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Retirement and Attrition Trends of Extension Professionals in North Dakota

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Abstract: The "graying" of the baby boomer generation and their pending mass retirement raise concern about job turnover in the Cooperative Extension System. The study reported here examined selected demographic data of North Dakota Extension professionals and the length of time they intended to continue working in their current positions. The Extension professionals' responses to an online questionnaire indicate that, along with rising retirement trends, attrition is a major concern. Recruitment of new employees to fill the ranks of those who leave their positions, due to retirement or attrition, must be a priority.

Introduction

"Baby boomers fundamentally will reinvent retirement." This powerful statement was made by James P. Gorman, president of the Global Private Client Group, during a press conference held by Merrill Lynch in February, 2005 (Merrill Lynch, 2005). Gorman's statement underscores what many experts have said about the profound changes that an estimated 78.2 million (US Census Bureau, 2006) Americans will bring as they reach their golden years. Few segments of society will be immune to the effects of the boomer generation as they reach retirement age, least of which will the federal government, where 60.8% of the non-seasonal, full-time permanent workforce will be eligible for retirement in the next 10 years (US Census Bureau, 2006).

This mass retirement of the baby boomer generation will add to an already tight labor market. According to the Bureau of Labor Standards, employee turnover rates are on the rise from a very stable 7 to 10% from 1975 to 1995, to almost 40% for the period of 2001 to 2006 (Insala, 2005). Moreover, these increasing attrition rates come with a large price tag. It has been estimated that employee attrition may reduce company profits by as much as 40% (Hay Group, 2001).

Will this "graying" of the baby boomer generation and their pending mass retirements, along with attrition trends, have an impact on the Cooperative Extension System? Will Extension experience employee turnover

rates comparable to the national averages? While little data is available regarding retirement and attrition trends of Extension professionals, many scholars have studied the underlying causes of attrition and reported on the retention efforts of several states.

Igodan and Newcomb (1986) developed a profile of a typical burned-out agent and offered coping strategies. Karen M. Ensle (2005) examined programs in Pennsylvania, Kansas, Illinois, and Vermont that attempted to identify issues leading to agent "burnout" and identify strategies to increase retention of agents. Ensle concluded that Extension should support efforts to reduce stress and provide training in life balance and wellness. Fetsch and Kennington (1997) quantified the cost of stress related to burnout and synthesized research related to burnout. In addition, these authors recommended two ways to help Extension employees deal with the strain of balancing family and work that included modifying organizational policies and implementing programs that help staff members reduce stress and increase productivity.

Research Questions

The research reported here sought to quantify the retirement and attrition trends of Extension professionals in North Dakota. The objectives were to:

1. Describe selected demographics of Extension professionals in North Dakota,

2. Determine when current Extension professionals in North Dakota will be eligible to retire,

3. Determine how long North Dakota Extension professionals intend to stay in their current position, and

4. Identify plans of North Dakota Extension professionals after they leave their current positions.

Methods

Procedure

Data collection was accomplished by using an electronic questionnaire administered through Survey Monkey. Prior to data collection, Duane Hauck, (Director, North Dakota Cooperative Extension Service, Fargo, North Dakota) sent an email to all Extension professionals in North Dakota notifying them that they would be asked to participate in the study. The email further stated his support for the study and encouraged all of the cooperative Extension professionals to participate.

The initial email from the researchers asking for participation in the study was sent the next day. The message had a link to the online questionnaire. This initial email also informed the Extension professionals of confidentiality procedures of the study and stated that their participation was voluntary. A week later, a second email was sent requesting a response from those who had not yet responded. A third and final email was sent a week after the second email requesting a final response. The two follow-up email messages also contained the link to the questionnaire (Dillman, 2007). Out of 239 North Dakota Extension professionals, 163 (68.2%) participated in the survey.

Instrument

The data collection instrument used in the study was originally developed by Morgan and Shoulders (2007) for use with agricultural education teachers in Kentucky and was modified to fit an online format as well as to reflect North Dakota Extension professionals. After the researchers modified the questionnaire, it was reviewed by a panel of experts comprised of North Dakota Extension professionals. The 23-question online questionnaire was formatted by the researchers and placed on Survey Monkey.

The questions were in a multiple-choice format, and respondents were allowed to only choose one answer from the options listed for each question. The number of options ranged from two to 11, based on the individual question. Two of the questions also contained an "other" category, and respondents were allowed to enter additional information. A "submit" button was located at the bottom of the Web page for the respondent to send the results to the database.

Data Analysis

Data was gathered through Survey Monkey and was downloaded by the researchers in table format. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, were used to summarize the data. As the percentages calculated by Survey Monkey did not take into consideration persons who did not respond to a specific question, the researchers recalculated the percentages based on only the number of persons who answered the question.

Because the final rate of return was 68.2%, the researchers addressed the possibility of nonresponse bias. The respondents were divided into two equal groups based on their order of response. The first half of the respondents were labeled "early responders," and the second half were labeled "late responders" as per recommendation of Lindner, Murphy, and Briers (2001), which improved the power of statistical comparison. Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare the two groups. No significant differences ($p < .05$) were detected for the variables of interest.

Results

Table 1 displays the demographic data on current North Dakota Extension personnel. A slight majority (53.37%) of the respondents were female. Combined, the age ranges 41-50 and 51-60 described over 60% of the respondents. The greatest percentage of respondents (31.29%) had worked in Extension for one to 10 years. Nearly two thirds of the respondents (64.42%) attended high school in North Dakota.

Table 1.
Demographics of Extension Personnel

	Frequency	**%**
What is your gender?		
Male	73	44.79
Female	87	53.37
No Response	3	1.84
What is your age?		

20-30	25	15.34
31-40	24	14.72
41-50	40	24.54
51-60	59	36.20
61 or older	14	8.59
No Response	1	.61
How many years have you been employed in Extension?		
Less than 1 year	17	10.43
1 to 10 years	51	31.29
11 to 20 years	41	25.15
21 to 30 years	39	23.93
31 or more years	14	8.59
No Response	1	.61
Did you attend high school in North Dakota?		
Yes	105	64.42
No	57	34.97
No Response	1	.61

Retirement

Sixty-nine respondents, or over 42% of the respondents, reported being eligible to retire in the next 10 years. Fifty-three respondents, or over 32% percent, are not eligible for 21 or more years. The percentage of males who are eligible for retirement in the next 10 years is nearly double the percentage of females eligible to retire in the next 10 years.

Table 2.
Years to Retirement

Number of Years	Total Frequency	Total %	Males Frequency	Males %	Females Frequency	Females %
1-5 years	41	25.15	27	36.99	14	16.09
6 to 10 years	28	17.18	12	16.44	15	17.24
11 to 15 years	20	12.27	10	13.70	9	10.34

16 to 20 years	19	11.66	8	10.96	11	12.64
21 or more years	53	32.52	16	21.92	36	41.38
No Response	2	1.23	0	0	2	2.30

Plans to Stay in Current Position

Although the above table indicates that 69 respondents (over 42%) could retire in the next 10 years, 121 (over 74% of respondents) stated that they intend to vacate their current position within the next 10 years, with 74 (45.4%) of the respondents indicating that they plan to vacate their position in the next five years. A similar percentage of males and females plan to continue in their current position. Nine respondents (5.52%) anticipate working in their current position for 21 or more years. In addition, 84 % of those who are between the ages of 20-30 plan to vacate their current position in the next 5 years.

Table 3.
Years Anticipated Working in Current Position

Number of Years	Total Frequency	Total %	Males Frequency	Males %	Females Frequency	Females %
1-5 years	74	45.40	34	46.58	40	45.98
6 to 10 years	47	28.83	18	24.65	27	31.03
11 to 15 years	17	10.43	12	16.44	5	5.75
16 to 20 years	13	7.98	4	5.48	8	9.20
21 or more years	9	5.52	3	4.11	6	6.90
No Response	3	1.84	2	2.74	1	1.15

Plans After Leaving Current Position

Almost 25% of the respondents plan to retire when they leave Extension. Twenty-four of the respondents, or 14.72%, anticipated working in another Extension position. Eighty respondents (over 49%) plan to work at a job in another field. Write-in responses in the "other" category included: become self employed, ranch, consult and teach part time, continue education, volunteer, continue in Extension, work in oil field, and retire but still work part time in some capacity.

Table 4.
Plans after Leaving Current Position

Number of Years	Total Frequency	Total %	Males Frequency	Males %	Females Frequency	Females %
Work at another Extension job in North Dakota	23	14.11	10	13.70	13	14.94
Work at another Extension job outside of North Dakota	1	.61	1	1.37	0	0
Work in another part-time job	46	28.22	20	27.40	25	28.74
Work in another full-time job	34	20.86	14	19.18	19	21.84
Retire	40	24.54	22	30.14	17	19.54
Other	18	11.04	5	6.85	13	14.94
No Response	1	.61	1	1.37	0	0

Discussion

The demographics data showed that a slight majority of the respondents were female. Most respondents were 41 to 60 years of age, and the number of persons who had worked in Extension from 1-10 years, 11-20 years, and 21-30 years was fairly evenly distributed. Almost two-thirds of the respondents graduated from a North Dakota high school.

The percentage of North Dakota Extension professionals who are eligible to retire during the next 10 years was reported to be over 42%, with a higher percentage of males being eligible for retirement compared to females. While this number seems quite large, it is lower than the 60.8% of federal employees who are projected to be eligible to retire over the same time period (US Census Bureau, 2006). Moreover, it is important to note that retirement trends among Extension professionals in North Dakota are twice as high when compared to state employees in North Dakota (Council of State Governments, 2002).

Although retirement trends are of concern, the attrition rates reported by the respondents are startling: almost three in four (74.23%) of Extension professionals in North Dakota report that they plan to leave their current Extension position in the next 10 years, with fairly equal percentages of males and females planning to leave. This figure is further compounded when the data collected for objective four is analyzed. When asked about

their plans after leaving the current Extension position, less than 15% indicated that they plan to seek another position in Extension. One implication of the high attrition rate could be that a large number of positions may go unfilled. This may result in greater employee stress due to additional workloads, as well as the potential for a reduction of service to clients.

Demographic data collected through the study reported here revealed that almost two-thirds of the current Extension staff graduated from North Dakota High schools. Because retirement and attrition trends among Extension professionals in North Dakota during the next 10 years present a unique set of challenges for Extension administration in the state, recruitment of new employees to fill the ranks of those who retire must be a priority. The results of the study provide support for increasing North Dakota students' awareness and acceptance of Extension as a possible career. This would require additional resources to support awareness programs, recruitment activities, and evaluation of recruitment program effectiveness. Retention efforts are also warranted, because 84% of those ages 20 to 30 plan to leave their current position in the next 10 years.

The study reported here was limited to data collected from one state, thus caution is urged regarding any attempt to generalize the study's findings beyond its target population. Additionally, although respondents reported when they plan to leave their current positions, it cannot be known whether they will actually leave their positions as planned. Some may choose to leave earlier than reported due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g., personal illness or relocation of spouse). Others may choose to stay longer. During the time the data was collected, the economy was stronger, and retirement accounts had not been affected by the recent economic downturn. Attempts to collect the same data today might reveal different retirement plans.

Although describing the retirement trends of Extension professionals was the primary focus of the study, data reporting the number of persons planning to leave their Extension positions before retirement was of concern. The attrition data collected in the study may support future research in North Dakota following the lead of other scholars (Ensle, 2005; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Igodan & Newcomb 1986) in seeking information to determine why many North Dakota Extension professionals plan to seek employment outside of Extension. Additionally, qualitative and quantitative research on retirement and attrition trends in other states could provide rich and valuable comparison data

Rising retirement rates along with attrition rates need to be of concern to the Cooperative Extension System. Who will be available to fill the positions of those who retire or leave for other reasons? What will be the best way to recruit these new professionals? Not only is it important to recruit new Extension professionals to replace those who are planning to retire, but also it is important to explore and address the reasons why many others are planning to leave their current Extension positions before reaching retirement.

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