

HOW WASHINGTON WORKS:

CONGRESSIONAL CAREERS

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GOVERNMENT

MANAGING YOUR CAREER ON (AND OFF) THE HILL.

It's safe to say 2016 will be a year defined by running. Presidential candidates are running toward party nominations, most of Congress is running for reelection and the Obama Administration is running toward the end of its final term.

But who's running Washington while everyone else is preoccupied with elections and legacy? Congressional staffers, that's who. Highly motivated members of one of the country's most select workforces.

Long hours? Check.

Low pay? Yeah ...

Unbelievable career experience? Definitely.

This highly ambitious, highly engaged workforce works an average of 53 hours per week when Congress is in session, according to the Congressional Management Foundation. Yet, despite the long hours, 80 percent of staffers say they're satisfied with their jobs. Why do they stay? Because nine out of 10 staffers say they believe what they're doing is meaningful.

But it is an election year – and transition is naturally on the mind. Most people don't stay on Capitol Hill forever (unless, of course, you worked for Robert Byrd or John Dingell ...). When congressional staffers do move on to new opportunities, 38 percent say it's for better work-life balance, and more than half of departing staffers cite a desire to earn more money.

Bloomberg Government did some digging to uncover best practices for staffers, no matter the phase of your career.

In the pages ahead, you'll gain insight into managing your career development, becoming a more effective staffer and positioning your experience to the private sector as well as get a few tips for finding that next opportunity – on or off the Hill.

Here's how to drive your agenda.

535 SMALL BUSINESSES (BUT ONLY ONE YOU).

CRAFTING A STANDOUT CAREER ON THE HILL.

Your Member is the CEO. The chief is the COO. And every office has a different culture. Precisely because of this mix of ideas and interests, most former staffers agree the career experience gained on the Hill is unbeatable. But if you don't actively manage your professional development, it's easy to get lost. The head of the Congressional Management Foundation shares how to make the most of your time on the Hill and take control of your career.

By David Boyajian

Brad Fitch is the president and CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF), a non-partisan resource for congressional staffers providing insight into how Congress really works. CMF regularly does studies analyzing the performance of Capitol Hill staffers, assessing how individuals and the institution can be better.

We spoke with Fitch about the current state of congressional careers and how staffers can take full control of their career development. Fitch, a former staffer himself, shared why he blames the media for misconceptions about Congress and how staffers can learn to love their careers in – right or wrong – the least loved American institution.

According to CMF, 75 percent of staffers cite “meaningful work” as their primary motivation for working on the Hill. But we also know the public’s trust in Congress is at historic lows. What’s the biggest disconnect between congressional staffers and the constituents they serve?

Well, I blame everything on “House of Cards.” I say that only half-jokingly! I think Hollywood does a great disservice to the American people, with the exception of “The West Wing” (which I think got the motivation of public officials down perfectly). But, in general, journalism’s business model is to run negative stories about the Congress. No one ever won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting that Congress worked this year. Because of that, most constituents feel their voice doesn’t matter because they’re constantly being bombarded with stories like that. In reality, their voices are dominant in the policy decision-making process.

In an election year, people are always thinking of their next step. What are the most common career concerns you see on Capitol Hill?

On the Hill, you have highly engaged staff members. Career issues more often have to do with the amount of responsibility a staffer is given or the ability to rise through the ranks. It’s not like “Did I get enough overtime pay?” It’s more like “Am I growing as a professional or contributing to the mission?” Everyone makes a sacrifice when working on Capitol Hill – you work longer hours and you get paid less. That goes with the territory. But what you get in return is an opportunity to make a difference and contribute to society. When that doesn’t happen, congressional staffers become dissatisfied.

Say you're in need of a new career challenge. What's the best way for a congressional staffer to switch offices?

Well, first you need to put in your time with your respective office. If your resume looks like you're going to hop off year to year, it will make you look unemployable, and no one will hire you. At a minimum, you have to put in two to three years, with the exception of staff assistant or legislative correspondent – with those you could probably move after a year.

And after you've put your time in?

Most smart staffers handle it the right way. There are a couple ways you could do it, secretly or openly. Unless you are certain you're getting the job, I don't see the need to inform your employer. Why create ill feelings and the potential to be labeled as disloyal? On the other hand, once a staff member gets to a position as a final candidate for a job, I believe it's ethical for the staff member to go to the chief of staff and be honest about the situation. If it's a good office and a good chief of staff, they will wish the staffer well—but also probably inquire about why the staffer is unhappy or if there is anything they can do. I tend to lean more toward the transparency route, just because deception is hard to pull off in a close-knit congressional office.

How can staffers take better advantage of career development opportunities?

In general, remember Congress is 535 small businesses with 535 different personnel policies. First, give yourself permission. Because the culture is not orientated to one of professional development, staffers tend to not want to leave their desks. We never do trainings for chiefs of staff when Congress is in session because they never want to leave. Seek permission not only from your chief of staff, but seek permission from yourself. Second, identify what you want to do. On the areas of legislative research, the Congressional Research Service has some amazing programs. Also, take advantage of the flexibility as well that comes with recess and other opportunities.

Learn more about the Congressional Management Foundation at congressfoundation.org

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY... YOU DO HERE?

POSITIONING HILL EXPERIENCE TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR.

Congressional staffers have a unique set of skills. Sometimes too unique. Whether you're looking to switch to a new office or to make a move to the private sector, learning to market those sometimes unexplainable experiences in Congress is essential.

By Mark Micheli

Finding the right match.

Elizabeth Hart was facing a new challenge. She'd been a chief of staff for seven years, a deputy chief for the three years before that. And she was ready to make a move. She wasn't secretive about it. Her member, John Carney (D-DE), was retiring and highly supportive of her finding that "next thing." A high achiever (like nearly everyone on the Hill), Hart was entrusted with a great deal of responsibility at a young age – part of an exclusive club of chiefs of staff under the age of 35. Her next big challenge? Explaining to people in the private sector those unique "in the trenches" experiences only congressional staffers can understand.

"Your skills do transfer to the private sector," Hart says, "But the transition can be hard. You have to find a place that's a good fit for you. Know yourself. Know your skill sets."

But coming from the high octane world of Congress, finding the right match can be difficult. "I spent time talking to different people, really getting a sense of what the landscape in the private sector looked like. I did a lot of due diligence."

Her conclusion? "Working on the Hill essentially boils down to problem solving."

Identifying a goal. Advancing an agenda. Anticipating what's coming. Managing relationships. All skills every effective staffer has developed – and developed well.

For Hart, after months of informational interviews and coffee meetings, she found the right fit for her, as a full-time problem solver and executive vice president at the lobbying firm Crossroads Strategies.

Channeling a service mindset.

How you encapsulate your experience on the Hill should be unique to you. When it came time to transition to the private sector for Steve Johnston, former deputy digital director for Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA), he saw his time on the Hill as defined by one word: service.

"The Hill is all about constituent services – I think that service mindset is a very valuable way of seeing things," says Johnston. "In the private sector, you can pluck out the word 'constituent' services and drop in the word 'customer' service. That's really important in private enterprise."

Now on Google's elections team, Johnston cites his experience working in Congress as the proving ground for learning how to navigate a large company.

"There's a lot to be said for the way things get done on Capitol Hill," he says. "You're talking about a pretty large bureaucracy, which requires you to build a coalition of supporters and be mindful of policy and communications. Any successful business in the private sector requires you be able to navigate similar bureaucracies and perform in stressful environments."

Building strong relationships.

Across the board, whether you're a problem solver or policy wonk, former staffers cite two essentials on or off the Hill: strong relationships and policy knowledge.

"Knowing that my road would eventually lead to the private sector, I was very deliberate in staying involved in all aspects of the office," says Ryan Guthrie, former chief of staff for Rep. Baron Hill (D-IN) and current group director for federal government relations at Coca-Cola. "That meant that I was at least fluent in any issues that came up."

"I took every opportunity to meet anyone I could on the after-hours circuit: the dinners, the meetings, etc.," says Guthrie. "Not with any specific target in mind, but the more people I know the better, and the more exposure I have to different industries and sectors will allow me to narrow my focus when I do leave."

Hart cited a similar approach when exploring an exit strategy.

"Chiefs of staff aren't the worker bees – the more that you are an administrator, the less you are a policy person," she says.

If you're going to stay in the policy world, as a lobbyist or advocate, "clients want to feel they are hiring people who really understand their issues but also bring the gravitas of having strong relationships."

And on building those strong relationships? "You don't just sit in your office," she says. Guthrie agrees.

"Going out of your way to get to know as many people on the Hill and off the Hill during your time there can only help you when you come out," says Guthrie.

"It's a time-consuming exercise, but it's worthwhile."

No matter your job on the Hill, if you're a staffer looking to transition to a new opportunity, remember one thing: You're not the first person to make the leap.

"Everyone has a story of someone who pointed them in the right direction," says Hart. "Washington is a town of pay it forward, pay it back. Really take the time to get to know other people – and be prepared to help others when it's your turn to pay it forward."

WONKS WELCOME:

THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE STAFFERS

Despite their long hours, congressional staffers display a high level of commitment to their jobs. Nearly 75 percent of respondents in a recent Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) / Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) analysis of congressional staff rated “meaningfulness of their job” as being very important to them — as opposed to only 35 percent of U.S. employees generally.

But beyond commitment, what makes a congressional staffer effective?

1

EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT

Time management is a function of trust, says Elizabeth Hart, former chief of staff to Rep. John Carney (D-DE). “Your member’s time is the most valuable asset that you have – being able to act as a surrogate gives you credibility and authority and allows you to serve as a huge time-saver for your boss.”

But, while managing time is important, it’s not easy. According to CMF and SHRM, congressional staffers don’t feel they have enough time to get their jobs done. In fact, nearly 50 percent of policy, legislative and research staff disagreed with the notion that they have enough time to get their assigned tasks accomplished. By managing your time effectively you’re not only able to get more done, but you’ll have more time to pursue career growth and networking opportunities.

“Good work will speak for itself,” says Hart. “Be proficient and good at what you do – but make time to build relationships.”

2

TEAMWORK (IT MAKES THE DREAM WORK)

Leave the ego to your member. The most effective staffers know the role they play in making their team function smoothly to help advance their boss’s agenda.

“You learn to work well under pressure, to be creative and to accomplish a goal when there’s no clear line from point A to B,” says Luke Albee, former chief of staff for senators Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Mark Warner (D-VA). “You’re working in a pressure cooker – you need to learn to multitask but also the importance of relationships and bridge building.”

Take into consideration both the goals that you want to accomplish and the goals of your member. When these are aligned, congressional staffers report being happier and more effective. Of those who remain in their jobs, 94 percent of congressional staff stay because they believe what they’re doing is meaningful, while 90 percent stay because they enjoy working for their lawmaker. Finding that meaning, says Albee, is essential. “You learn that if you take stuff on and believe in it, it’s not that hard to do really well.”

3

GRATITUDE, HUMILITY AND AWE

Give yourself some credit – you work in Congress! But remember what that means. “I miss getting to work in the Capitol, getting to walk up the Capitol steps every day,” says Steven Johnston, former deputy digital director to Eric Cantor (R-VA). “As much as Americans can be frustrated with government, to see constituents come to the Capitol and respect the place by wanting to see it in person – that’s a very inspiring part of the job.”

Yes, Congress is dysfunctional – some would argue by design – and you knew that coming in. While the hours can be long, the majority of congressional staffers report being motivated by their jobs, whereas only 35 percent of U.S. employees share the same sentiment. Put simply: Congress is a cool place to work. Having the humility and gratitude to appreciate it – and the awe and sense of history to respect it – ensures you stay grounded.

“As frustrating as the institution is, it is still a pretty amazing place,” says Hart. “If you’re already frustrated and you haven’t been there that long, it may not be the right place for you.”

WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN THEN...

MY BEST ADVICE FOR CONGRESSIONAL STAFFERS.

	Before/after	Best advice for congressional staffers
Elizabeth Hart 	Before: Chief of Staff, Rep. John Carney (D-DE) After: Executive Vice President, Crossroads Strategies	"Pushing yourself and being comfortable are fundamentally at odds with one another. Go to the meeting, expand your network, go do the things to push yourself. Maybe you feel that you don't understand the conversation, or the person who you want to have coffee with is more senior, but push yourself out of your comfort zone."
Luke Albee 	Before: Chief of Staff, senators Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Mark Warner (D-VA) After: Senior Advisor, Engage Cuba	"Decide what your goals are. Decide if it's a financial goal, a personal growth goal, an issue goal. Another important thing is patience and how you carry yourself on the Hill."
Ryan Guthrie 	Before: Chief of Staff, Rep. Baron Hill (D-IN) After: Group Director, Federal Government Relations; Coca-Cola	"Figure out what you want to do after you leave the Hill – do you want to do communications, do you want to do policy work, do you want to be a generalist. Once you figure out what you want to do when you leave, you can figure out how to build your best self to get there. Going out of your way to get to know as many people on the Hill and off the Hill during your time on the Hill can only help you when you take your next steps. It's a time consuming exercise but it's worthwhile."
Steven Johnston 	Before: Deputy Digital Director, Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA) After: Account Executive, Google	"It's always very important to keep in touch with people because, especially in D.C., knowledge and information is important. It's helpful to be able to talk with people and learn what's going on and be able to keep up."

Key Resources for Growing Your Career

[The U.S. Government Policy and Supporting Positions Book \("The Plum Book"\)](#)

[House Vacancy Announcement and Placement Service \(HVAPS\) Resume Bank](#)

[The U.S. Senate Employment Bulletin](#)

DRIVE THE AGENDA:

THE WAY YOU WORK, REDEFINED.

It's your job to make Washington work – and you know that's easier said than done. To master D.C.'s complexity and drive the agenda, you need data, analytics, insight – and speed. Bloomberg Government delivers that and more – designed for the way you work, ready for you to leverage. No matter where your career takes you, Bloomberg Government has got your back.

FIVE WAYS BLOOMBERG GOVERNMENT HELPS CONGRESSIONAL STAFFERS ON (AND OFF) THE HILL:

ON THE HILL.

1 Get the news you need.

Alerts and customized dashboards give you immediate access to the latest news on the issues that matter most to you, your boss and your constituents.

2 Understand the complete picture on legislation.

Fast intel for people who need to know everything. Get a comprehensive view of all House and Senate floor and committee activity.

3 Track and understand the rules that matter.

The single most complete, accessible and intuitive database of U.S. regulatory information at your fingertips.

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OFF THE HILL.

1 Expand your business.

On K St., one of your core responsibilities will be to identify new business. Bloomberg Government makes it easy by filtering through the best opportunities.

2 Understand your current clients.

It's not enough to bring in new clients if you can't retain them. Our proprietary data helps you get up to date quickly on everything your clients care about.

3 Receive real-time intelligence.

For anyone playing in the Washington game, real-time alerts on clients, competitors, prospects and partners allow you to identify risks and opportunities.

4 Benchmark your performance.

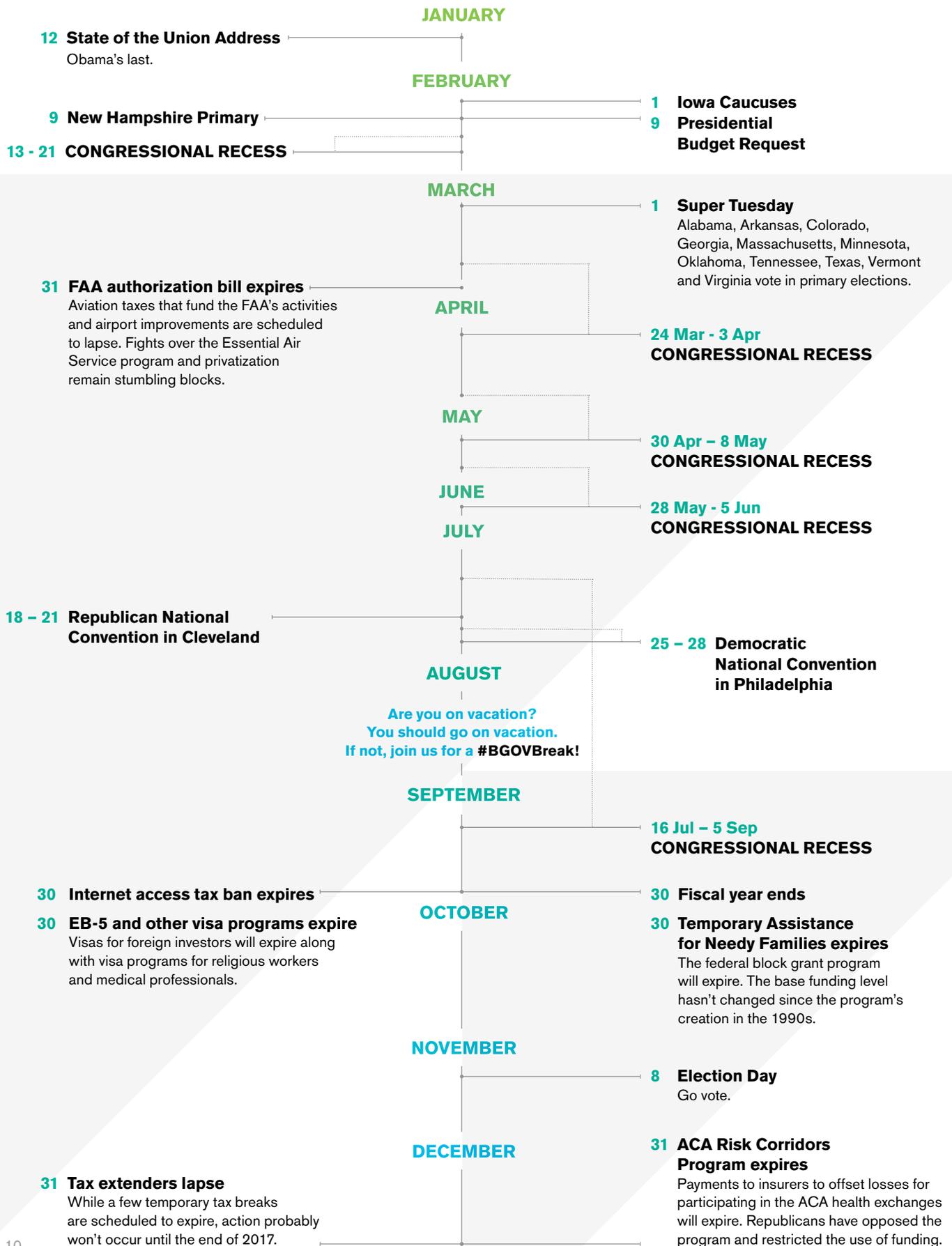
Being successful means understanding how you stack up. Review detailed performance metrics on every registered lobbying firm to understand how your strategy and performance compare to your competitors.

5 Continue to grow your network.

Being a Bloomberg Government client means invitations to webinars, executive dinners, our exclusive speaker series and the best events in Washington – so you get face time with the people who matter to your business.

OFF TO THE RACES.

2016 DATES YOU NEED TO KNOW.





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news and analytics, Bloomberg
Government's digital workspace gives
an intelligent edge to government affairs,
federal and contracting professionals
influencing government action.

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