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Job Satisfaction in the North Dakota State University Extension Service

Abstract

Retirement rates are on the increase. Levels of job satisfaction and changing demographics raise concerns about attrition in the North Dakota State University Extension Service system. The study reported here examined data provided from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire and a demographics questionnaire to describe the overall job satisfaction of employees in the North Dakota State University Extension Service as well as their satisfaction based on the 20 job satisfaction scales of the MSQ. Determining levels of satisfaction, especially in relation to specific aspects of the job, is a necessary priority in recruiting and retaining new employees.

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Introduction

Job satisfaction frequently has an effect on a variety of work-related outcomes, including job performance (Ziegler, Hagen, & Diehl, 2012). Job satisfaction may also affect attrition rates. Jewell, Beavers, Kirby, and Flowers (1990) stated that there is an implication of some degree of job dissatisfaction when agriculture education teachers decide to leave the profession. The same may be said in regards to Extension professionals. After studying job satisfaction for years, researchers have identified an assortment of variables related to job satisfaction to include: retirement, baby boom era, motivation, managing professional and personal time, demographics, and organizational restructuring. The North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension Service is facing job retention challenges within the organization. The first challenge and priority for the North Dakota State University Extension Service is the baby boom era. James P. Gorman, president of the Global PRIVATE Client Group made the powerful statement that "baby boomers fundamentally will reinvent retirement" during a press conference held by Merrill Lynch (2005). According to Borr and Young (2010):

This mass retirement of the baby boomer generation will add to an already tight labor market as three in four (74.23%) of Extension Professionals in North Dakota report they plan to leave their current Extension position in the next ten years (p.6).

Changing societal demands, philosophical thinking, the baby boom era, and market dynamics have altered how businesses, including the NDSU Extension Service, manage job performance and job satisfaction. The multiple expectations of a county Extension agent create a concern for motivation, or the lack of motivation, in the work environment. The expectations prompt the question, "what motivating factors affect job satisfaction in the work environment?" Factors could include: demographics, balance of work and family, recognition, working environment, advancement, competitive salary, and increased workload. Volsky and Aguilar's (2009) research indicated a "positive correlation with employee satisfaction, job challenge, performance measures, feedback on performance from superiors, job instrumentally, and job stability/security" (p. 3).

Job satisfaction is instrumental in maintaining a thriving work place at the North Dakota State University Extension system. Due to the unusually high attrition rate indicated in the previous research (Borr & Young, 2010), the study reported here was conducted to determine overall job satisfaction in the North Dakota State University Extension system as well as satisfaction in specific aspects of their jobs. Determining current levels of satisfaction, and identifying current levels of satisfaction with specific aspects of a ND Extension professional's job, may help to identify ways to reduce potential attrition.

Research Questions

The research reported here sought to quantify demographics and job satisfaction in Extension professionals in North Dakota. The objectives were to:

1. Describe selected demographics of Extension professionals.
2. Describe the overall job satisfaction of employees in the North Dakota State University Extension Service using the existing instrument associated scales.
3. Describe the job satisfaction of employees in the North Dakota State University Extension Service based on the 20 job satisfaction scales of the MSQ.

Methods

Data collection was accomplished using an electronic questionnaire administered through SurveyMonkey in the spring of 2011. Prior to data collection, Duane Hauck, Director of NDSU Extension Service, sent an email to all Extension professionals in North Dakota, notifying them of a research study to determine job satisfaction of NDSU Extension professionals. Director Hauck's email stated his support for the study and encouraged all Extension professionals to participate.

The following day, the researcher sent the initial email asking for participation in the study. The

message included the on-line link to the questionnaire. The initial email informed the Extension professionals of the confidentiality procedures of the study and stated that participation was voluntary. A second email was sent a week later requesting participation from those who had not responded to the first request. A third and final email was sent a week after the second email requesting a final response. There were 231 Extension professionals invited to participate in this research study. There were 149 Extension professionals who provided a completed response to the questionnaire, for a return rate of 64.5%.

Instruments

The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) collection instrument used in the study was developed by Weiss, Dawis, England, and Lofquist (1977) of the University of Minnesota Vocational Psychology Research. Overall reliability of the instrument as used in the study was measured with a Cronbach's $\alpha = .950$. Validity of the MSQ is derived from theoretical expectations called construct validity. Much of the evidence supporting construct validity for the MSQ is derived indirectly from construct validation studies for the Minnesota Importance Questionnaire (MIQ), based on the Theory of Work Adjustment (Weiss et al., 1977).

The long form of the MSQ, consisting of 100 items was used for the study. Each long form satisfaction scale consists of five items, with the items appearing in blocks of 20 questions (Weiss et al., 1977).

The 11-question demographic instrument was developed by the researcher and delivered through SurveyMonkey to collect data related to the NDSU Extension professionals' demographics. Face validity was confirmed through the use of an expert panel made up of NDSU Extension and Teacher Education staff. The questions were in multiple-choice format, and the respondents were allowed to choose one answer from the options listed for each question. The number of options ranged from two to six, based on the individual questions for both demographic and MSQ questionnaires. A submit button was located at the bottom of the Web page for the respondent to send the results to the database.

Results

Data was gathered and downloaded by the researchers in table format. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the data. As the percentages calculated by SurveyMonkey did not take into consideration persons who did not respond to specific questions, the researchers recalculated the percentages based on only the number of persons who answered the questions. The SPSS v. 19 (Statistical Package for the Social Science) was used to analyze the data.

Because the final rate of return was 65.5%, the researchers addressed the possibility of nonresponse bias. The respondents were divided into two equal groups based on their order of response. The first half of the respondents were labeled "early responders," and the second half were labeled "late responders" as per recommendation of Lindner, Murphy, and Briers (2001), which improved the power of statistical comparison. Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare the two groups. No significant differences ($p < .05$) were detected for the variables of interest.

Demographic Data Findings

Table 1 presents selected demographic characteristics of NDSU Extension professionals. This table includes frequencies and percentages of total responses (N=149). The majority of professionals (63%) were over the age of 41, and the majority of the professionals (77%) were married. Females were the majority of responding professionals (51%). Of the professionals surveyed, 53.7% had a masters' or doctoral degree, and 43.6% of the Extension professionals had been working for 10 years or less. The responding professionals (48.6%) also indicated they worked 46-55 hours per week. Forty-seven percent had an agriculture/natural resource emphasis. The data indicated that 77 Extension professionals worked in a county setting and, of those, 48 individuals worked in a county setting of 10,000 or less.

Table 1.
Demographics of North Dakota State University Extension (N=149)

Demographics	<i>f</i>	%
How old are you?		
18--30	27	18.1
31-40	17	11.4
41-50	26	17.4
51-60	61	40.9
60 and above	8	5.4
I choose to opt out	10	6.8
Gender		
Male	61	40.9
Female	76	51.0
I choose to opt out	12	8.1
What is your highest level of education?		
Bachelor's degree	61	40.9
Master's degree	52	34.9
Doctoral degree	28	18.8
I choose to opt out	8	5.4
If you work in county setting, what is the population size of your county?		
0-2500 people	14	9.4

2501-5000 people	19	12.8
5001-7500 people	6	4.0
7501-10,000 people	9	6.0
10,000-20,000 people	9	6.0
20,000 people or more	21	14.1
I choose to opt out	71	47.7
How long have you worked for Extension?		
Less than a year	13	8.7
1-5 years	24	16.1
6-10 years	28	18.8
11-15 years	16	10.7
16-25 years	34	22.8
26 years or more	25	16.1
I choose to opt out	9	6.8
How many hours, per week do you spend on your job, including travel, realizing some of you are part time Extension professionals?		
12-25 hours	8	5.4
25-35 hours	12	8.1
36-45 hours	31	20.9
46-55 hours	72	48.6
56-68 hours	18	12.2
66 or more	5	3.4
I choose to opt out	3	1.4
How many Extension professionals work in your office?		
1-Extension professional	12	8.2
2-Extension professionals	36	24.5
3-Extension professionals	20	13.6
4 or more Extension professionals	63	42.9
I choose to opt out	18	10.8
What is your primary location of work?		

County	77	52.0
Regional	12	8.1
State	49	33.1
I choose to opt out	11	6.8
What is your major employment emphasis?		
Agriculture/Natural Resources	70	47.6
Family Consumer Sciences	18	12.2
4-H Youth Development	17	11.6
Community Economic Development and Leadership	5	3.4
Expanded Food & Nutrition Education Program/Family Nutrition Program (FNP/FNP)	14	9.5
I choose to opt out	25	15.7
What is your family status?		
Single	16	10.8
Married	114	77.0
In a committed relationship	4	2.7
Separated, divorced, widowed	4	2.7
I choose to opt out	11	6.8
Are there children under the age of 18 currently living in your household?		
Yes	58	38.8
No	91	61.2

Table 2 describes the general job satisfaction of the NDSU Extension professionals based on demographics. The general job satisfaction scale is determined by the average of the 20 job satisfaction subscales. The MSQ uses the following Likert scale: 1=very dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=neutral, 4=satisfied and 5=very satisfied. The Likert scale was converted to general job satisfaction scales using SPSS v. 19. The minimum score possible is 10, and the maximum score possible is 100. As a group (N=149), the mean of general job satisfaction scales (M=78) would indicate that overall, Extension professionals expressed average levels of job satisfaction at their job; however, satisfaction ranged from a high of 100 to a low of 41.

Table 2.

General Job Satisfaction Descriptive Statistics



	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
General	149	41.00	100.00	78.00	11.16

Table 3 evaluates the scales of job satisfaction within NDSU Extension professionals. Scale scores are determined by summing the weights for the responses chosen for the items in each scale. Scale scores will have a range of (M= zero - 25). Collectively, the mean for Social Service (M=22.48), Creativity (M=21.98), and Values (M=21.45) ranked high, while the means for Compensation (M=15.40), Advancement (M=15.98), and Policies (M=17.45) all ranked low and had greater variability among scales than the higher mean scales.

Table 3.

The Means of the Job Satisfaction Scales of the North Dakota State University Extension Professionals as Compared to the MSQ Sample (N=149)

Job Satisfaction	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
Social Service	22.48	2.44
Creativity	21.98	3.07
Values	21.45	3.11
Variety	21.38	2.70
Achievement	21.21	2.94
Ability	20.93	3.54
Responsibility	20.89	2.85
Activity	20.77	3.05
Independence	20.62	3.11
Coworkers	20.44	3.63
Working Condition	19.44	3.77
Social Status	18.62	3.36
Security	18.40	3.84
Supervision	18.34	4.59
Authority	18.15	3.07
Recognition	17.99	4.35
Policies	17.45	4.11
Advancement	15.98	4.73

Compensation	15.40	5.14
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Discussion

Job satisfaction of North Dakota State University Extension professionals was the focus of the study reported here. The research data was limited to NDSU Extension professionals, and the researcher urges no generalization beyond this population due to a small N (sample) population. It is important that similar research be conducted in other states to determine if there are any generalities across the nation.

Demographic data (N=149) indicated a majority of Extension professionals (63%) were over the age of 41 and most were married (76%) with no children 18 years of age and younger living at home (61%). The responding professionals indicated females having a slight majority of the work force (50.7%), with 61% of Extension professionals holding a bachelor's degree. The responding professionals indicated that 77 Extension professionals worked in a county setting while 48 Extension professionals worked in a county setting of 10,000 or less population. Extension professionals responded that 40% have worked for 16 years or more and (42%) worked with four or more professionals in the same office setting.

The general means of job satisfaction scales indicate that NDSU Extension professionals have an average level of satisfaction (M=78). It is similar to other studies of agricultural education teachers in general, where teachers were fairly or moderately satisfied with their jobs (Watson & Hillison, 1991; Odell, Cochran, Lawrence, & Gartin, 1990; Castillo, Conklin, & Cano, 1999). Teachers seemed most satisfied with ability utilization and creativity scales of their jobs (Turayev, 2007, p.45). Similar conclusions were made in Watson and Hillison's (1991) data. It was indicated that teachers of agricultural education in West Virginia were more satisfied with the intrinsic factors of their jobs (creativity, social service, and independence [Turayev, 2007, p. 45]).

There are job satisfaction scales that emerge as significant characteristics of job satisfaction in NDSU Extension professionals. Extension professionals are most satisfied with the social service (M=22.48), creativity (M=21.98), and values (M=21.45) scales of their job. It is also observed that Extension professionals are least satisfied with scales of compensation (M=15.4), advancement (M=15.98), and policies (M=17.45).

The scales of compensation, advancement, and policy indicate a need to investigate what changes would be necessary to enhance the levels of job satisfaction. NDSU Extension leadership should explore ways to enhance the scales affecting compensation, advancement, and policy. Possible compensation solutions may include implementing a salary schedule, increased legislative funding, and merit adjustments. The implementation of additional funding could change some professionals' interest in advancement; other Extension professionals may be more interested in advancements in career opportunities. Possible solutions could include greater responsibilities, such as regional leadership positions in a smaller multi-county unit.

Extension professionals' satisfaction scales for policy indicate an area for further research. Does policy dissatisfaction come from NDSU policy, or do dissatisfaction levels derive from NDSU Extension policy? What specific policies affect job satisfaction levels?

It is important that NDSU Extension leadership address the issues of lower job satisfaction scales and explore ways to enhance satisfaction levels of the NDSU Extension professional family.

Extension leaders should review how compensation and advancement could be managed to meet satisfaction levels of Extension professionals and explore if Extension policy plays a role in job satisfaction levels. Further exploration is needed to determine if policy is important in the recruitment of new Extension professionals.

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