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Workplace Issues in Extension

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Abstract: Using the Delphi technique, expert state leaders in Extension determined and prioritized those workplace uses in Extension that are most important to attract, motivate, and retain Extension educators/agents over the next 5-7 years. The problem addressed is one of determining the leadership imperatives in Extension that will be required to populate the field with talent as current educators/agents retire and new employees are needed to populate the field.

Introduction

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:

1. Technology is changing how Extension advances its mission;
2. Society is becoming more diverse, requiring Extension to be more diverse, flexible and responsive;
3. Extension, teaching and research efforts will be better integrated;
4. Partnering with other groups with similar interests will be expected and should be rewarded;
5. System-wide tools should be developed to provide support of those contributing to the development and communication of the value of Extension;

6. Scholarship of Extension should be enhanced through more extensive education, evaluation and communication efforts, communication with a variety of audiences will continue to be essential,
7. Communication with a variety of audiences will continue to be essential, and
8. Resources (both personnel and financial) will need to be made available to facilitate and reward these changes (NASULGC, 2007).

While reading and reflecting on this report, we thought about Extension within an organizational context and how these issues would play into Extension's future. Who would meet these changing needs and support a quality workplace? Obviously, it will be Extension employees.

Background

Many organizations face issues concerning attracting and maintaining quality employees. Workplace issues such as organizational commitment, burn out, motivation, recruitment, and retention are just a few of those. Extension is not a unique organization and thus faces these same issues. Over the last several decades, articles in the *Journal of Extension* have been published related to these issues. Articles about balancing work and family (Thomson, Kiernan, Pierre, & Lewis, 1987; Kutilek, Conklin, & Gunderson, 2002), burn out (Enslie, 2005; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Igodan & Newcomb 1986), and where the next Extension professional will come from (Bachtel, 1989; Smith, 1990) are examples. However, little follow-up research has been published as a result of these articles, and we could find little that comprehensively considers future workplace issues. There appears to be a need for additional research related directly to Extension and the workplace. The purpose of the study reported here was to gather expert opinion about the workplace issues related to attracting, motivating, and retaining Extension educator/agents that are most in need of attention over the next 5 to 7 years.

The specific objectives were:

1. To determine the issues in Extension, as identified by expert Extension leaders, that are related to the attraction, motivation, and retention of educator/agents over the next 5 to 7 years.
2. To determine which of those issues, as identified by expert Extension leaders, 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 state Extension leaders 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 & Gant, 1971; Pollard & Tomlin, 1995) as a way to acquire expert opinion without people being physically in the same location.

Delphi has been used for program planning, resource determination, needs assessment, 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-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 and run for a period of weeks." "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 this study.

Seventy-six individuals were invited to participate in the research project. NASULGC (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges) provided the original list, which was comprised of the state Extension leader from each of the 50 states, as well as the state Extension leader from Washington D.C., American Samoa, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Twenty of those on the original list agreed to participate. A four-round Delphi process was conducted to identify the issues most critical for attracting, motivating, and retaining educator/agents in Extension. Twenty individuals responded to Round One of the study, 15 responded to Round Two of the study, 16 responded to Round Three of the study, and 15 responded to Round Four of the study.

Procedure

The steps in this 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 workplace-related issues in Extension over the next 5-7 years?" Twenty individuals responded with 55 statements. Any responses that directly overlapped or were clearly the same statement were combined. A list of 33 issues was used for Round 2.

Round 2: To further focus the study, we then defined workplace issues more specifically as those that respondents felt were the most critical for attracting, motivating, and retaining educator/agents in Extension in the next 5-7 years. We then asked participants to indicate which of the original 33 statements fit that definition. We asked them to also add any additional issues meeting that definition to the list. Issues were included in the next round of the study only if 60% or higher of respondents indicated that a statement should be included as a workplace-issue. Six original statements were removed from the list, and five new

statements were added from comments received in Round 2. The remaining statements were then categorized into ten topic areas for Round 3.

Round 3: In Round 3, participants were asked to complete two tasks. The first task was to rate each of the 32 issue statements according to their 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 again were asked to list additional workplace issues they thought should be added to the list. Two statements were added to the list for Round Four prioritization. The second task was to rank the 10 workplace issue topics that were grouped from Round 2 in order of importance.

Round 4: In the final round, participants were asked again to review and the rerate each issue and to re-rank the 10 grouped workplace issues. Each of the 34 issue statements was listed in the order of most to least importance as calculated by mean scores from Round Three. Each statement also included its mean score from the prior round.

Each of the 10 workplace issue topics was also listed in order of importance as calculated from the rankings from Round Three. 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 5-7 years. Responses were then summarized as depicted in Table 2. Ten of the 15 respondents ranked all 10 categories, and those were considered to be usable. One of those responses appeared to be misranked and was therefore reverse scored.

The four-round process allowed participants to identify what they believed to be Extension workplace issues; to narrow those more specifically to issues related to attracting, motivating, and retaining Extension educators/agents over the next 5-7 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. The first 11 statements received the highest ratings from the participants in Round Four. The statements that participants thought the most important issues related to attracting, retaining, and motivating Extension educator/agents over the next 5-7 years were the need to focus on priorities rather than trying to please everyone ($m=4.47$) and the need to be viewed as an essential part of the land-grant university ($m=4.47$). Four of the top issues (1, 2, 8, & 10) related to understanding and keeping centered on the role and mission

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistical Summary of Extension Workplace Issues

Extension Workplace Issues	Mean
1. Focusing on priorities rather than trying to be everything to everyone	4.47
2. Viewed as an essential part of the land grant university	4.47
3. Administrators and co-workers who encourage innovation and creativity	4.40

4. Keeping up with communication technology used by clientele	4.33
5. Encouraging and pursuing excellence in non-formal teaching and learning	4.33
6. Grantsmanship to support and expand Extension programming	4.27
7. Competitive salaries	4.20
8. Understanding the scholarship of outreach and Extension	4.20
9. Improving communication internally and externally	4.20
10. Evolving from historic Extension program and methodologies to contemporary issues and learning platforms	4.13
11. Developing and /or maintaining current technology knowledge and skill	4.13
12. Adequate funding for programming efforts	4.07
13. Having appropriate resources to do the job	3.93
14. Providing professional development opportunities	3.93
15. Recruiting and retaining Extension Educator/Agents	3.93
16. Recruiting and retaining diverse work force	3.87
17. Maintaining budgets while costs escalate	3.87
18. Balancing work and family issues	3.87
19. Linking department based faculty in teams with and among county or area based faculty and staff.	3.86
20. Need for culturally appropriate material	3.80
21. True team development across disciplines and program areas	3.79
22. Increasing urban programming	3.67
23. Expectations versus resource availability	3.60
24. Reducing stress and burnout	3.60
25. One challenge will be managing the expectations of people who want Extension to be as it was in the 70's and those who want to move into a new future	3.53
26. Shrinking faculty/staff but increasing work load	3.53
27. Improving intergenerational interaction and relationships	3.47
28. Reduction in staff from traditional funding sources (short term contracts, grant funded positions)	3.47
29. Need for multi-language staff	3.40
30. Differing work ethic	3.33
31. Career mobility	3.33

32. Navigating promotion and tenure	3.27
33. Differences in expectations, values and culture among different generations	3.20
34 Lack of qualified candidates	3.13
<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 10 major workplace issue categories in Round Four. Participants ranked two categories highest (m= 7.90)—evolving from traditional to contemporary issues and priorities, and providing competitive salaries—as the two most important topics concerning the attraction, retention, and motivation of Extension educators/agents over the next 5-7 years. The next highest ranked category was having appropriate resources to do the job (m=7.50), and the fourth ranked category was recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and staff (m=6.30). Of the 10 categories, improving the way we work was considered the least important (m=1.50), followed by balancing work and family (m=4.40) and providing professional development opportunities (m=4.40).

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistical Round 4 Delphi Rankings of Extension Workplace Issues

Workplace Issue Categories	Group Response from Round 4	
	Mean	Rank
1. Evolving from traditional to contemporary issues and priorities	7.90	1
2. Providing competitive salaries	7.90	1
3. Having appropriate resources to do the job	7.50	3
4. Recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and staff	6.30	4
5. Keeping up-to-date with technology	5.60	5
6. Navigating promotion and tenure	4.80	6
7. Improving intergenerational interaction and relationships	4.70	7
8. Providing professional development opportunities	4.40	8
9. Balancing work and family	4.40	8
10. Improving the way we work	1.50	90
<i>Note.</i> Round 4 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 ten, which denoted the most important category.		

Limitations

The Delphi method of research has helped us to better understand the issues that state Extension leaders believe will be the most important for attracting, retaining, and motivating Extension educator/agents over the next 5-7 years. We did not ask, however, whether these leaders believed the overall issue of attracting/retaining/motivating these key educators/agents would be important over the next few years. It is possible that state leaders don't think personnel concerns will be dire compared to other issues that Extension is facing. Or they may consider it to be a very critical issue relative to others. We do not know any more about the relative importance of attracting, motivating, and retaining Extension educator/agents than we did before.

The study was also limited because of the small percentage of the total population who agreed to participate. We initially invited 76 state Extension leaders to participate. Although Delphi studies typically only have 15-20 participants, as ours did, we do not know if the individuals who did not agree to participate did so because of lack of interest, lack of time, or other factors.

There are two methodological issues to note. The first concerns scoring. We changed the way we asked participants to rank the importance of the 10 topic categories between rounds three and four. In Round Three, we asked participants to rank based upon the number "1" being the most important down through "10" as the least important. We reversed that in Round Four in order to be congruent with how we asked participants to rate the 34 individual issues using a Likert Scale. In the unlikely event that participants remembered and took for granted the scoring methodology between Rounds Three and Four, there might have been some confusion in their responses.

The second methodological limitation is simply one of defining categories more specifically. Some categories, like "The way we work together," may have been too general for participants to truly evaluate. More clarification might have helped improve the quality of the results.

Finally, we should note that the study was completed just prior to a global financial crisis. It is quite possible that events might cause different responses if the study were to be conducted at a later time. Our results should be considered in this light. However, changing economic conditions, like any external factor, might change the results of any study if it were conducted at a different time. Each person must take all of these factors into consideration as he or she reviews this, or any other, study.

Conclusions

The study reported here is the beginning of research intended to understand what makes an attractive, highly motivating work environment for Extension professionals. It was limited to the perspectives of higher-level state leaders. Extension leaders feel that priority issues include: evolving from traditional to contemporary priorities, providing competitive salaries, and having the appropriate resources to do the job. The fact that Extension leaders identified 32 issues as critical to attracting, motivating, and retaining educator/agents in Extension in the next 5-7 years shows a wide scope of concern.

To gain more depth of understanding, it will be necessary to ask educator/agents what will attract, motivate, and retain them in a changing, competitive work environment. With additional information from educator/agents and the current information from state leaders, a research agenda could be developed and future recommendations made.

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