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Implications of Maintenance and Motivation Factors on Extension Agent Turnover

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Abstract: What factors are relevant in determining why agents remain employed in Extension? This article discusses the implications of maintenance and motivation factors on Extension agent turnover. It describes motivator and maintenance factors affecting job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and their influence on agent turnover. Professional associations offer agents the motivation factors discussed in this article. The benefits gained by investing in Extension's current employees may ultimately enhance Extension's ability to fulfill its mission as the educational outreach branch of the land-grant university.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The retention of Extension agents was identified as a challenge by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges' Extension Committee on Organization and Policy's Leadership Advisory Council (ECOP LAC, 2005). Low salaries, downsizing, and increased workload were identified by the ECOP LAC as factors negatively affecting employee turnover. This is a significant problem for Cooperative Extension nationally, as increased burnout and staff **turnover** are monetarily expensive and an inefficient use of time management (Ensle, 2005).

There is a net cost of \$80,000 per year to Extension due to turnover (Kutilek, 2000). A public or private organization may spend as much as 150% of the employee's salary to hire another individual (Friedman, Galinsky, & Plowden, 1992). Chandler (2005) estimated it could cost Extension from \$7,185 to \$30,000 to replace an agent who had an annual salary of \$30,000.

Herzberg's (1959) Motivation-Hygiene Theory established how job satisfaction and dissatisfaction operate separately from one another. The Motivation-Hygiene Theory differentiates among motivating and maintenance influences in the workplace (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). Herzberg (1968) proposed that individuals are encouraged by motivators more than maintenance factors. Motivators include a stimulating vocation, accountability, and providing fulfillment from the profession, such as awards, accomplishment, or individual development (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Maintenance influences include

position, employment, income, and benefits, but these influences do not provide affirmative satisfaction, though dissatisfaction occurs from their deficiency (Hackman & Oldham).

According to Herzberg (1968), administrators must make sure that employee salaries and other maintenance factors are sufficient. If not, then employees will leave the organization. Satisfying employee maintenance factors will enable them to develop motivation via their position. Job enrichment is the procedure of constructing motivators within the position by making it more appealing and stimulating (Herzberg, 1968). Daft (1997) indicated job enrichment is a purposeful progression of accountability, capacity, and stimulation in the profession. It consists of more acknowledgment, opportunities for professional development, education, and success (Daft, 1997). Job enrichment was implemented effectively to stimulate staff to elevated levels of accomplishment at many organizations, including Monsanto, GM, AT&T, and Maytag (Lussier & Achua, 2006).

Similarly, research in agricultural education has been conducted using Herzberg's (1959) Motivation-Hygiene Theory. Castillo and Cano (2004) found the vocation of teaching was the most motivating aspect for agricultural education faculty in their study. Professors who experienced higher levels of mentoring, as a motivator factor had added satisfaction with their present positions and career progress (Eastman & Williams, 1993). Castillo, Conklin, and Cano (2000) found teachers were motivated by students achieving success in the classroom.

Numerous researchers have studied job satisfaction in agricultural teachers. Mentoring programs, level of education achieved, and the perception of teaching effectiveness are components that have an effect on job satisfaction for agricultural teachers (Bruening & Hoover, 2000; Eastman & Williams, 1993; Thobega & Miller, 2003). Researchers have identified factors that influenced job satisfaction such as working environment and professional acceptance (Jewell, Beavers, Kirby, & Flowers, 2001). Maintenance factors were poorer signs of job satisfaction than were motivator factors for faculty members in agricultural education (Bowen & Radhakrishna, 2000). Job satisfaction was significantly lower for employees with children which may be a source of conflicts between the profession and parenting (Odell, Cochran, Lawrence, & Gartin, 2001).

Methods

Extension agents still continue to leave Cooperative Extension prematurely, despite the attention research has paid to the issue of employee turnover. The study reported here synthesized selected research studies related to Extension agent turnover. Specifically, the study synthesized motivator and maintenance factors identified in the literature as affecting job satisfaction. The study was conducted to provide a more thorough understanding of the issue.

According to Marsh (1991), integrative inquiry is the process of screening and synthesizing "ongoing or previously done studies . . . for the kinds of knowledge that will help address those problems which are at hand and about which planning or action decisions must be made" (p. 271). Integrative inquiry leads to synthesized knowledge that is "useful and appropriate" for practical decision-making (Marsh, 1991, p. 272). Roberts (as cited in Marsh) identified six steps for conducting an integrative inquiry. The six steps described by Roberts were used to guide the study reported here. They were:

1. Identify need/request, conduct preliminary search, clarify request;
2. Conduct the search for and retrieval of studies;

3. Selecting, screening, and organizing studies;
4. Determining the conceptual framework and fitting it to the information from the analysis;
5. Developing the synthesis and interpretation into a material product; and
6. Delivering the results of synthesis (Roberts, as cited in Marsh, pp. 277-279).

Data for the study were gathered from the *Journal of Extension*, *Journal of Agricultural Education*, *Journal of Southern Agricultural Education Research*, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, and the proceedings of the regional and national Association for Agricultural Education research conferences. Parameters were established to restrict the review of literature to the years of 1987 - 2007.

Findings

Based on the results of the integrative inquiry, several maintenance factors affected Extension agents' decisions to leave Cooperative Extension. Salary was a factor for some agents (Clark, 1992; Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990; Kutilek, 2000; Riggs & Beus, 1993; Tillburg, 1988). Rousan and Henderson (1996) found departing agents were dissatisfied with their pay, relative to the amount of work performed. Better financial opportunities existed outside of the organization, and those opportunities required less of a time commitment. In Kentucky, insufficient pay was the leading organizational factor contributing to an Extension agent's decision to leave his/her position (Mowbray, 2002).

Fetsch and Kennington (1997) found job stress to be a condition prevalent among Extension agents in multiple states. Ensle (2005, ¶ 2, *The Challenge of Working for Extension*) explained "the Extension System is very stressful and does not provide help or support directly to local county agents." Inefficiencies associated with working in a multi-county setting, such as duplicate mailings and twice as many committee meetings, contributed to job stress for Extension agents (Bartholomew & Smith, 1990). Place, Jacob, Summerhill, and Arrington (2000) found factors such as over-commitment, continuous multi-tasking, and working late were statistically related to the amount of stress an agent experienced. Job stress experienced by Extension agents was noted by their spouses, as well (Herbert & Kotrlik, 1990). Ezell (2003) reported positive associations between agents' job stress and their intent to leave Extension. Job stress contributed to Extension agents' decisions to leave Cooperative Extension (Kutilek, 2000). ECOP LAC (2005) indicated staff cuts and downsizing translate to increased workload on those already overloaded.

Extension agents are asked to work long and abnormal hours that include nights, and weekends. The amount of time required for programming including those for nights and weekends were some chief explanations why Extension faculty left their job (Rousan & Henderson, 1996). Kutilek, Conklin, and Gunderson (2002) found the significant professional/personal experiences in Extension were an intense job assignment, obligation to work irregular hours, and a shortage of work independence.

Balancing work and family was identified as an organizational concern for Extension administration. Boltes, Lippke, and Gregory (1995) explained balancing between a professional and personal life, awareness of professional development, and staff participation were a dilemma not just for Extension's workforce but for

Extension as well. Intense occupational duties and a shortage of opportunities with family and friends have caused states to lose Extension faculty (Ensle, 2005). Rousan and Henderson (1996) found ex-agents frequently cited family obligations and duties as key reasons for departing the organization.

Job dissatisfaction was another component in determining agent turnover. In Mississippi, other agents were more satisfied with the occupation as compared to 4-H faculty (Long & Swortzel, 2007). However, a study by Bowen, Radhakrishna, and Keyser (1994) suggested that 4-H faculty were content with their positions and dedicated to Extension. The satisfaction level of an agent's spouse can be relevant in determining if the agent will remain in the organization. Herbert and Kotrlik (1990) found agents' spouses were least satisfied with the faculty members' income, level of stress, and the amount of time spent weekly on the job.

There were various motivation factors identified in the research. Staff will not be encouraged in their occupation when appropriately planned incentive methods are not put into practice (Lindner, 1998). The lack of a reward system will have unintended consequences on the organization. Agents leave the vocation because of the deficiency of acknowledgements for well accomplished work (Rousan & Henderson, 1996).

A mentoring program was identified as important in retaining and training of employees. Kutilek and Earnest (2001) reported annual evaluations of a mentoring plan found most of the participants felt the program improved their proficiency in planning and implementing a program and assisted their comprehension of the workplace environment. Bowen, Radhakrishna, and Keyser (1994) indicated organizational commitment and job satisfaction would be enhanced in less experienced agents as a result of mentoring by more seasoned agents. Strong and consistent training, mentoring, and staff development programs are lacking in Extension (ECOP LAC, 2005). Kutilek and Earnest (2001) reported the outcome of Extension employees partaking in a mentoring plan was an increase in their total leadership efficacy.

Job satisfaction was identified as an important motivator factor for agents to remain employed in Extension. Tilburg (1988) reported that numerous Extension agents were dissatisfied with the possibilities for advancement. The chief motivational influence for Extension employees was an appealing occupation (Lindner, 1998). Highly satisfied agents experienced a higher probability that support (organizational and individual) was provided in their work place (Nestor & Leary, 2000). Riggs and Beus (1993) indicated Extension agents with high levels of job satisfaction were content with the occupation, pay, benefits, ability to administer programming, superiors, prospects for development, Extension, and contemporaries.

Conclusions

Herzberg (1968) theorized that employees must be motivated to experience job satisfaction but that unacceptable working conditions can only result in a lack of satisfaction. The data analyzed for the study reported here indicate Extension agents left the organization for both reasons: lack of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction. The presence of sufficient maintenance factors prevents employment discontent, whereas adequate motivators may direct occupational contentment (Herzberg, 1968).

An agent's decision to leave Cooperative Extension may be influenced by his/her level of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction. Job satisfaction was a sign of achievement and may affect the total success of Extension (Bartholomew & Smith, 1990). The reviewed studies identified 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. The motivators identified were reward systems, job satisfaction, and mentoring. There were more maintenance than motivator factors identified in the synthesis of research.

Former Extension agents frequently cited family obligations and duties as key motives for departing the organization. ECOP LAC (2005) identified that the retention of Extension agents has been a challenge to the organization. The factors negatively affecting employee turnover were low salaries, downsizing, and increased workload. This increased burnout and employee **turnover** are significant problems because they cost the organization time and money.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Herzberg (1968) said administrators must make sure that employees' salary and other maintenance factors are sufficient. If not, then they will leave the organization. Satisfying employee maintenance factors will enable them to be motivated through their jobs.

The findings of the study reported here revealed Extension agents perceived maintenance factors were more often lacking than motivators. Based on Herzberg's theory, Extension should be concerned about agents leaving the organization due to a lack of adequate maintenance factors. There are other maintenance factors in Extension even in times of budget constraints. Extension can offer employees the ability to continue their education, medical and retirement benefits, and flexible work schedules.

Extension directors and administrators should look for methods and procedures to ensure that agents' maintenance factors are adequate. When that has been accomplished, they can identify strategies to motivate agents through their positions. Doing so may result in a considerable savings of time and money (Friedman, Galinsky, & Plowden, 1992) by reducing the number of "revolving door" positions. Providing a reward system for agents working extra hours may be an incentive for them to remain in the organization.

Also, Extension agents should be more pro-active about addressing a lack of maintenance factors. Agents may decrease the number of hours they work by placing more emphasis on program planning and evaluation, rather than focusing primarily on delivery. A better work/life balance might be achieved if agents planned personal time before scheduling work events.

Extension has professional associations for its programmatic areas. These associations offer professional development opportunities, mentoring, recognition, and awards for their members. Those new to the job may find it easier to ask questions or discuss concerns with their peers (association members) versus their immediate supervisor. Professional associations may assist agents with mentoring, learning about the organization's promotion process, and offer opportunities for recognition through successful programming. All of these have been determined to be motivation factors in Extension (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Rousan and Henderson, 1996; Riggs & Beus, 1993).

Administrators and faculty of land-grant universities ought to work jointly in providing superior stages of success, acknowledgment, and satisfaction of occupational duties to faculty members, whether tenured or not. If experienced faculty guided or advised less experienced faculty members by focusing on collaboration and cooperation, these objectives may be achieved (Nestor & Leary, 2000). If support team members (mentors, colleagues, and immediate supervisors) were taught to discern agents' necessities, the usefulness of this model will be enhanced in supporting agents with planning and implementing a program, evaluation of job duties, and their development as professionals (Zoller & Safrit, 1999).

Extension needs to do a better job of preparing and developing individuals to be future leaders within the organization (ECOP LAC, 2005). This could be accomplished through targeted professional development opportunities in leadership development. Agents could shadow or be mentees of high-quality county Extension directors and/or district Extension directors.

Leadership academies could be facilitated by an Extension program development and evaluation center or the human resources office at the university. Instruction could be offered from an internal leadership development specialist, or a panel of university faculty, deans, and district and county Extension directors. This could be delivered via face-to-face instruction, distance education through podcasts, video conferencing, or learning modules online.

Or land-grant universities may have existing internal leadership development programs for faculty that could be marketed more directly to agents. Administrators could annually invite one agent to represent their state at the annual National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges conference. This would provide the agents with some recognition as well as introducing them more directly with Extension's role in the land-grant system on a national level. The implementation of these examples would increase the number of motivational factors for Extension agents, which may help to increase job satisfaction and may encourage quality individuals to stay in Extension and assume leadership roles.

The implementation of these recommendations would be expected to decrease agents' stress levels and job dissatisfaction over time. Fetch and Kennington (1997) indicated changing guidelines and procedures in the organization were causal to levels of elevated stress and that instituting successful complementary work and family programming that enhance agents' coping behavior and efficiency will assist in balancing work and family. Extension leaders should be aware that low salaries make it difficult to attract and keep talented agents. Extension programming would have greater continuity if there were a lower rate of agent turnover. The benefits gained by investing in Extension's current employees may ultimately enhance Extension's ability to fulfill its mission as the educational outreach branch of the land-grant university.

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