

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EMPLOYEE RESIGNATION (PERCEIVED & ACTUAL) AMONG GEORGIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION AGENTS

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Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors contributing to employee resignation among Cooperative Extension Agents in Georgia. This study sought insight into why Extension Agents resign and what factors lead to job dissatisfaction. Specifically, this study utilized interview data from former Extension Agents who willfully left the organization and currently employed Extension Agents in order to compare actual and perceived factors leading to employee resignation, job satisfaction, and job dissatisfaction. This study also sought recommendations from both former and current Agents as to how Cooperative Extension might increase employee retention among Agents.

Procedures

This study used a qualitative approach to data collection, utilizing open-ended interview questions with five former Extension Agents who willfully left the organization and five currently employed Extension Agents. Interview subjects were purposefully selected from a list of former Agents who resigned within the last five years and a list of current Agents. The researcher selected former Agents who were willing to participate and were thought to be informaton-rich. Regarding the selection of current Agents, the researcher discussed participant selection with District Extension Directors in order to achieve a representative cross-section of Extension Agents, based on gender, years of experience, and diversity of program area.

Subjects were contacted via telephone to schedule a convenient time and location for the interviews. During the interview, subjects were asked four open-ended questions and were encouraged to comment on any subject related to their employment with Cooperative Extension. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher conducted a member check by allowing interviewees to read the transcript before proceeding with data interpretation. Following the member check, the researcher reviewed and coded the data for emerging themes.

Descriptive Data

During the interview process, the following information was collected from the study participants: (a) program area, (b) gender, (c) position, (d) years of experience, (e) degree held, (f) county, and (g) marital / family status. Of the five former Extension Agents interviewed,

three had primary responsibility in Agriculture and Natural Resources, one had primary responsibility in 4-H / Youth Development, and one had a split Agriculture / 4-H appointment. Four of the former Agents were male and one was female. Regarding years of experience, four had been employed with Cooperative Extension less than five years, and one had been employed between five and ten years. Highest degrees obtained by the former agents were three master's degrees and two bachelor's degrees. Marital status included two married without children, two married with children, and one single with no children.

Among the current Extension Agents interviewed, two had primary responsibility in Agriculture and Natural Resources, two had primary responsibility in 4-H / Youth Development, and one had primary responsibility in Family and Consumer Sciences. Two of the current Agents were male, and three were female. Years of experience of the current Extension Agents included two with five to ten years, one with eleven to twenty years, and two with more than twenty years. Highest degrees obtained were four master's degrees and one bachelor's degree. Marital status included three married with children at home, one married with no children at home, and one single with no children.

Findings

The following four research questions provided the focus for the study:

- What characteristics of the profession, Cooperative Extension Agent, provide the most satisfaction?
- What characteristics of the profession, Cooperative Extension Agent, lead to job dissatisfaction?
- What factors lead to employee resignation among Cooperative Extension Agents?
- What can Cooperative Extension, as an organization, do to increase retention among Extension Agents?

Research Question 1:

What characteristics of the profession, Cooperative Extension Agent, provide the most satisfaction?

The characteristics of the profession, Cooperative Extension Agent, providing the most satisfaction as stated by former Extension Agents included interaction with people, sharing information and solving problems, continuing education offered, support from coworkers, and job flexibility. The characteristics stated by currently employed Extension Agents are almost identical and included interaction with people, working with young people, sharing information and solving problems, relationships with coworkers and getting to know other agents from around the state, and job flexibility.

Research Question 2:

What characteristics of the profession, Cooperative Extension Agent, lead to job dissatisfaction?

When asked what characteristics lead to job dissatisfaction, the responses of the former and current Extension Agents were also very similar, with a few notable exceptions. Former Cooperative Extension Agents listed the following factors as leading to job dissatisfaction: night

and weekend work / trying to balance work and family, uncertainty regarding job responsibilities, paperwork, lack of support at the county level, and low number of female Agriculture & Natural Resource Agents. Factors leading to job dissatisfaction as provided by current Extension Agents included night and weekend work / trying to balance work and family, paperwork, too many trainings, the promotion process, and uncertainty regarding job responsibilities.

Research Question 3:

What factors lead to employee resignation among Cooperative Extension Agents?

The next question asked of the participants examined the factors leading to employee resignation among Cooperative Extension Agents. The factors noted by the former and current Extension Agents interviewed were also similar, but were ranked differently in order of significance. Former Agents listed the following as major factors leading to employee resignation: salary, time away from family / family problems, lack of leadership and support from County Extension Coordinator, and returning to school to work on advance degree. Current Extension Agents stated that time demand on new agents (especially 4-H agents), unrealistic expectations / feelings of frustration, salary, and time away from family were the most significant factors leading to resignation.

Regarding factors leading to resignation, the most notable difference was in the area of leadership. Former Agents expressed concern over a lack of leadership at the county level, and in particular, they did not believe that they received adequate support from their County Extension Coordinator. The current Agents interviewed did not make mention of county-level leadership. Also interesting was the issue of salary. Former Agents and currently employed Agents with less than ten years experience felt that low salary was an issue, while more experienced agents, those having worked more than twenty years, believed salaries to be sufficient.

Research Question 4:

What can Cooperative Extension, as an organization, do to increase retention among Extension Agents?

Finally, in the area of recommendations to Extension administration, the responses provided by the former and current Extension Agents interviewed varied widely. Former Extension Agents made the following recommendations to improve employee retention: increase salaries, provide better leadership/support at the county level, training on how to better balance work and family, and have a more effective mentoring program. The currently employed Agents recommended reinforcing the current mentoring program and creating an internship program, providing good leadership and being more engaged with Agents, reducing out-of-county travel for new agents, and streamlining the hiring process. In the area of leadership, former Agents stressed the need for better leadership from County Extension Coordinators, while current Agents focused on improving leadership and increasing engagement at the District level.

Conclusions

After further analyzing the data, the researcher offers the following four conclusions:

1. Among former and currently employed Cooperative Extension Agents, the common characteristics of the profession providing the most satisfaction included interaction with people, sharing information and solving problems, coworker relationships and support, and job flexibility.
2. The former and current Extension Agents interviewed reported night and weekend work / trying to balance work and family, paperwork, and uncertainty regarding job responsibilities as leading to job dissatisfaction. Notable differences included former agents reporting dissatisfaction with the support they received at the county-level and current agents reported dissatisfaction with the public service promotion process.
3. Regarding factors leading to employee resignation, former and current Agents both cited time demand / time away from family and salary as important. Notable areas in which the two groups did not agree included lack of leadership and support from County Extension Coordinator as stated by former Agents and unrealistic expectations / feelings of frustration as stated by current Agents.
4. Recommendations to increase employee retention were varied. The only similar recommendations given by both former and current Agents were to improve current mentoring programs and provide better leadership and support to new Agents. Former agents stressed improving salaries and better leadership from County Extension Coordinators, and current Agents felt strongly about reinforcing the current mentoring program and creating an internship program.

Concerns related to employee retention and job satisfaction cited in the pertinent literature facing today's Extension Agents include low compensation, difficulty in working with administrators, lack of support, long hours, and conflicting expectations from students, the community, local supporters, and state administrators. The following two paragraphs include findings in the relevant literature in support of the study conclusions.

Regarding factors leading to job satisfaction among Extension Agents, similar findings have been noted by several other studies. Purcell (2003) found relationships with clientele and coworkers and flexibility in planning one's schedule as leading to job satisfaction (p. 98). Ensle (2005) noted flexible scheduling and educating clientele as providing much job satisfaction. Ensle also noted a 1995 Kansas study that identified "teamwork" and "the opportunity to be self-directed" as key factors leading to job satisfaction among Extension Agents (p. 1-3).

This study's findings also reflect some of the factors leading to job dissatisfaction found in the pertinent literature. Manton and van Es (1985) found that Illinois Extension agents who voluntarily resigned reported "dissatisfaction with administration and too much time away from family" as factors leading to job dissatisfaction (p. 4). Fetsch and Kennington (1997) identified long work hours, including nights and weekends, and conflicting demands from clientele and administrators as factors leading to job dissatisfaction among Extension Agents.

Recommendations

While the concerns related to employee resignation found in the pertinent literature are important, the findings of this study point toward increasing administrative leadership and support and improving the current mentoring program as steps which are financially feasible to address. Many of the recommendations made by study participants and researchers in the area of employee retention and job satisfaction highlight the need for improved administrative support, clarification of expectations from administrators, providing opportunities for recognition, being proactive in the evaluation process, and encouraging agents to take time off for family and personal development.

Specifically, the researcher would like to offer the following recommendations to Cooperative Extension administration:

1. Examine Extension Agent salaries and identify those employees whose compensation is markedly lower than their peers with similar qualifications and experience. Once identified, administration should make the necessary adjustments, over time if necessary, to bring those employees' salaries up to that of their peers. Also in the area of compensation, examine the salary levels of those professions to which Agents turn upon leaving Cooperative Extension, specifically agricultural education, private industry, and other government agencies.
2. Evaluate the current mentoring program to determine its effectiveness. This evaluation should include interviews with agents who were mentored and agents who have served as mentors and a review of the current mentor training program. In addition, Extension administration should examine what Cooperative Extension is doing in other states in the area of new Agent orientation and mentoring.
3. Investigate internship programs being conducted in other states, if any currently exist. Explore the options for creating an Extension internship program with UGA's College of Agricultural & Environmental Sciences, Warnell School of Forestry & Natural Resources, and other related colleges and departments.
4. Continue the existing County Extension Coordinator orientation and training program. Create an evaluation of this training to be administered approximately one year after completion of the program in an effort to determine strengths and weaknesses of the current training program. In addition, survey current County Extension Coordinators as to what information and/or education is needed in new Coordinator training.
5. Survey current Extension Agents regarding the effectiveness of Extension leadership, including County Extension Coordinators, Program Development Coordinators, District Extension Directors, and upper-level administrators. The findings of this survey would be helpful in identifying the strengths and areas needing improvement in the leadership hierarchy of the organization.

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