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Michael Kroth

University of Idaho, mkroth@uidaho.edu

Joey Peutz

University of Idaho, joeyp@uidaho.edu



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Workplace Issues in Extension—A Delphi Study of Extension Educators

Michael Kroth
Assistant Professor
Boise, Idaho
mkroth@uidaho.edu

Joey Peutz
Associate Professor
Caldwell, Idaho
joeyp@uidaho.edu

University of Idaho

Abstract: Using the Delphi technique, expert Extension educators identified and prioritized those workplace issues they believe will be the most important to attract, motivate, and retain Extension educators/agents over the next 5 to 7 years. Obtaining and then utilizing a talented, highly motivated workforce during a period when many will be retiring will depend upon thoughtful long-range planning by Extension leadership.

Introduction

The benefit of having a positive work environment is receiving increased attention both from scholarly and popular perspectives (Ballou, Godwin, & Shortridge, 2003; Boyle, 2006; Edmans, 2007; Fulmer, Gerhant, & Scott, 2003; May, Lau, & Johnson, 1999). Research has shown that one reason employees leave organizations is because of poor managers (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). It makes sense that organizational benefits will occur if employees believe their organizations are making decisions that create attractive work environments.

Employees continue to perceive bosses to be abusive and work environments as negative at the same time *Fortune* and *Working Mother* are publishing lists of the best places for employees to work (Ehrenreich, 2001; Leonard, 2007; Levering, Moskowitz, Levenson, Mero, Tkaczyk, & Boyle, 2006). Some employers are figuring out strategies, such as flexible schedules and onsite daycare facilities, to attract talented workers. In a free agent talent market, in-demand employees will likely flow to the best employee value proposition (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998). Developing a deeper understanding of what the most important workplace issues are related to attracting, retaining, and motivating Extension educators would provide leaders insight into decisions they must make over the next 5-7 years, and might have an impact for many subsequent years.

In spring 2007, the Extension committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) Leadership Advisory Council met to "discern the strengths of Extension and its personnel and to help envision a vital future that builds on

those strengths" (NASULGC, 2007, pg 1). The ECOP Leadership Advisory council report listed eight issues related to Extension's future. The council said that resources (both personnel and financial) will need to be made available to facilitate and reward the critical changes needed. But will Extension have the educators needed?

Background

Over the last several decades, articles in the *Journal of Extension* have been published related to workplace issues (Enslie, 2005; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Igodan & Newcomb, 1986) and where future Extension professions will come from (Bachtel, 1989; Smith, 1990). Recently, the *Journal of Extension* has published articles about motivation (Strong & Harder, 2009), employee satisfaction (Vlosky & Aguilar, 2009), the barriers, and challenges of women agents (Seevers & Foster, 2004), and how Extension professionals perceive scholarship related to their jobs (Vlosky & Dunn, 2009). A recent study looked at how state Extension Directors view future workplace issues (Kroth & Peutz, 2010), but we were not able to find research that comprehensively considers future workplace issues from the perspective of Extension educators/agents. The purpose of the study reported here was to gather expert opinion from Extension educators/agents about the issues most in need of attention over the next 5 to 7 years related to attracting, motivating, and retaining Extension educators/agents.

The specific objectives were:

1. To determine the issues in Extension, as identified by expert Extension educators/agents, which are related to the attraction, motivation, and retention of educators/agents over the next 5 to 7 years.
2. To determine which of those issues, as identified by expert Extension educators/agents, will be the most important over the next 5 to 7 years.

Methodology

The Delphi technique, developed in the early 1950's (Hsu & Sandford, 2007), was used in the study to obtain opinions from Extension educators/agents about workplace issues that are most the most important concerning educator/agent attraction, motivation, and retention over the next 5 to 7 years. Delphi, originally developed to predict future defense needs, was implemented in education as early as 1971 and across discipline areas (Cope, 1981; Custer, Scarcella, & Stewart, 1999; Cyphert & Grant, 1971; Pollard & Tomlin, 1995) as a way to acquire expert opinion without people being physically in the same location. The *Journal of Extension* featured Delphi methodology as early as 1997 (Ludwig, 1997).

Delphi has been used for program planning, resource determination, needs assessment, and long range planning and as a tool for curriculum development in various fields (Custer et al., 1999; Hsu & Sandford, 2007). It is a method for developing consensus by using a series of questionnaires to collect data from a panel of experts. The process uses multiple iterations such that after participants complete questionnaires they are returned to the researchers who then summarize the results so that each participant can be made aware of the other participants' opinions.

One or two open-ended questions generally begin a Delphi process, which is given to a panel of experts to obtain their information about the content area to be studied. Participants' responses are collected and converted into a questionnaire, which is used for the second round of data collection. In the second round panelists are asked to review the items and may be asked to rate or rank items to begin to prioritize them.

Panelists receive the summarized ratings of items in the third round and are asked to make changes regarding their importance. There are typically three to four rounds in a Delphi process.

Participants

There is no consensus about what the best number of subjects is for a Delphi study, and the size is variable (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). However, it has been suggested that 10 to 15 homogenous participants may be sufficient (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975). Ludwig, in a 1997 *Journal of Extension* article discussing Delphi methodology, indicates that "the majority of Delphi studies have used between 15-20 respondents." "Large numbers of respondents," Ludwig says, "generate many items and ideas making the summarizing process difficult." Delbecq et al. (1975) recommend using the minimally sufficient number of respondents. Using this as a guideline, we thought that 10 to 15 participants would be sufficient for the study.

One hundred and thirteen individuals were invited to participate in the research project. The list was comprised of members of the last two classes (2006/2007 and 2007/2008) of the Western Extension Leadership Development (WELD) program participants and the last two classes (2007 and 2008) of National Extension Leadership Development (NELD North Central) program participants. WELD was created by the Western Extension Directors Association and represents 13 western states and territories, and NELD North Central is sponsored by Extension in 13 North Central States. The purpose of both programs is to build Extension leadership. Both WELD and NELD participants include county faculty who face day-to-day Extension issues. These are the only two programs of their kind in the country, and we felt this group of up-and-coming Extension professionals who had been selected for leadership development would be able to best serve as representative "experts" to help us understand the issues that would attract, motivate, and retain Extension educators/agents over the next 5 to 7 years.

A three-round Delphi process was conducted to identify the issues most critical for attracting, motivating, and retaining educator/agents in Extension. Forty-six individuals agreed to participate in the study and responded to Round One of the study, 35 responded to Round Two of the study, and 30 responded to Round Three of the study. The 41% return rate on an electronic survey for busy professionals well exceeded our expectations. We maintained a high return rate through all three rounds, which shows an ongoing interest in the study.

Procedure

The steps in the study were as follows:

Round 1: To generate the broadest initial list of responses, participants were asked to answer the following question, "Please list what you believe will be the most important issues over the next 5-7 years related to attracting, motivating, and retaining Extension faculty. Forty-six individuals responded with 156 statements or issues. Any responses that overlapped or were clearly the same statement were combined by the researchers. A list of 32 issues, which the researchers categorized into nine topic areas, was used for Round Two.

Round 2: In Round Two, participants were asked to complete two tasks. The first task was to rate each of the 32 issue statements according to its level of importance. A five-point traditional Likert scale was used for participants to rate these issues (Scale: Not Important, Of Little Importance, Moderately Important, Important, Highly Important). Participants were asked to list additional workplace issues they thought should be added to the list and to make suggestions for improving the wording of any items. Three statements were added to the list for Round Three prioritization. The second task was to rank the nine workplace issue topics

in order of importance.

Round 3: In the final round participants were asked again to review and the rerate each issue and to rerank the nine grouped workplace issues. Each of the 35 issue statements was listed in the order of most to least importance as calculated by mean scores from Round Two. Each statement also included its mean score from the prior round so participants could see how others had rated each statement. The responses were then summarized as depicted in Table 1.

Each of the nine workplace issue topics was also listed in order of importance as calculated from the rankings from Round Two. Participants were asked to review the categories as ordered from the previous round and to rank them again according to their importance for attracting, retaining, and motivating Extension educators/agents over the next 5 to 7 years. Responses were then summarized as depicted in Table 2.

Zoomerang Online survey technology was used to distribute surveys, collect data, and calculate mean statistics for each round.

The three-round process allowed participants to identify what they believed to be Extension workplace issues related to attracting, motivating, and retaining Extension educators/agents over the next 5 to 7 years, to initially prioritize those individual issues and issue topic areas, and then to finalize what they believed to be the most important when taking into consideration the views of the entire group of experts. This process moved toward a consensus understanding from expert participants across the nation about the most important issues leaders should consider when planning future human resource management initiatives.

Results

Table 1 shows all the statements, divided into the top 10, bottom 10, and middle 15 mean scores as rated in the final round. Two of the top 10 issues related to competitive salary/wages ($m=4.5$) and the availability of benefits ($m=4.37$). Four of the top 10 issues related to the appropriate amount and focus of work: work/life balance ($m=4.33$), clear job expectations ($m=4.33$), focusing on priorities versus doing everything ($m=4.25$), and having a reasonable work load which doesn't lead to burnout ($m=4.2$). Two of the top 10 issues related to having what is needed to do the job: keeping up with technology ($m=4.27$) and having the resources to accomplish goals ($m=4.13$). The remaining two of the top 10 issues related to assuring that Extension was doing significant work: having the ability to show relevance to the community ($m=4.4$) and to address emerging issues in a timely way ($m=4.37$).

Table 1.
Descriptive Summary of Extension Workplace Issues

Extension Workplace Issues	Group Response Round 2	Group Response Round 3
	Mean	Mean
1. Competitiveness of salary/wages	4.47	4.5
2. Ability to show relevance to the community	4.56	4.4
	4.56	4.37

3. Availability of quality benefits including healthcare and retirement		
4. Ability to mobilize Extension to address emerging issues in a timely way	4.50	4.37
5. Balancing work and life issues	4.44	4.33
6. Clear job expectations and definition of success	4.44	4.33
7. Keeping up with technology including training and equipment	4.68	4.27
8. Focusing on priorities rather than trying to be everything to everyone	4.32	4.25
9. Having reasonable job duties/work load (avoiding burnout)	4.24	4.2
10. Having appropriate resources to accomplish goals	4.29	4.13
11. Availability of training for new faculty	4.26	4.03
12. Providing a workplace that allows people to contribute their strengths	4.26	4.03
13. Opportunities for flexible work arrangements (as examples, telecommuting, flex time, or reduced appointments such as 9, 10, or 11 month options)	new response	4.03
14. Having a clearly defined mission and organizational purpose	4.41	4
15. Job security including sustainable funding for positions	4.35	3.97
16. Offering a family friendly workplace	4.32	3.93
17. Professional development opportunities and resources	4.00	3.93
18. Work autonomy	4.12	3.87
19. Opportunities for career advancement	4.29	3.86
20. Moving beyond traditional Extension programs and addressing issues requiring multi-disciplinary and multi-geographic area approaches	4.12	3.83
21. Availability of mentoring for new faculty	4.15	3.79
22. Marketing Extension at state and national levels	4.32	3.77
23. Providing recognition and rewards for innovation, creativity, and new ideas	4.26	3.7
24. Reducing unproductive time spent on administrative and reporting activities	4.03	3.69

25. Removing the silo effect (when areas don't communicate with each other) that currently exists between Educators/Agents and campus faculty	3.79	3.53
26. Having status and benefits on par with research faculty	3.76	3.5
27. Building a strong, cross-disciplinary network/team of Educators/Agents in multi-geographic areas	3.91	3.4
28. Recruiting and training a diverse workforce	3.79	3.34
29. Developing productive relationships between generations in the workplace	3.38	3.33
30. Specialization rather than generalization in program area	3.29	3.27
31. Overcoming isolation issues	new response	3.1
32. Lack of qualified candidates	3.88	2.97
33. Workplace safety	new response	2.83
34. Not requiring certain degree for position and allowing people to work towards their degree while a part of extension	3.00	2.77
35. Lack of graduate programs in Extension education, those that have little or no formal training/education programs	3.03	2.7
<i>Note.</i> Respondents were asked to rate each workplace issue on the basis of importance using a 5-point Likert type scale (1= Not Important and 5= Highly Important)		

Table 2 shows the order in which the participants ranked the nine major workplace issue categories first in Round Two and then in Round Three. The far left column represents the issue categories, the middle two columns the mean and consequent ranking from Round Two, and the two right columns the mean and consequent rankings from Round Three. The order of these categories was consistent, and nearly identical, through both rounds. They were also congruent with the rating of the issues, as listed in Table 1. Competitive salaries and benefits were ranked as the most important ($m=6.47$ in the final round), providing a work supportive environment ($m=5.97$ in the final round) the second most important, and balancing work and life was the third most important ($m=5.7$ in the final round) in both rounds. Having a clear Extension focus ($m=5.2$ in the final round) and a healthy interpersonal work climate ($m=4.93$) exchanged places between rounds.

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistical Summary of Rounds 2 and 3 Delphi Rankings of Extension Workplace Issues

Workplace Issue Categories	Group Response from Round 2		Group Response from Round 3	
	Mean	Ranking	Mean	Ranking
Providing competitive salaries and benefits	5.91	1	6.47	1
Assuring an environment that supports the accomplishment of work, including autonomy, resources, recognition, removing barriers, reasonable workload, etc.	5.68	2	5.97	2
Balancing work and life	5.65	3	5.7	3
Having a clear Extension focus (mission/purpose/priorities) that are relevant to the internal and external community and emerging issues	5.06	5	5.2	4
Having a healthy interpersonal work climate, including diversity, collaboration, and multidisciplinary efforts	5.24	4	4.93	5
Keeping up-to-date with technology	4.68	7	4.63	6
Job security including sustainable funding for positions	4.88	6	4.6	7
Marketing Extension	3.74	9	3.8	8
Providing professional growth (development/career) opportunities	4.18	8	3.7	9
<i>Note.</i> Round 2 & 3 means were calculated using rank scores each expert assigned to the major categories. A rank of one served to denote least important for attracting, motivating and retaining Extension Educators/Agents, a rank of two was eighth most important, up through a rank of nine, which denoted the most important category.				

Limitations

Our participants were chosen from WELD and NELD programs, so their views may not represent those from other parts of the country. Because they were all a part of a leadership development program, it is also possible that they don't represent views from others who were not selected for leadership development, though we would argue that this type of individual may be in the most demand and the most difficult to hire in the future.

The Delphi method of research has helped us to better understand the issues that will be the most important for attracting, retaining, and motivating Extension educators over the next 5 to 7 years. We did not ask, however, whether our participants believed the overall issue of attracting/retaining/motivating these key educators/agents would be important over the next few years. It is possible that Extension educators don't think personnel concerns such as these will be important compared to other issues that Extension is facing, though we find that unlikely.

Conclusions

The study reported here is a continuation of research intended to understand what makes an attractive, highly motivating work environment for Extension professionals. Attracting, motivating, and retaining talented Extension educators/agents have become increasingly important in a knowledge-based world. Changing knowledge management practices, global impacts, and increased use of technology have redefined the nature of work. The simple Delphi study reported here identifies some basic issues that seem to be important to workers, but it remains for leadership to determine how or if these issues— at least some of which will come as no surprise either to members of the workplace or leadership— will be addressed.

Extension educators feel that priority issues include: competitive salaries and benefits, supportive work environments, and balancing work and life. Although it is tempting to say that issues rated lower— say in the bottom 10— are not important, the reality is that these issues were identified as important initially, but were just not viewed by this group of participants as important as other ones. Additional understanding may come from identifying the similarities and differences between what state leaders and Extension educators believe to be important. From that may come the opportunity to plan strategically the best ways to obtain and utilize the Extension workforce of the future. Land-grant universities need to intentionally plan how they might align human resource and organizational strategies to create competitive advantage in attracting, motivating and retaining a talented Extension workforce. We hope that additional studies such as this will provide a continuing impetus to create or improve work environments.

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