party leaders encourage working cooperatively across the aisle	3.53	0.26
3.28	Increase legislative nonpartisan professional staff/resources	2.85	0.43
3.06	Limit how many bills a legislator can introduce	3.30	-0.24
2.67	Review the rules for ways to modernize them	2.80	-0.13
2.52	Limit how many committees on which a legislator can serve	2.39	0.13
2.46	Reduce the hours spent in meetings each day during session	3.24	-0.78
2.24	Change rule timelines so bills can move slower	2.76	-0.52
2.13	Incorporate a week break in the middle of the session	3.08	-0.95
2.08	Increase the length of session	3.80	-1.72
2.01	Change rule timelines so bills can move faster	2.98	-0.97

In your view, what is one other action the Washington state legislature can take to improve its effectiveness?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Improve legislative process and time management
- Move bills in a more efficient manner
- Encourage greater cooperation among legislators

Twenty of the last thirty years has required at least one legislative special session. Why do you believe there have been so many special sessions?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Inability of legislators to work together
- Poor budgeting process design and logistical support
- Insufficient use of allotted time

What needs to change for the legislature to complete its work during the regular session?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Focus upon and pass budget first
- Increased willingness to bargain and achieve principled compromises
- Disincentives for not finishing during regular session should be increased

Some legislators feel that the increase in legislative workload, moving from part-time to full-time, is the reason for not finishing during regular session and that the solution is to increase the length of the regular session. Do you agree with this recommendation?

Yes- 22%

Legislative civility and relationships

Legislative staff identified as the easiest to implement action to be taken to improve legislative civility and deepen relationships among legislators for them to “eat meals with other legislators,” and that the most effective way of improving civility is to “show respect for other people and their opinions.” The recommendation which was rated as producing the greatest difference between the level of effectiveness and the level of implementation difficulty was “show respect for other people and their opinions.” The recommendations which were rated most difficult to implement and least effective were (1) “for legislators to be examples of statesmanship” and (2) “change seating assignments so parties are intermixed,” respectively.

The results of previous legislative surveys recommended the following possible steps to be taken to improve legislative civility and build productive relationships. For each item please indicate how effective the item would be to improve legislative civility and relationships and how difficult it would be to implement.

Effectiveness	Recommendation to Improve Legislative Civility and Relationships	Implementation Difficulty	Difference
Average	Low (1) – 7-point scale – High (7)	Average	
4.26	Show respect for other people and their opinions	2.88	1.38
4.00	For legislators to be an example of statesmanship	3.13	0.87
3.73	Be willing to work with those with whom you don't agree on bill of mutual interest	2.93	0.80
3.58	Work with legislators from the other party on joint projects	2.37	1.21
3.18	Spend time with other legislators outside of session	2.53	0.65
3.02	Visit other legislators in their legislative district	2.63	0.39
2.97	Eat meals with other legislators	2.03	0.94
2.82	Hold social functions which are limited to legislators	2.15	0.67
2.25	Change office assignments so parties are intermixed	2.88	-0.63
2.13	Change seating assignments so parties are intermixed	2.58	-0.45

In your view, what is one other action the Washington state legislature can take to improve legislative relationships?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Show respect for others and their opinions
- Party/office space mixing and more collaborative work
- Visit other legislators in their district/outside work setting

For the following scenarios, rate how civil the following actions are:	Civility level
Very Uncivil (1) – 5-point scale – Very civil (5)	Average
An individual disagrees with you about a political issue and tells you their stance on that issue	4.42
An individual disagrees with you about a political issue and tells you that you are wrong	2.51
An individual disagrees with you about a political issue and starts an argument with you	1.81
An individual disagrees with you about a political issue and chooses to treat you differently	1.63
An individual removes your campaign sign from your yard due to difference in their political stance	1.16
An individual disagrees with you about a political issue and starts a fight with you	1.08

Technology impacts on the legislative process and working relationships

A number of survey participants indicated that increased use of new communications and information technology could improve the legislative process through enhanced constituent interactions via social media, remote testimony provision, and live video conferencing/broadcasting for interim work sessions and hearings. This technology can also be used to improve communication with district constituents by increasing communication options through which constituents can contact their representatives

What are ways new technology can be used to improve the legislative process?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Improve constituent interactions via more channels of contact
- Provide for remote testimony in more cases
- Video conferencing and broadcast of interim committee meetings
- Increase speed of the overall process in session
- Improve information storage and access to archival information

What are ways new technology can be used to improve communication with constituents?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Increase communication options
- Video-chat meetings and sessions
- Greater use of social media
- Electronic news and updates on-line

Legislative leadership and decision-making processes

*Results from past legislative surveys conducted as part of the **Legislative Service Project** revealed that legislators and legislative staff/lobbyists have quite different opinions concerning how legislators process information and arrive at their decisions. Staff members identified the reason for these differences to be the result of misperceptions of both the individual's own and other legislators' decision making processes. Staff were fairly evenly split between what type of legislative office leadership style is most effective, but strongly supported the view that the best legislative management office style to be one which focuses on **proactive listening and supporting employee careers**.*

The results of previous legislative surveys revealed that legislators and legislative staff/lobbyists have differing opinions concerning how legislators tend to process information and make decisions. Why do you feel that the staff/lobbyists who work closest with legislators have an understanding which differs from legislators concerning how legislators make decisions?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Misperception concerning what others are thinking
- Misperception of one's own personal decision making process
- Preference for a positive, idealized self-representation (best "spin")

What are ways legislators can better communicate to the public the process they follow when processing information and making decisions?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Communicate more often publicly their decision-making processes
- Maintain consistency in decisions arrived at as a legislator
- There is no need for improved communication

The results of previous legislative surveys suggest that legislators and staff members tend to have differing opinions concerning the preferred legislative leadership office style. Based on the top two selected styles, which legislative leadership office style do you feel promotes the most effective legislative work?

49% Emphasize teamwork and working together in harmony

51% Set the end vision and allow staff considerable freedom in how they get there

The results of previous legislative surveys also identified that legislators and staff have differing opinions concerning the preferred legislative management office style. Based on the top three selected styles, which legislative management office style do you feel promotes the most effective legislative work?

46.6% Focus on proactive listening to staff and making staff successful in their legislative careers

31.1% Provide the legislative assistant great flexibility in making decisions on behalf of the legislator

22.2% Decisions are cleared by the legislator for nearly everything

Sleep and legislative work performance

Staff members indicated that during the course of the legislative session there is a decline in their productivity, quality of work, personal and work relationships, quality of sleep, and personal and work satisfaction. Staff members tend to define productivity in their own work based on the amount of work they complete in a timely manner in the fast-paced environment of the legislative session. The majority of their office productivity is measured by not only these conventional measures of office work, but also based on constituent and legislative member feedback.

The results of previous legislative surveys identified that during session legislators get tired sooner, go to bed later, take longer to fall asleep, wake up more often at night, sleep fewer hours, get up earlier, and have a harder time getting up.

In general, do you feel that the previous statement matches most legislators' experience?

Yes 88%

As an employee, do you feel that the previous statement also matched your legislative session experience? Yes 81%

Beginning of session	Rate each of these items in relationship to the beginning and end of your last legislative session	End of session	Change
Average	Poor (1) — 7-point scale – Excellent (7)	Average	
4.24	Your personal enjoyment	2.71	-1.53
4.12	Your overall quality of life	2.66	-1.46
4.1	Your job satisfaction	2.8	-1.30
3.73	Your sleep quality	2.46	-1.27
4.32	Your family relationships	3.08	-1.24
4.11	Your personal attitude about life	2.87	-1.24
4.38	Your personal work productivity	3.53	-0.85
4.11	The number of mistakes you made (excellent=few, poor=many)	3.6	-0.51
4.0	Your work relationships	3.66	-0.34
4.15	The quality of work decisions you made	3.79	-0.25

What are ways that you measure productivity for yourself?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Work completed vs. not completed
- Work completed in a timely manner
- The quality of work and number of errors

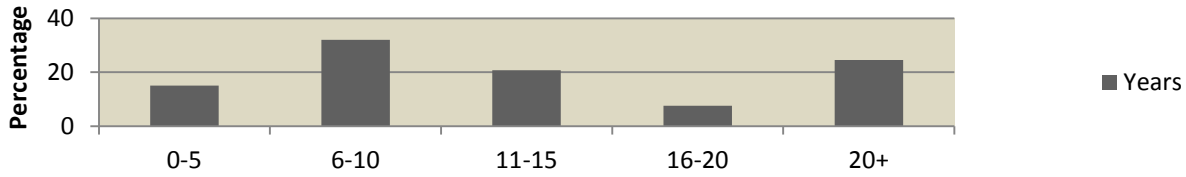
What are ways that you measure productivity for your office?

Most frequently mentioned:

- Work completed vs. not completed
- Constituent satisfaction and feedback
- The quality of work, number of errors, and exceeding expectations
- Do not currently measure office productivity
- Member satisfaction and success

Appendix: Political Personal Background

How long have you worked in a job which interacts with the legislative process?



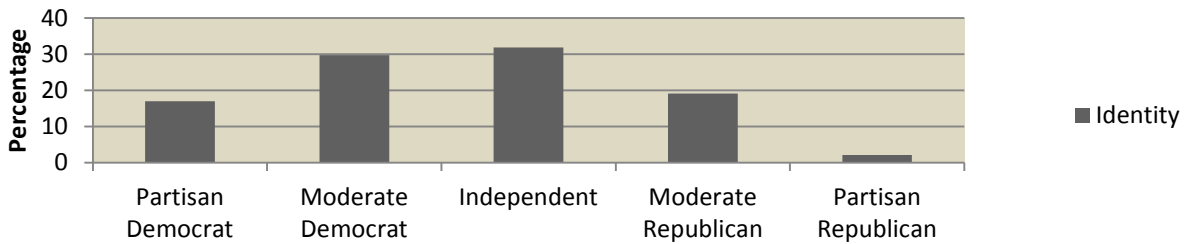
In which office/agency do you currently work?

Non-partisan staff	52.8%
Legislative Office	22.6%
Partisan staff	17.0%
Agency	7.5%

What is your gender?

Female	64%
Male	36%

In terms of your partisan identity, where do you feel that you fall on the following continuum?



On fiscal policy issues (taxes, government, spending), rate where you stand on the following continuum? On social policy issues (such as abortion, marriage equality, doctor-assisted suicide), rate where you stand on the following scale.

