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Why Work for Extension? An Examination of Job Satisfaction and Motivation in a Statewide Employee Retention Study

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Why Work for Extension? An Examination of Job Satisfaction and Motivation in a Statewide Employee Retention Study

Abstract

Understanding motivation and job satisfaction is important for increasing rates of employee retention within Extension. The purpose of the study reported here was to explore factors positively affecting the motivation of Extension professionals in their careers. An online survey of Extension professionals in Colorado was conducted. Factors such as the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives, variety in daily activities, leave policies, and flexible scheduling were identified as positive motivators, but perceptions of motivators were significantly different between satisfied and dissatisfied employees. Recommendations for improving retention based on what motivates Extension professionals are discussed.

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Introduction, Theoretical Framework, and Review of Literature

As states explore the underlying issues contributing to the turnover of Extension professionals serving in county positions, it is critical that administrators gain a better understanding of what motivates Extension employees to stay in the job and what might motivate them to seek other employment. The question of what motivates a person within the various contexts of their life has been explored throughout numerous disciplines. In response to such questions, researchers and theorists have attempted to define motivation, suggesting that motivation is a:

- Predisposition to behave in a purposive manner to achieve specific unmet needs (Buford, Bedeian, & Lindner, 1995)
- Willingness to expend energy toward a goal or reward (Mamoria, 1995), or
- Psychological process that gives behavior purpose and direction (Kreitner, 1995).

Such definitions have been used within research to explore various facets of the motivations that people experience, including within the workplace.

Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959) examined the influence of motivating and maintenance factors in the workplace. The Motivation-Hygiene Theory (Herzberg et al., 1959) states that individuals are more encouraged within the workplace by motivating factors (e.g., having a vocation that is stimulating and fulfilling) than they are by maintenance factors (e.g., having a job that promotes job security, income, or other benefits) (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Herzberg, 1968). As suggested by Morrill and Morrill (1967), this is even truer in an Extension setting, where workers are known to have an altruistic orientation towards their work.

A recent study of Florida agricultural agents by Arnold and Place (2010) supported this position, suggesting agents' decisions to enter an Extension career path are most influenced by: background, career contacts, service to agricultural communities, nature of Extension work, position fit, and university-supported education. Research findings from the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (2007) also supported these findings, with two of the top five factors for respondent career selection being attributed to the opportunity to help people make a difference and their own previous 4-H experience. In a study of Extension center employees in Ohio, Lindner (1998) found that motivation factors were able to be ranked according to importance, with factors of highest importance falling into the motivating rather than the maintenance group of factors.

The importance of employee motivation can specifically be traced within Extension literature as far back as the 1960s (e.g., Giegold & Skelton, 1976; Lewis, 1972; Morrill & Morrill, 1967), with researchers even then recognizing the importance of combatting inadequate work climates and disconnected organizational expectations. It is little surprise that Extension continues to be interested in employee motivation, given the "chronic challenges" that the organization has retaining employees (Safrit & Owen, 2010, para. 1).

Using the Motivation-Hygiene Theory, Strong and Harder (2009) categorized various motivation factors that have the potential to influence Extension agent retention. The motivating factors identified by Strong and Harder included: strong and consistent training and staff development programs, mentoring programs, accolades for work well done, having an appealing vocation, a sense of support within the workplace, and overall job satisfaction (Strong & Harder, 2009). The integrative inquiry also found several maintenance factors had been linked to Extension agents' decisions to leave (Strong & Harder, 2009). These maintenance factors included: inadequate salary, poor pay to workload ratio, financial opportunities outside Extension, large and abnormal time obligations, issues balancing personal and professional life, and job stress (Strong & Harder, 2009).

Strong and Harder's (2009) findings were supported by a Delphi study of Extension professionals participating in the Western Extension Leadership Development program and the National Extension Leadership Development program (Kroth & Peutz, 2011). However, Strong and Harder (2009) also found "a number of recurring maintenance factors that agents were dissatisfied with, including salary and work/life balance. Fewer studies identified motivators that positively influenced the agents' level of job satisfaction" (Strong & Harder, 2009, Conc., para. 2). That study attempted to address this gap in the literature by focusing on what currently employed agents report motivates them in their careers.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study reported in this article was to explore factors positively affecting the motivation of Extension professionals in their careers. Specifically, the objectives were to:

1. Describe Extension professionals' level of career satisfaction.
2. Describe the extent to which Extension professionals agreed or disagreed that selected factors were positive motivators for their careers.
3. Determine if any significant differences in perceptions of motivators existed between satisfied and dissatisfied Extension professionals and, if so, to describe any differences.

Methods

The findings presented in this article are part of a larger study investigating Extension professional retention in Colorado. The reported study used an ex post facto design to study the variables of interest. A census was conducted of all Extension professional staff working in county or multi-county offices. At the time of the study, there were 140 potential participants.

The online questionnaire that was used for the study was developed by the researchers. Statements were derived from several sources, including previous related research (Benge, 2009), a focus group of agents within the state, and the researchers themselves. The entire questionnaire contained 87 questions, 21 of which were used to address the purpose and objectives of the study. Extension professionals were asked to (a) rate their level of job satisfaction/dissatisfaction using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Very Satisfied*, 2 = *Somewhat Satisfied*, 3 = *Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied*, 4 = *Somewhat Dissatisfied*, 5 = *Very Dissatisfied*), and (b) rate the extent to which they believed 20 factors were positive motivators in their careers using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Agree*, 2 = *Somewhat Agree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Somewhat Disagree*, and 5 = *Strongly Disagree*). The Likert scale was interpreted as follows: *Strongly Agree* = 1.00 – 1.50, *Somewhat Agree* = 1.51 – 2.50, *Neither Agree nor Disagree* = 2.51 – 3.50, *Somewhat Disagree* = 3.51 – 4.50, *Strongly Disagree* = 4.51 – 5.00. Demographic items asked respondents to identify: (a) Extension appointment, (b) if he/she was a county or area director, (c) job title, (d) if he/she had children, (e) marital/domestic partner status, (f) household income, (g) gender, (h) years of age, (i) years in Extension, and (j) staff size of Extension office.

The questionnaire was reviewed for content validity by a panel of experts composed of current county agents in Colorado and Florida. A pilot study was conducted to test face validity and establish reliability. Following the expert panel review and pilot study, the wording for several statements was modified, constructs reorganized, and additional statements were added to increase the likelihood of obtaining valid and reliable results. An ex post facto analysis of reliability for the final questionnaire yielded a reliability of $\alpha = .89$ for the positive motivators construct.

Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's Tailored Design Method (2008) was followed to collect data. Potential participants ($N = 140$) were contacted using the e-mail feature within Qualtrics. All e-mail addresses were valid. There were 115 questionnaires submitted for a final response rate of 82.14%. According to Moore and Tarnai (2002), when response rates exceed 80%, there is generally believed

to be minimal threat of non-response bias thereby alleviating the need to check for non-response error.

Respondents for the survey reported having an appointment in the following program areas: 4-H ($n = 97$), agriculture ($n = 37$), family and consumer science ($n = 27$), horticulture ($n = 27$), natural resources ($n = 30$), administration ($n = 26$), and other ($n = 16$). It is important to note that professionals in Colorado often have split appointments between program areas, with 4-H being a program area commonly included in split appointments. Thirty-one respondents were county or area directors. Ninety-nine respondents were Extension agents/associates, while 13 respondents self-identified as county 4-H coordinators/4-H program assistants. The majority ($n = 77$, 68%) of respondents had children, although 41 respondents reported having children who did not live with them. Most ($n = 82$, 71%) respondents were married, and many ($n = 72$, 64%) respondents lived in a multiple income household. There were more female respondents ($n = 73$, 66%) versus male respondents ($n = 37$, 34%). Respondents tended to be older (M Age = 45.3 years), but with few years of Extension experience. Forty-three respondents reported fewer than 5 years of experience, while only 11 respondents had over 20 years of experience. Respondents tended to work in offices with approximately eight co-workers, although working in smaller offices was frequently reported as well.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data for the first two objectives. An independent sample t -test was used for the third objective. Respondents who reported being somewhat or very satisfied were categorized as "Satisfied," while respondents who reported being somewhat or very dissatisfied were categorized as "Dissatisfied" for the purposes of the third objective. Similarly, the responses of "Strongly Agree" and "Somewhat Agree" were collapsed into a singular category of "Agree" for the third objective. The level of significance was set a priori at $p = .05$. Cohen's d was used to inform effect size as this statistic is typically used to represent "the magnitude of differences between two (or more) groups on (*a particular*) [emphasis original] variable" (Piasta & Justice, 2010, p. 181). The differences between the percentages of satisfied and dissatisfied respondents agreeing with each motivator were also calculated.

Findings

The first objective of the study was to describe Extension professionals' level of career satisfaction. The majority of respondents reported they were somewhat ($f = 53$, 45.7%) or very satisfied ($f = 40$, 45.7%) with their careers in Extension (Table 1). Only one person (0.9%) indicated he/she was very dissatisfied, and few respondents ($f = 16$, 13.8%) indicated they were somewhat dissatisfied.

Table 1.
Extension Professionals' Perceptions of Career Satisfaction

Level of Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction	f	%
Very satisfied	40	34.5
Somewhat satisfied	53	45.7

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6	5.2
Somewhat dissatisfied	16	13.8
Very dissatisfied	1	.9

The second objective of the study was to describe the extent to which Extension professionals agreed or disagreed that selected factors were positive motivators for their careers (Table 2). The majority of respondents strongly agreed the "Opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others" ($f = 86, 74.8\%$) and "Variety in daily job duties" ($f = 85, 73.3\%$) were positive motivators regarding their careers. The fewest respondents strongly agreed "Job security" ($f = 23, 19.8\%$), "Opportunity to be a part of the land-grant system" ($f = 21, 18.4\%$), and "Ability to spend time with spouse/family at work-related events" ($f = 11, 9.5\%$) were positive motivators.

Table 2.
Extension Professionals' Perceptions of Positive Motivators

Motivator	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither A/D	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>
	%	%	%	%	%
Opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others	86 74.8	27 23.5	1 .9	1 .9	-- --
Variety in daily job duties	85 73.3	28 24.1	1 .9	2 1.7	-- --
Generous family emergency leave and sick leave policies in Extension	62 53.4	33 28.4	13 11.2	5 4.3	3 2.6
Flexible scheduling	59 51.3	43 37.4	9 7.8	3 2.6	1 .9
Opportunity to work with youth in my community	58 50.0	25 21.6	21 18.1	8 6.9	4 3.4
Ability to chart my own course and design programming within my areas of	57 49.1	47 40.5	8 6.9	4 3.4	-- --

interest					
Friendships with other agents	46 39.7	47 40.5	16 13.8	4 3.4	3 2.6
Ability to network with other agents at events and activities	43 37.1	49 42.2	17 14.7	3 2.6	4 3.4
The co-workers in my office are a positive reason to come to work every day	38 33.0	56 48.7	15 13.0	5 4.3	1 .9
Opportunity to work with adults in my community	38 33.0	48 41.7	19 16.5	8 7.0	2 1.7
Building lifelong relationships	38 33.0	45 39.1	24 20.9	6 5.2	2 1.7
Opportunity to work with volunteers in my community	35 30.4	54 47.0	17 14.8	8 7.0	1 .9
Teamwork opportunities	35 30.2	53 45.7	17 14.7	6 5.2	5 4.3
Professional development opportunities	34 29.6	58 50.4	12 10.4	10 8.7	1 .9
Being a key leader in my community	34 29.3	41 35.3	16 13.8	15 12.9	10 8.6
Extension is more of a lifestyle than a job	30 25.9	45 38.8	17 14.7	19 16.4	5 4.3
Opportunity to work with community leaders	29 25.0	48 41.4	28 24.1	10 8.6	1 .9
Job security	23 19.8	39 33.6	26 22.4	19 16.4	9 7.8
Opportunity to be a part of the land grant system	21 18.4	39 34.2	38 33.3	11 9.5	5 4.4
Ability to spend time with spouse/family at	11 9.5	26 22.4	38 32.8	23 19.8	18 15.5

work-related events					
Note. Construct M = 2.02, SD = .55. Scale: 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Somewhat Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Disagree, and 5 = Strongly Disagree.					

The third objective was to determine if any significant differences in perceptions of motivators existed between satisfied and dissatisfied Extension professionals and, if so, to describe any differences. The means and standard deviations for the motivators construct for each group were compared. The satisfied group had a M = 1.91, SD = .46, while the dissatisfied group had a M = 2.55, SD = .61. Although the means for both groups appear similar, a significant difference between the two groups did exist, $t(109) = -5.00, p = .00$. Calculation of Cohen's d yielded a medium effect size of -.57.

The differences in perceptions of motivators by career satisfaction are presented in Table 3. The largest differences were observed in the percentages of satisfied (72.0%) and dissatisfied (23.5%) respondents who agreed that "Being a key leader in my community" was a positive motivator and the percentages of satisfied (79.6%) and dissatisfied (35.5%) respondents who agreed that the "Opportunity to work with youth in my community" was a positive motivator. The smallest difference in respondents' perceptions was observed for the motivator called "Friendships with other agents," with only a 5.2% difference observed between groups.

Table 3.
Differences in Motivators by Career Satisfaction

Motivator	Group	Agree	Difference	
		%	f	%
Being a key leader in my community	Satisfied	72.0	67	48.5
	Dissatisfied	23.5	4	
Opportunity to work with youth in my community	Satisfied	79.6	74	44.1
	Dissatisfied	35.5	6	
Opportunity to work with community leaders	Satisfied	74.2	69	38.9
	Dissatisfied	35.3	6	
Building lifelong relationships	Satisfied	79.3	73	38.1
	Dissatisfied	41.2	7	
Opportunity to work with adults in my community	Satisfied	82.6	76	35.5
	Dissatisfied			

	Dissatisfied	47.1	8	
Extension is more of a lifestyle than a job	Satisfied	71.0	66	29.8
	Dissatisfied	41.2	7	
Professional development opportunities	Satisfied	92.9	78	28.6
	Dissatisfied	64.3	9	
Ability to network with other agents at events and activities	Satisfied	83.9	78	25.1
	Dissatisfied	58.8	10	
Opportunity to work with volunteers in my community	Satisfied	81.5	75	22.7
	Dissatisfied	58.8	10	
Flexible scheduling	Satisfied	92.4	85	21.8
	Dissatisfied	70.6	12	
Opportunity to be a part of the land grant system	Satisfied	83.1	49	21.6
	Dissatisfied	61.5	8	
Job security	Satisfied	55.9	52	20.6
	Dissatisfied	35.3	6	
Ability to spend time with spouse/family at work-related events	Satisfied	34.4	32	16.8
	Dissatisfied	17.6	3	
Ability to chart my own course and design programming within my areas of interest	Satisfied	91.4	85	14.9
	Dissatisfied	76.5	13	
The co-workers in my office are a positive reason to come to work every day	Satisfied	84.8	78	14.2
	Dissatisfied	70.6	12	
Teamwork opportunities	Satisfied	78.5	73	13.8
	Dissatisfied	64.7	11	
Generous family emergency leave and sick	Satisfied	83.9	78	13.3

leave policies in Extension	Dissatisfied	70.6	12	
	Satisfied	100.0	93	11.8
Opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others	Dissatisfied	88.2	15	
	Satisfied	98.9	92	10.7
Variety in daily job duties	Dissatisfied	88.2	15	
	Satisfied	81.7	76	5.2
Friendships with other agents	Dissatisfied	76.5	13	
	Satisfied			

Conclusions, Implications, & Recommendations

Results from the study revealed over 80% of the Extension professionals surveyed believed they experience some degree of satisfaction (either *very satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied*) within their career, while another 5% *neither agreed nor disagreed*. The remaining 15% were either *somewhat dissatisfied* or *very dissatisfied*. It is good to find so many professionals reported being satisfied, but this does not help to understand why Extension has an issue with retention. The long hours are often blamed (e.g., Kutilek, Conklin, & Gunderson, 2002; Rousin & Henderson, 1996), but a survey of 26,000 workers conducted by MONEY Magazine and Salary.com actually found the most satisfied workers spent more time on the job (56 hours per week) than their less satisfied counterparts (45 hours per week) (Kelley, 2006).

Ensuring a state's organizational Extension system motivates professionals is one possibility for improving retention. Extension administrators and supervisors are encouraged to review how well their own systems are providing the positive motivators identified by the study. The highest percentage of professionals most strongly agreed that "Opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others" was a positive motivator. A recommendation to keep thank you cards and other meaningful notes and e-mails from clientele is something that could help Extension professionals have something tangible to remind them of the positive impact they are having in their communities.

Using the descriptions suggested in the Motivation-Hygiene Theory (Herzberg et al., 1959), the factors Extension professionals were most likely to find motivational in their careers would be categorized both as motivating factors (i.e., Opportunity to make a difference...) *and* maintenance factors (i.e., Leave policies). This conclusion differs from previous work suggesting motivating factors are more likely to be reported as important to employees versus maintenance factors (Herzberg et al, 1959; Lindner, 1998). Given that maintenance factors can often be addressed by changes in organizational policy, Colorado may find opportunities to improve retention by enhancing policies related to areas strongly identified as positive motivators, like the ability to take a considerable amount of leave or to have flexible scheduling. Policies enabling agents to work from home more often or to adopt a workweek schedule of four, 10-hour days instead of five, eight-hour days may be

similarly popular with Extension professionals.

The study found a significant difference with a medium effect size existed when comparing what motivated satisfied Extension professionals versus dissatisfied professionals. Practically, this means there are real differences in what drives each group. Of the 20 motivational factors presented, the two largest differences found between the Satisfied/Dissatisfied groups were for the motivators: "Being a key leader in my community" and "Opportunity to work with youth in my community." Both motivators can be directly linked to a sense of responsibility or engaged leadership within the community assumed by the professional. The difference between the two groups of professionals with regard to community leadership was so large that it may be possible to consider the "key leader" attribute an indicator of a satisfied Extension professional. The relationship appears significant enough that Extension organizations may want to consider a desire to serve as a key leader as a qualification for applicants during the search and screen process. A development program designed to help Extension professionals view themselves as key leaders within their communities and enhancing their drive to serve in such roles may enhance job satisfaction for current employees. Additional research on the effectiveness of such a program would be useful.

Extension touts that research-based information is the foundation that makes it different from other sources of information and education. As Extension addresses internal issues of employee retention, research-based information should be used for making decisions on this topic. The information reported in this article can guide Extension administrators and Extension systems to better meet the needs of their employees in order to better serve those employees and in turn, better serve citizens.

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