A Conceptual Model for Retaining County Extension Program Professionals

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Abstract: Retaining county program professionals in their positions continues to challenge Cooperative Extension systems. Turnover among program professionals results in unmet citizen needs, disrupted educational programs, low morale among remaining Extension professionals, and wasted financial and material resources. Using a qualitative methodology and content analysis, the authors developed the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. conceptual model for retaining county Extension program professionals, and suggest practical implications of the model: Recruit authentically; Expand on new employees' experiences and abilities; Train, train, train; Advocate for both the employee and the position; Inspire, invest in, and empower employees; Nurture connectivity among employees; and Show appreciation through effective recognition.

Introduction

For more than two decades, Cooperative Extension systems nationwide have faced chronic challenges related to employee turnover and retention. As early as 1983, Whaples noted that "Poor morale, job dissatisfaction, burnout, and agent turnover continue to plague Extension in many states" (¶ 1). The previous year, Church and Pals (1982) explored why Idaho Extension agents left the organization and identified high incidences of required work activities during evenings and weekends as a major reason. St. Pierre (1984) suggested that Extension agent turnover may be related to the highly absorptive nature of the agent role that may result in a lower quality of family life. Manton and van Es (1985) investigated employee turnover in Illinois and concluded that alternative reward structures and stronger formal and informal employee networks were warranted. Hebert and Kotrlik (1990) investigated Extension agents' spouses' satisfaction and found direct correlations between spousal satisfaction and such variables as salary, stress level, and number of hours worked.

Rousan and Henderson (1996) indentified "other priorities in their lives, other job offers, insufficient pay for the amount of work performed, family obligations, too many late night meetings, too many work

responsibilities, and attraction to more money elsewhere" (p. 56) as common reasons for agent turnover in Ohio. In 2000, Kutilek found that in Ohio, "Turnover rates have remained around 7% for the total Extension staff, 5% for agents" (¶ 17); she and colleagues (Kutilek, Conklin, & Gunderson, 2002) later commented on the need for Extension systems to address work/life issues so as to better retain quality employees facing increased personal, familial, and professional demands upon their time. Mowbray (2002) addressed the issue of job stress and turnover among Extension employees in Kentucky while Ezell (2003) did likewise in Tennessee.

However, the issue of employee retention is not unique to Cooperative Extension. Much contemporary literature regarding employee retention and turnover relates to the workplace in general yet has important implications for Extension settings. Branham (2005) suggested seven hidden reasons why employees decide to leave a job, including: the job or workplace was not as expected; the mismatch between job and person; too little coaching and feedback; too few growth and advancement opportunities; feeling devalued and unrecognized; stress from overwork and work-life imbalance; and loss of trust and confidence in senior leaders. Lencioni (2007) described "three signs of a miserable job," including not being understood or appreciated by someone in authority, not knowing if your work matters to anyone, and no tangible means for assessing if you are successful or failing in your work.

The Challenge Remains Today

In 2005, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy's Leadership Advisory Council of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges identified agent retention as a major challenge facing Cooperative Extension nationally. According to unpublished data compiled by North Carolina District Extension Directors (W. Sykes, personal communications, June 22, 2008), North Carolina Cooperative Extension experienced overall turnover rates among county program professionals averaging 6.5% in fiscal years 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. The issue was especially critical in the 4-H program area, where 31% of 4-H agents hired since January 2006 had already left the organization as of April 2009 (R. Dale Safrit, personal communications, April 2, 2009). Strong and Harder (2009) concluded that even today, "Extension agents still continue to leave Cooperative Extension prematurely, despite the attention research has paid to the issue of employee turnover" (¶ 7).

Turnover among county Extension agents results in disrupted educational programs, unmet citizen needs, low morale among remaining Extension professionals, and wasted financial and material resources dedicated to Extension agent on-boarding and in-service training. In order to recruit and maintain the highest quality workforce possible, Extension administrators and supervisors nationally need a valid contemporary model to describe and define potential reasons that Extension agents decide to leave the organization and to subsequently re-focus these reasons upon effective strategies to promote retention. Such a model would serve as a foundation for innovative ideas, strategies, and programs designed to retain quality Extension county program professionals in today's organization.

Methods

The purpose of the qualitative research reported here was to identify components of a contemporary conceptual retention model for county program professionals in American Cooperative Extension systems. The authors used content analysis (McNabb, 2004) to accomplish the study objectives and conducted an exhaustive review of literature published in the past 15 years related to both "employee turnover" and "employee retention." As a result, they identified 10 texts, 21 peer-reviewed journal articles, and 16 other peer-reviewed Web-based publications, both internal and external to Cooperative Extension, as data sources. The authors read each publication and coded its content, resulting in 143 individual pieces of qualitative data

regarding contemporary personnel retention. Using an analytical matrix and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the authors collapsed the data into seven holistic themes or components that they subsequently labeled. To increase the rigor of the data analysis, the authors engaged a panel of experts consisting of eight members of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Administrative Council who reviewed the categories and suggested minor revisions in wording.

Findings

The resulting seven themes comprising the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. conceptual model for retaining county program professionals are presented in Table 1. The authors also present operational definitions for each theme/component based upon the content analysis findings and expert panel suggestions.

Table 1.
Operational Definitions for the Seven Themes/Components Comprising the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. Conceptual Model

Model Component	Operational Definition
Recruit authentically	Communicating to prospective employees the job's professional responsibilities as well as critical aspects of the total organization's and specific workplace's cultures critical to success in the position
Expand on new employees' experiences and abilities	Hiring employees who have substantial overlap between their personal needs, interests and goals and those of the total organization and immediate workplace
Train, train, train	Providing moral support and material resources for the continuous professional education (CPE) of the newly-hired employee so s/he may meet and exceed basic professional competencies (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations) needed to ensure professional success
Advocate for both the employee and the position	Ensuring that both the employee and his/her position to grow and evolve together as the organization's mission/vision and employee's needs/goals evolve
Inspire, invest in, and empower employees	Dedicating time and energies to best understand the needs of each individual employee and then developing and sustaining a workplace environment within which s/he thrives and succeeds
Nurture connectivity among employees	Building strategic linkages between people and people, ideas and ideas, and people and ideas so as to strengthen each employee's internal and external workplace environments
Show appreciation through effective recognition	Using appropriate intrinsic and/or extrinsic resources to effectively communicate appreciation to each employee for workplace excellence

Recruit Authentically

This initial component of the proposed model entails communicating realistically to prospective program professionals their specific day-to-day responsibilities as well as critical cultural aspects of the Extension organization and specific workplace. A potential new county program professional must be made aware of the day-to-day, real-life demands of the position and especially those outside regular work hours and weekends.

This component of R.E.T.A.I.N.S. has been alluded to in the Extension literature for more than a quarter century (Church & Pals, 1982; St. Pierre, 1984) yet remains a major challenge still today. Ensuring authentic recruitment is fundamental to the holistic success of the remaining six concepts of the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model. In filling a vacant program position, Extension supervisors must accurately, truthfully, and completely describe the work content, internal organizational context, and internal/external environments of the specific position so that an applicant may objectively assess whether the position is a good potential match for his/her current skills and abilities, and future aspirations.

Expand on New Employees' Experiences and Abilities

This component involves hiring program professionals who perceive substantial overlap among their personal needs, interests, and goals and those of the total Extension organization and immediate workplace. By aligning the right tasks to the right county program professionals, Extension supervisors ensure that program professionals are challenged and enriched in their daily work (Branham, 2005). Program professionals who are passionate about their work, who enjoy the tasks they are assigned, and who work in an environment that supports their success are more engaged and thus more productive (Chang, 2000).

Thus, Extension supervisors should hire program professionals into career paths that create a match between the professionals' personal/professional interests and the work they are responsible for completing. Once employed, new Extension county program professionals need to know exactly what is expected of them, and have both the materials/equipment needed to do their work and the talent to do what they do best. This aspect of R.E.T.A.I.N.S. is supported by much contemporary Extension literature regarding the critical importance of new employee orientation (Brown, Gibson, & Stewart, 2008; Mincemoyer & Kelsey, 1999; Stone, 1997).

Train, Train, Train

This component involves providing both moral support and material resources for the continuous professional education (CPE) of a newly hired Extension county program professional so she or he may meet and exceed basic professional competencies needed to ensure professional success. Organizations that focus extensively on developing newly hired talent through continuous training will be in a much stronger position to retain the most talented employees, thus becoming an employer of choice (Boxall & Purcell, 2003).

Even today, in times of fiscal retrenchment and budget crises, training is often the first budget item to be reduced or eliminated entirely by administrators. However, in light of the critical role training plays in not only retaining quality program professionals but also developing the organization's overall human capital, training should be sustained, if not increased, during times of organizational change and upheaval. According to Storey (1995), training is a, if not the, major element of an organization's commitment to employee development and retention; this belief is strongly supported in the Extension literature as well (Ferrer, Fugate, Perkins, & Easton, 2004; McCann, 2007).

Advocate for Both the Employee and the Position

This component involves ensuring that an individual Extension county program professional and his or her professional responsibilities grow and evolve together as both the organization's mission/vision and the program professional's needs/goals evolve. Extension administrators and supervisors must work to better understand and monitor how each individual professional co-evolves with his or her physical and socio-cultural workplace environments. Rennekamp and Nall (1994) describe an Extension professional development model that builds upon each individual's needs according to the individual's career stage and long-term career goals.

Too often supervisors focus overwhelmingly upon growth in content of an employee's job and minimize aspects of the employee's peers and/or job environment. Of even greater concern, they may often ignore personal goals and needs as they relate to the employee's job and career. While respecting privacy issues and boundaries, Extension supervisors must work more diligently to support and develop each program professional's total, integrated work-life ecology.

Inspire, Invest In, and Empower Employees

Extension supervisors must also dedicate individual time and energies to better understand each individual county program professional to support him or her in developing and sustaining a workplace environment within which she or he thrives and succeeds. As early as 1987, Clark recognized that continuous, quality human resource development programs were critical to the survival of Cooperative Extension. More recently, Stone and Coppernoll (2004) emphasized a systematic approach to continuous professional development for Extension employees. Lencioni (2007) stressed that even the most cynical employees need to see a connection between what they do in their work and the satisfaction expressed by someone significant in their life.

Extension supervisors need to ensure that they consistently acknowledge specific moments of success by their program professionals. In addition to ensuring a positive feedback system, they need to align organizational systems to empower and reward employee contributions and should strive to empower county program professionals so that they develop a sense of ownership for their programmatic work and the successes derived from it.

Nurturing Connectivity Among Employees

Nurturing connectivity involves building strategic linkages between people and people, ideas and ideas, and people and ideas so as to strengthen each Extension county program professional's internal and external workplace environments. Fleming and Asplund (2007), Rath (2006), and St. Pierre (1984) each reported a significant improvement in retention among Extension employees who had at least one best friend in the workplace. Ingram (2006) discussed a direct connection between interpersonal relationships in the workplace and self-identity, and job performance and satisfaction. Extension program professionals who feel a sense of belonging and who have a strong social network of colleagues at work are more engaged and less likely to leave the organization.

Show Appreciation through Effective Recognition

This final component encourages Extension supervisors and administrators to use appropriate intrinsic and/or extrinsic rewards to effectively communicate appreciation to each Extension county program professional for workplace excellence. Once again, authors have discussed the critical role of employee rewards and

recognition in Cooperative Extension systems (Chandler, 2005; Manton & van Es, 1985; Mowbray, 2002). A recent survey of 10,000 employees of Fortune 1000 organizations found that 40% identified "lack of recognition" as a major reason for leaving a job (Gibson, 2008).

To be effective, recognition must not only be an organizational strategy, but also be demonstrated as a personal philosophy by direct Extension supervisors. In many ways, this component serves to bring full-circle the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model, given that program professionals who feel appreciated and who were hired based upon authentic recruitment are more likely to want to expand their professional responsibilities and experiences, participate in meaningful training, and feel empowered and connected in their daily work lives in Cooperative Extension.

In Closing

While the proposed R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model is still conceptual in nature and as of yet untested in the field, in Table 2 the authors suggest some potential real-life strategies for retaining Extension county program professionals. Additionally, they are currently using the model to develop a follow-up quantitative study among Extension county program professionals in North Carolina. The empirical data collected will serve to refine the original model so that Extension administrators and supervisors may begin to develop and implement practical applications. The ultimate goal is a practical model for retaining county Extension program professionals that could be used to train mid-level and front-line Extension administrators and supervisors nationally on how to best attract and retain the most talented program professionals in county Extension programs.

Table 2.
Potential Real-Life Strategies for Retaining Extension County Program Professionals Based Upon the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. Conceptual Model

Model Component	Potential Retention Strategies Based Upon Component
Recruit authentically	• Provide applicants with contact information for successful county program professionals in similar positions, and encourage them to contact them to discuss the position demands • Revise job descriptions so they authentically *describe* the job instead of "sell" the job • Ask behavioral-based questions during interviews that help an applicant and/or supervisor determine if they will most likely "fit" the position.
Expand on new employees' experiences and abilities	• Assign each new employee a personal mentor to support his/her individual professional development needs and goals • Re-focus and redesign training and development programs to make them individualized regarding both individual participant needs and goals related to the training topic

	• Require individualized personal development plans be completed in partnership with supervisors for all county program professionals
Train, train, train	• Make training and professional development opportunities a day-to-day expectation of each professional by incorporating them into performance review systems • Establish alternative funding sources for training costs (e.g., grants, donor gifts, endowments, etc.) • Employ authentic assessment techniques (e.g., portfolios, personalized case studies, individualized action plans, etc.) to emphasize pragmatic applications of training
Advocate for both the employee and the position	• Establish personal leadership development programs focused upon professional peer cohorts (i.e., by program focus, job title, etc.) • Create "stretch" opportunities through state and regional task force assignments • Establish and communicate organization-wide parameters that provide for professional scheduling/flextime and telecommuting based upon specific county program professional positions
Inspire, invest in, and empower employees	• Develop supervisorial training that helps managers achieve excellence in coaching and empowering their direct reports. • Encourage the development of shared strategic planning at all levels. • Provide encouragement and support for participation in appropriate professional associations/societies for specific county program professional positions
Nurture connectivity among employees	• Help entire Extension county program staff teams identify and focus upon at least one local critical targeted need/issue that can serve as a program focus for the entire staff • Establish intra-county informal mentor programs for new Extension program professionals • Identify annual staff and program development events where county program professionals may invite and bring their immediate families
Show appreciation through effective recognition	• Establish routine monthly recognition programs that recognize and publicize county program professionals' personal and programmatic

	accomplishments • Develop supervisory training that ensures that supervisors are giving direct, specific positive recognition on a timely basis. • Send a hand-written notes/cards to county program professionals recognizing exemplary work and/or personal achievements

The authors firmly believe that retaining the most talented county program professionals will increasingly become more critical to the strategic growth and success of Cooperative Extension nationally as levels of physical and monetary capital remain stagnant or decline. As Holland, Sheehan and de Cieri (2007) concluded, "There is increasing recognition... of the potential of... human capital to make a substantial and lasting impact on sustainable competitive advantage" (p. 247).

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