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The New Agent: A Qualitative Study to Strategically Adapt New Agent Professional Development

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Abstract

The qualitative study reported here assessed the needs of agents related to new agent professional development to improve the current model. Agents who participated in new agent professional development within the last 5 years were selected to participate in focus groups to determine concerns and continued needs. Agents enjoyed networking and struggled with the time away from their home counties. Recommendations for improvement include integrating the idea of pre-entry competencies, developing online new agent professional development sessions, introducing new agents to existing communities of practice, developing new communities of practice, and developing more resources for new agents.

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Introduction

For Extension to retain agents, it is recommended that agents be prepared with critical skills during their first 3 years on the job (Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzales, Craig, & Haile, 2011). Kutilek, Gunderson, and Conklin (2002) define this time in an agent's career as "entry stage," which is when an agent must acquire essential skills to perform their job. Organizational strategies to teach recommended competencies for entry stage agents include peer mentoring programs, professional support teams, leadership coaching, and orientation and job training (Benge, Harder, & Carter, 2011; Kutilek et al., 2002).

In an effort to prepare agents to be successful on the job, K-State Research and Extension (KSRE) has offered new agent professional development for over 50 years. This professional development uses the multi-module professional development approach, which has been used in other Extension training programs successfully (Brodeur et al., 2011; Garst, Hunnings, Jamison, Hairston, & Meadows, 2007; Stone & Coppernoll, 2004). The KSRE model has been adapted through the years based on informal feedback from participants and needs identified by administration. All modules are completed by newly hired agents within their first year of service.

The current KSRE new agent professional development modules include the following.

Orientation: Agents generally attend orientation their first three days of employment. During orientation new agents begin building their network of professional colleagues, they learn foundational concepts of working for KSRE, and they identify Keys to their Success.

Basic 4-H Operations: Agents learn the mission and vision of 4-H youth development, the role of the 4-H Program Development Committee and other volunteers, and the importance of the Volunteer Information Profile process.

Communications: Agents learn and practice communication skills and concepts including websites, social media, presentations, news columns, and newsletters. They also discuss strategies for building relationships with clients, stakeholders, and local media.

Local Operations: Agents learn about improving relationships by experiencing the True Colors personality profile experience. Other topics include Extension laws and budgets, supervision of office staff, working with boards and program development committees, serving as a team member and balancing their personal and professional responsibilities.

Program Development: Agents are introduced to program planning, implementation and evaluation. They practice program development using the logic model framework. In addition new agents learn about program resources, professional associations, and developing public impact statements.

Review of Literature

The competencies Extension agents need to be successful have been explored at multiple levels, all with the goal of preventing agent attrition as prioritized by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges' Extension Committee on Organization and Policy's Leadership Advisory Council (ECOP LAC, 2005). Kutilek et al. (2002) suggest the professional development model should begin with entry stage agents in order to arm agents with the appropriate skills and competencies to be successful. While Benge et al. (2011) acknowledge the need for entry stage competencies, they suggest pre-entry competencies are also needed, which include self-management, program development process, communication skills, technical/subject matter expertise, and teaching skills. Organizational strategies to address pre-entry stage competencies are a pre-service examination of competencies before hiring and pre-service training before agents begin the job.

Job stress and work-life balance have been cited as a challenge to Extension agents' success (Ensle, 2005). Place and Jacob (2001) found that Extension agents who have time management and workday planning skills experience significantly less on-the-job stress than those agents who do not possess these skills. Because these skills can be improved through professional development programs (Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Place & Jacob, 2001), it stands to reason that professional development in these areas could lead to less stress for agents and better retention of agents. Place and Jacob (2001) recommend Extension address these skills through proactive professional development, like early stage professional development. Similarly, Fetsch and Kennington (1997) report research into work-life balance programming indicates improved time-management strategies can positively effect work-life balance and stress levels.

The format of new agent professional development continues to be explored in the literature. In a case study of Virginia's 4-H new agent training program, it was discovered agents need a training program that is flexible, focused, and face-to-face. Training should include theory, real world examples, and hands-on tools and resources (Garst, et al., 2007).

Online professional development has emerged out of cost-cutting necessity. Multiple studies have confirmed comparable results with online and face-to-face instruction (Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002; McCann, 2007; Neuhauser, 2002; Shachar & Neumann, 2010). McCann specifically focused on Extension professional development and found that, while achievement levels were comparable, Extension personnel preferred face-to-face professional development to online. When comparing a highly interactive online professional development approach with a minimally interactive online session, Extension personnel reached higher achievement with the highly interactive option (McCann, 2007). Research conducted on behalf of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP, 2005) regarding the attributes and skills of the 21st century Extension professional recommends investigation into technology and innovative ways to develop skills in agents.

Another format issue explored in the literature is timing. The timing of training can be as important as the skills included. If a concept is introduced too soon, the agent may not understand its importance, or too late and the agent may already have developed a work pattern that is less than ideal. Brodeur et al. (2011) propose the following research developed timeline for peak success of new agent professional development (Table 1).

Table 1.
Timing of New Agent Professional Development

Time Frame	Topics Needed in Time Frame
1st Month	office know-how, what is expected, overview of Extension
Months 2-6	what is a program, building a community network, resources who can help, developing objectives, working with a mentor
Months 7-12	starting a program, needs assessment, logic models, advisory committees, mentoring program, evaluation plan, reporting
Months 13-18	keys to a successful program and measuring success, getting involved, managing advisory committees, effective communication, time management and work-life balance
Months 19-36	meeting community needs, leadership, grant writing, marketing, team-building and managing conflict, how to mentor others

While timing of concepts introduced in training programs has proven important (Brodeur, 2011), research indicates training does not need to be adjusted based on agents' background and individual characteristics (Jahi & Newcomb, 1981). However, more recent research into agents' stress levels and job satisfaction indicates individual characteristics may make some agents more prone to struggle with stress and work-life balance (Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Place & Jacob, 2001). Research into

learning styles and distance education shows learning styles are an important characteristic for perceived effectiveness of online education (Aragon et al., 2002).

Purpose and Research Questions

It is recommended that new agent professional development be continually evaluated so it can effectively address the dynamic needs of Extension agents (Brodeur et al., 2011). The study reported here sought to add to the body of knowledge related to the assessment of new agent professional development strategies by assessing the effectiveness of one state's new agent professional development model. Moreover, increased communication between Extension agents and Extension administration is recommended to proactively address issues (Benge et al., 2011; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997), which the study did by asking new agents about their experiences during the first few years on the job. The following research questions guided the study.

RQ1: What are the most valuable aspects of KSRE's current new agent professional development model?

RQ2: What concerns do agents have related to new agent professional development?

Methods

The study used a set of four focus groups with representative members of the target population of KSRE Extension agents who participated in the new agent professional development within the last 5 years. Purposive methods were used to recruit participants of the member population. Due to the small number of people in this population, a qualitative study was ideal for eliciting quality in-depth responses. Thirty-two agents completed the KSRE new agent professional development within the selected time frame and were still employed by KSRE at the time of the study; of these, 26 agents were able to participate in the study. Three of the focus groups were comprised of early career new agents, while the fourth group included agents who had another career first and came to Extension late or returned to Extension after having another career in between. The mean age of this group was approximately 50. The focus groups were conducted October 15, 2012.

Focus group research allows researchers to determine emotional and unconscious motivations, which are sometimes difficult to assess in conventional survey research (Morgan, 1998). A protocol was developed to guide the focus groups using the procedures set forth by Krueger (1998b). The protocol was used to guide the discussion and to keep the focus groups consistent; it was reviewed by a panel of experts for face and content validity. The same experienced, formally trained moderator was used for all focus groups to ensure credibility. All focus groups were audio recorded for verbatim transcription. Verbatim transcripts are a more rigorous means of analyzing focus groups than relying on notes (Krueger, 1998a). Transcripts from the focus groups were imported into Weft QDA software to be analyzed for themes in accordance with Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method. The constant comparative method involves coding each incident into a category, comparing each incident to prior incidents; integrating incidents into categories of shared properties; defining the boundaries of categories; and writing theory, which consists of describing the participants' responses in terms of themes, organized by research objective.

The epistemological lens this research team, including the moderator, viewed the study through was that of people outside the industry of interest. Therefore, research and reports related were able to be free of bias. However, epistemologically the researcher should try to get as close as possible to the subjects (Creswell, 2007), which was done in the study through developing a familiarity and trustworthiness with participants in the beginning of the sessions and throughout the sessions.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are used to describe rigor in qualitative research (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010). Triangulation was used in the study, as it is recommended to gain a detailed and balanced depiction of the situation being investigated (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008). This consisted of multiple researchers analyzing transcripts to ensure validity of themes for confirmability. Additionally, to ensure veracity, an audit trail was kept. The moderator summarized participants' responses at the end of each focus group, allowing participants to make clarifications or additions as a means of member checking, which also aids the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2007). Credibility of the research was also aided by the verbatim transcripts helping to maintain richness of information, low-inference descriptors through the use of quotes, putting participants at ease through ice breaker questions, and having the participants serve as validators for each other's responses (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Flick, 2006; Krueger, 1998c; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

Even though the study was with one specific state Extension's new agent professional development, the factors were similar to other state new agent training programs, and thus results may be transferrable to programs with similar characteristics. To address transferability, as much description of participants' responses was given as possible (Creswell, 2007). The dependability of the study is aided by the audit trail (Ary et al., 2010). Confirmability of the study occurs through the audit trail and member checking measures (Ary et al., 2010; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Findings

RQ1: What Are the Most Valuable Aspects of KSRE's Current New Agent Professional Development Model?

Agents agreed networking was an important part of the new agent professional development experience. One participant expressed this by saying, "I think ...meeting the other new agents, that's I think probably the number one most helpful thing of the new agent training." Participants consistently indicated networking was one of the most positive and memorable aspects of the professional development experiences in their first few years on the job. Another participant shared "...networking of the agents at that time because you're all new and so just meeting those different people and then seeing them, and you know you can call upon them because you're all on that same boat." This was confirmed by another participant who said:

One of the things that I really liked and was very memorable is the group that we had our training with, I mean, we still greet each other, we know each other... That's probably one of my most memorable one and I would say that's your first block of friends that you have.

Some participants indicated they missed out on the networking experiences because of their location. One participant said, "I drove back and forth, so while everybody else was going out for dinner I was going home to a board meeting." Participants who lived close to where the sessions were held indicated they felt disconnected from the group and did not benefit from the networking opportunities.

RQ2: What Concerns Do Agents Have Related to New Agent Professional Development?

Time Management

When agents were asked how new agent professional development affected their job performance, every group initially mentioned the negative effects related to time out of the office. All groups only mentioned positive attributes when asked specifically about positive effects. One agent expressed this as: "It was disappointing because there was a good job on K-State's behalf promoting the new agents, so there would be people calling and stopping in to see the new agents, but they were gone to training."

Agents felt constituents in their home counties expected them to be in their home counties, especially because they were new to the Extension role and had not yet built credibility. The participants were also concerned about the amount of time driving to campus and overnight stays. These concerns caused stress for the participants.

Participants suggested converting at least part of the professional development to online. They believed this would allow them to receive the proper information, while remaining in their home office and being available for constituents. One participant expressed this by saying:

Time management again of it. It's just reviewing how long is it really going to take for this amount of information. And also ways to make it a webinar, if this is all stuff that we could do from our office, let's do it.

The three early career groups all mentioned online options without being asked. Once asked about moving content to an online format, the second career group indicated online would work for some topics and materials.

The timing of the sessions based on agents' start date was also of great concern in all groups. One participant expressed this as:

Programming needed to be earlier in training, along with local office operations. Talked to other agents who got started off on the wrong foot in office, and it takes a while to repair that relationship. Those two things should be the first training an agent goes through.

Other agents were worried they had been doing parts of their jobs wrong. One agent said, "...some of that stuff would have been really great to have had earlier instead of a year later. And I feel like - So I've been doing it wrong for a year...." Specifically, agents mentioned needing program planning and

communications early in their career.

Need for Resources

Extension agents indicated they needed more access to resources when they had problems or questions they couldn't answer. One participant said, "It would be nice to have like a list of resources or who to call...When you're new it's kind of hard to know where you need to go."

Agents expressed a desire to connect more with on campus resources like labs and specialists. One agent said:

We didn't get anywhere out of that office other than to go take a picture and go talk on the radio. But there's a whole lab you know, like the other agents I talked to about what they expect in this. You know, you maybe can see the plant lab, and when you get to the plant lab you do this, or when you get the soils lab you can do this...

Agents also saw a need for more resources for programming. One participant said:

Maybe if there's ever training about what resources are available and what resources are out there because I would hear from another agent during the trainings... if there was some sort of web page or something where people could come together in a forum setting and share their ideas...

Another participant said, "Yeah. I agree with that. You know teachers, they all kind of have a curriculum and every year, it's kind of the same thing and they all share it. Why aren't we doing that?"

Participants expressed a need for materials they could take away from sessions and refer back to when they were in the office. One participant said, "Maybe there could be a website or a training online you could refer back to when you know you had questions." Other participants wanted this more as a physical list. One participant said, "A list of specialists in our technical area, or even different ones cause we get calls sometimes we don't know how to handle." Whatever the preferred format for the resources, agents expressed a need for them to be user-friendly.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Agents in the study reported here indicated networking opportunities were the most valuable experiences gained from new agent professional development, which confirms the entry level needs of agents related to mentoring and support teams suggested by Kutilek et al. (2002). It is recommended that mentoring programs and networking continue. Agents who were close to campus and did not have overnight stays for new agent training indicated they missed out on networking opportunities. Networking should be included in the official schedule of new agent professional development to include all participants. Additionally, online opportunities for networking should be explored by state Extension programs.

Agents indicated they would like to see a community of practice where they could share programming and ideas for community engagement. It is recommended that state Extension programs share available communities with agents like eXtension and seek to create other online communities of practice within their states.

Additionally, the study confirms research by Benge et al. (2011), which suggests the need for pre-entry competencies. Agents in the study did not feel as though professional development related to program planning and communication were offered early enough in their career. Agents also expressed difficulty managing time and all of the aspects of new agent professional development. As such, the researchers in the study recommend a pre-entry phase of new agent professional development that includes program planning, communication, and time management.

Agents in three of the focus groups in the study were early career professionals, who may have different needs than past generations of new agents. Agents in these groups requested more online professional development options with less time out of the office. Agents in the second career group were older and did not offer the idea of online options, but when asked confirmed that online professional development may work for some topics. The study does not align with previous research that indicates face-to-face training is preferred by Extension agents (Garst et al., 2007; McCann et al., 2007). This may represent a shift in the preferences of new agents, who are a part of a generation that has used online tools and resources all of their adult lives. It is recommended that state Extension programs begin to transition at least part of their new agent professional development to an online environment. These opportunities should be as interactive as possible to increase effectiveness (McCann et al., 2007) and should be archived. This would help agents who expressed a desire for information they could refer back to when questions arose on the job.

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