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# **Extension's Future: Time for Disruptive Innovation**

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**Abstract:** Extension has been considered change adverse by some scholars and practitioners, and they claim this inhibits organizational growth and relevance. Pockets of individuals and teams across the nation have worked independently as entrepreneurs to enhance Extension's relevance by introducing organizational processes and programs that greatly differ from past practices. However, every Extension system, team, and worker has a role to play in the disruptive innovation process. This may include exploring, implementing, or evaluating disruptive organizational innovations, or removing barriers, resourcing, or supporting a culture of innovation to enhance relevance and sustainability.

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Extension has been considered change adverse by some scholars and practitioners, and they claim this inhibits organizational growth and relevance (McDowell, 2001; Oliver, 2011). Pockets of individuals and teams across the nation have worked independently as entrepreneurs to enhance Extension's relevance by introducing organizational processes and programs that greatly differ from past practices specifically driven by budget reductions (Morse, 2009, 2011). However, every Extension system, team, and worker should explore, implement, and evaluate disruptive

organizational innovations to enhance relevance and sustainability (Coates, 2004; King & Boehlje, 2000)

## Disruptive Innovation

Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) believe this type of innovation, "disrupts the trajectory of traditional improvement" and "changes what constitutes quality attractiveness to nonconsumers" (p. 46). They suggest disruptive innovation addresses root causes by concentrating on one or two underlying problems often addressed by autonomous or spin-off units of an organization. Disruptive innovation must provide new value through affordability, accessibility, capacity, responsiveness, simplicity, or customization of a process or product (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004; Christensen, 1997). Assink (2006) believes disruptive innovation is revolutionary, not evolutionary, and needed for organizations to survive dynamic and complex markets and uncertain economic situations, increase competitive advantage, and prevent organizational decline. Disruptive innovation, if successful, becomes a sustaining innovation that can directly contribute to organizational sustainability (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). A disruptive innovation usually conflicts with the current way of operating (Charitou & Markides, 2003; Christensen, 1997) and takes place at the individual, functional, company, or industry levels (Assink, 2006).

Exploring disruptive innovation requires an outside-in analysis of how particular innovations can change an organization or industry. This requires examining resources, processes, values, nonconsumers, barriers to innovation, actions to overcome barriers, emerging developments on the fringe, and specific customer circumstances (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004). Employees and organizations must observe the world differently through a circular process of probing, learning, and examining feedback (Assink, 2006). Kanter (1999) finds that organizations with successful disruptive innovations have (1) a clear business agenda, (2) strong partners committed to change, (3) investment by both parties rooted in the user community, (4) links to other organizations, and (5) commitment to sustain and replicate results.

Specific barriers to disruptive innovation include not providing funds early enough to support the exploration process, not cultivating an outside perspective, and jumping the gun rather than allowing for natural innovation (Gilbert & Bower, 2002). Other barriers include the inability to unlearn old ways of thinking, failing to move away from a successful dominant concept, a risk-averse organizational climate, too much senior management turnover, a lack of process to integrate the innovation into the organization (Assink, 2006), and the lack of competencies to embrace change in the organization (Henderson, 2006). For disruptive innovation to succeed, an organization needs internal passion to explore radical new ideas and solutions, and to leverage internal and external resources accordingly (Assink, 2006).

Adult educators have studied the concepts of disruptive innovation at the individual level as part of transformative learning theory. They often describe it as a personal disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000). Franz (2002) found in Extension faculty and staff that transformation was spurred by disorienting dilemmas from critical events such as: (1) joint writing projects; (2) receiving significant grant funding; (3) personal crises; (4) change in job status; (5) interactions with others at workshops and work teams; (6) unexpected changes in projects; (7) leadership roles, opportunities, and

connections; (8) discovery of a particular gap/niche in their work; or (9) serendipity. These personal critical events led to personal transformation of the Extension worker and innovations for the teams they worked with and their Extension system as a whole.

## **Organizational Leadership and Disruptive Innovation**

Disruptive innovation needs to be projected as a threat and an opportunity to get attention (Gilbert & Bower, 2002). Managers are key to bringing innovations to senior leadership. Christensen, Anthony, and Roth (2004) believe managers of disruptive environments operate with a lot of uncertainty, discover seemingly unattainable knowledge, experiment and locate unanticipated customers, follow theory and intuition rather than data, don't need a lot of money to solve problems, build innovative teams from scratch based on the skills needed to handle the task, and fund and harness processes to quickly get the right thing done. Nurturing curiosity is key to fueling disruptive innovations (Assink, 2006).

The roles of senior leadership in developing disruptive innovation include (1) bridging the interface between disruptive growth and mainstream business; (2) designating the appropriate resources and processes for the innovation process; (3) creating and shepherding a disruptive growth engine that starts early, providing oversight, and engaging an expert team of well-trained movers and shakers; and (4) sensing when the context is changing and training others to recognize the signals (Christensen, & Raynor, 2003). Upper level organizational leaders also need to know what type and how much change their organization can handle (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000).

Disruptive innovations in Extension are infrequent. In fact, some Extension work specifically 4-H, tends to offer more services than most consumers prefer, overshooting customer needs (i.e., a long list of 4-H projects and activities on the assumption that more services are better rather than meeting the specific needs of today's families) (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004). External innovations such as the Internet or private companies taking over Extension services more conveniently or cheaply has put us at risk of organizational decline.

So why does Extension fail to create and embrace disruptive innovations? From our observations we suggest the following reasons:

- An organizational culture that supports the status quo and discourages innovation
- A funding entitlement mentality that has created over dependence on past sources of funding and lack of urgency to innovate
- A lack of diversity in customer base and staffing
- Strong linkage to academia, known for its bureaucracy and historic slowness to react to change rather than operating with a business mindset
- A 100-year history of operating in an expert model paradigm rather than collaborative paradigms with clients

- Over reliance on rural customers
- A lack of customer management/tracking over time

We believe that if Extension can overcome these barriers to innovation, organizational decline can be stemmed.

## **Extension's Disruptive Innovations**

In spite of the multiple reasons preventing Extension from embracing disruptive innovation, innovations have been taking place in some areas. The first innovation focuses on revenue generation. As public funding sources shrink, new revenue sources are needed to sustain and grow the organization. A major disruption takes place as fees are levied for programs, staff and faculty are expected to successfully win grants and contracts for educational programs, and sponsors are secured for educational events and products where this activity did not exist or exist fully in the past. Entrepreneurship and creativity are encouraged, the public funding entitlement mentality is challenged, and ways are found to more quickly address rapidly changing client needs. This original disruptive innovation has now become a sustaining innovation.

A second disruptive innovation found increasingly across Extension systems includes the closing of county Extension offices. Again, this disruption is fueled by decreased funding by state and local government. In some states, urban county offices have failed to maintain funding. In other states, regional offices have replaced county offices. This has resulted in more creative programming to meet clients across a wider geography, more diversity in staffing and customers, and less reliance on rural customers to maintain the organization. The closing of county offices has become more common but is still disruptive to some Extension systems.

Finally, a decline in public funding for Extension has resulted in a disruptive innovation created by the public value movement in Extension (Franz, 2011; Kalambokidis, 2004). Educators and administrators are finding they need to change the way they describe the impacts of their work. Funders are now interested in learning how Extension education has changed public economic, environmental, and social conditions in addition to being informed of learning and behavior changes of particular clients. This requires finding creative ways to link research on public impacts with Extension programs, moving beyond an expert model of instruction to a more collaborative educational paradigm, and tracking customers over time to determine what program effects have taken place. This disruption is just taking hold across the Extension system.

## **Lessons Learned**

Embracing disruptive innovation in Extension work is not easy or popular. The following lessons may help those exploring disruptive innovations.

- Start the disruption movement with early adopters. Don't waste time on other types of Adopters; it takes too long to bring them along.

- Support, protect, and provide resources for "skunk works" (Rich, 1994) groups to operate outside mainstream work to enhance innovation.
- Chose organizational leaders who can bridge innovation and mainstream operations.
- Hire employees with a history of innovation and the ability to navigate within the current organizational context.
- Watch what other organizations are doing on the fringe to learn and adapt to change.
- Address the root causes behind the need for organizational change rather than just addressing symptoms of the causes.

## Next Steps

Next steps for supporting disruptive innovations in Extension need to be considered. We suggest that academics more fully study past disruptive innovations explored and adopted by Extension and other organizations and the contexts that spurred those innovations. Are there particular Extension environments and environmental factors that catalyze or thwart disruptive innovation?

More important, Extension workers in all parts of the organization need to work toward embracing innovation and the disruptions they create as a way of life rather than an organizational anomaly. This change can be nurtured by creating flexible job descriptions that allow for innovation and providing incentives for those who discover, implement, and evaluate disruptive innovations rather than branding these individuals as problem employees. Extension administrators should also hold up models of disruptive innovation for others to emulate, provide appropriate professional development, and build support for innovation into organizational infrastructure rather than adhere to the processes and cultures of the past.

Scenario planning for extremes could also force innovative thinking. For example, what if county Extension offices were all eliminated? What if current Extension units were closed and new units were created to reach a different client base? What if no geographic boundaries were part of Extension operations? What if Extension had no public funding? What if Extension was removed from higher education and was privatized?

## Summary

Extension must more fully and adeptly embrace disruptive innovation as a way to thrive rather than cling to old ways of operating. Discovering, implementing, and evaluating disruptive innovations may be the tipping point for survival of Cooperative Extension. Christensen's work on this type of innovation is especially informative as Extension workers, managers, and senior leaders work to understand and embrace new ways of conducting work. Current experiments in disruptive innovation such as revenue generation, office locations, and public value impact reporting can inform new ways of operating in an increasingly turbulent environment.

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