Employee recognition, flexible work arrangements and career architecture were among the topics addressed by Human Resources leaders at the Staff Council's October meeting.

The meeting began with a presentation by Helena Rodrigues, senior vice president and chief human resources officer, who spoke of plans to increase the number of HR professionals serving the campus community.

With recent hires, HR has worked to bring in people with experience in health care, the private sector and nonprofits, she said.

“So, you are getting rich experiences, rich expertise and different perspectives, which I think complement the team and ultimately make us a much stronger team,” Rodrigues added.

Rodrigues joined the University in 2008 and was named the permanent chief human resources officer in 2020.

Diane Brennan, associate vice president for human resources, said the division is putting a focus on working directly with unit leaders through dedicated Senior Human Resources Partners and HR Generalists. This model connects units throughout campus to human resources professionals who can assist with issues including conflict management, policy navigation and more.

“Our first line of defense really for HR is working with your generalist and your partners and they’re bringing that additional expertise within the division to assist with those questions,” added Chante Martin, associate vice president for human resources.

Following their remarks, Rodrigues, Brennan and Martin fielded questions from the more than 150 people who attended the meeting, held on Zoom on Oct. 31.

One attendee asked whether there are ongoing conversations about flexible work arrangements for employees. Rodrigues said those decisions will likely continue to be made at the unit level but added that she believes flexibility will have to "become a norm" to retain quality employees.

“I think our staff, since the pandemic, have many more options than they've ever had before for employment, and we as the University of Arizona shouldn't think that we are the only choice for our staff,” Rodrigues said.

Human Resources offers a flexible work guidelines and resources webpage, including templates, trainings, frequently asked questions and case studies from units throughout campus that have offered hybrid work and flexible schedule options.

“To me, flexibility is something we should offer to everyone if it's possible given the job responsibilities,” Rodrigues said.

Rodrigues also addressed concerns about the discontinuation of the annual Service Awards luncheon to honor employees marking service milestones. One attendee said the program now feels impersonal.

The annual in-person event was paused during the pandemic, and gift distribution for 2020 and 2021 awardees was delayed due to supply chain disruptions. In 2022, the management of the Service Awards and retirement recognition programs was transferred from Human Resources to Arizona BookStores to take better advantage of its gift cataloguing and distribution expertise and because "it wasn't sustainable within our budget," Rodrigues said.

She also emphasized the importance of employee recognition at the unit level.

"I know that there was research done about how other institutions have deployed good recognition programs and, for a place our size, what was found to be the most successful is to really have it at a much more local level," Rodrigues told attendees. "So, for us it could be at the college or division level as opposed to trying to do an institutionwide program.”

In response to a question about whether the University Career Architecture Project has worked as it was intended, Rodrigues said it has helped communicate clear ideas of the functions and qualifications needed for various jobs, which she said helps with employee retention.

UCAP was launched in 2017 and the new career architecture took effect in 2020. The project was designed to support employee career progression, provide market-informed data for pay decisions and create a more cohesive culture for all employees by replacing the classified staff and appointed professional categories with a single employment category.
“The career architecture is a living thing that changes all the time in response to changes within the organization,” Rodrigues said. “It has also brought tremendous visibility to staff. There are conversations about staff that would not happen if we didn’t have a career architecture.”

Also at the meeting, Jessica Thornburg, senior director of strategy and special projects in the Office of Strategic Initiatives, shared details on the new Project Management Community of Practice, which will hold monthly meetings, periodic trainings, quarterly networking events and weekly office hours to support project managers throughout campus. Those interested can join the UArizona PM Community on Microsoft Teams[4] to receive information about upcoming events. Thornburg said the group currently has about 100 members.

The Staff Council is a shared governance organization that represents University Staff and Classified Staff. The council meets via Zoom the last Tuesday of each month throughout the year. Meetings are open to all employees. The next meeting is Nov. 28 at 2 p.m. [5]

More information about the Staff Council can be found on the council’s website [6]. Anyone interested in becoming a Staff Council representative can apply online [7]. Those who want more information can contact Melanie Madden [8], Staff Council chair and program manager for curricular affairs in Academic Administration.

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