

orientation: adjust for agent characteristics?

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In Extension, orientation training is an early part of employee development programs. It's designed to provide a transitional period for newly hired county Extension agents to help them adjust to the working and living conditions in their new place of employment.

Orientation training takes place from the first day on the job and continues throughout the first year of employment. Organized activities acquaint the agents with the organization, their place in it, the role they're expected to perform, and also how to measure up to the standard of performance that's considered necessary for building the agents' commitment to the organization. It also provides a period during which the new agents acquire further knowledge, skill, and judgmental ability they'll need to become effective Extension professionals.

Given that orientation training is one component of Extension's in-service training efforts, the question is: Does orientation training also need to be adjusted to the individual's background and characteristics? . . .

Extension is constantly changing. As the organization changes, the change needs to be reflected in its employee development programs. Additionally, the personnel of the organization are also constantly changing. Because of professional advancement, retirement, and resignation, experienced personnel are moving out of the organization and new personnel are filling the vacancies. These new people need to know their function in the organization so they can better serve the

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clientele. The National Task Force on Cooperative Extension In-Service Training recommended that the training of these people be adjusted to the individual's background and characteristics.¹

Question

Given that orientation training is one component of Extension's in-service training efforts, the question is: Does orientation training also need to be adjusted to the individual's background and characteristics? Furthermore, what needs to be included in orientation training programs?

Methodology

To determine the extent to which differences in agents' backgrounds and characteristics were related to the kind of orientation training program they felt they needed, the investigators collected data on seven agent characteristics. These were: sex, academic degree held, type of institution granting the academic degree, previous academic major in college, previous experience with Extension, professional position, and type of county where the agents worked.

One group of respondents was asked to rate the amount of training they felt they needed in 13 areas of training as developed by Jenkins.² A second group of agents rated the importance of these areas of orientation training.

The agents in this study were all the newly hired county Extension agents in Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and South Dakota.

Findings

The answer to the question "Does orientation training need to be adjusted to the individual's background and characteristics?" is "no."

The answer was apparent when statistical procedures (Spearman's *rho* and Kendall's coefficient of concordance) were used to test for relationships between the two dependent variables—amount of training needed and importance of training—and the following independent variables: sex, academic degree held, type of instruction, previous academic major, previous experience with Extension, professional position, and type of county. In 13 of the 14 tested relationships, the probability of the obtained result occurring by chance was less than 1 in 10,000; the fourteenth probability was less than .015.

In other words, there was close agreement among people with dissimilar background or characteristics. Male and female agents, for example, felt they needed essentially the same amount of training and also rated the importance of the 13 areas of training similarly.

Examine Table 1 to get the answer to: "What needs to be included in orientation training programs?" Table 1 contains the agents' perceptions of the "amount of training needed" and "the importance" of that training for each of 13 training areas. Notice that a rating of 3 means "some

Table 1. Rank order of 13 areas of orientation.

	Amount of training needed ¹		Importance ²	
	Rank	Weighted score	Rank	Weighted score
	(n=76)		(n=74)	
Understanding the position and the job responsibilities	1	3.9	3	4.0
Understanding the process in planning Extension programs	2	3.8	1	4.8
Understanding the involvement of people in Extension program development	3	3.7	2	4.1
Understanding office operations	4	3.7	8	3.8
Planning and effecting educational change with clientele groups	5	3.7	4	3.9
Understanding the items and steps related to processing appointments	6	3.7	10	3.7
Get acquainted with people involved in Extension	7	3.6	5	3.9
Understanding the Extension organization at the county, area, and state levels	8	3.5	11	3.6
Know the county where the agents are going to work	9	3.5	6.5	3.8
Understand and know how to use Extension methodology in communication	10	3.4	6.5	3.8
Understand Extension professionalism and professional development opportunities	11	3.3	12	3.4
Experience the first day on the job	12	3.3	9	3.7
Satisfying personal and family needs prior to the starting date of employment	13	2.7	13	2.9

$r_s=0.79$ significant at $p=0.001$

¹ Amount of training needed: 1=very little training needed, 2=little training needed, 3=some training needed, 4=much training needed, 5=very much training needed.

² Importance: 1=very little importance, 2=little importance, 3=some importance, 4=important, 5=very important.

training needed." Thus, the agents felt that in 12 of the 13 areas they needed some training. Likewise, they reported that all 13 areas have at least "some importance." The data in the second column of Table 1 can serve as a basis for prioritizing the content of orientation training programs if time and resources are limited.

The reader will notice that agents felt that training in "understanding the process in planning Extension programs" was close to being "very important" (a rating of 5). They said the following areas were clearly "important" to them: "understanding the involvement of people in Extension program development," "understanding the position and the job responsibilities," "planning and effecting educational change with clientele groups," and "get acquainted with people involved in Extension." The other training areas that are listed received ratings between "some importance" and "important."

Agents reported that they need "some" to "much training" with respect to "understanding the position and the job responsibilities," "understanding the process in planning Extension programs," "understanding the involvement of people in Extension program development," "understanding office operations," and "planning and effecting educational change with clientele groups." Agents felt they needed lesser amounts of training in the other areas.

Conclusion

Based on these data, it was concluded that agents' orientation training programs do *not* need to be modified on the basis of any of the characteristics examined in this study. The content of orientation training programs could include all 13 areas of training. However, if there are limited resources, prioritizing should be based on the ratings of importance. The time spent on each area of training selected should be weighted with the agents' suggestions of amount of training needed in each area.

Recommendations

We'd like to recommend the following:

1. Orientation training be considered as basic and general training for the new agents entering the organization. The training helps the agents acquire a body of common knowledge about the organization, its function, and its beneficiaries. It also helps the agents understand their place in the organization and the roles that they're expected to perform.

2. In implementing orientation training for newly hired county agents, the same 13 training areas should be administered to all new agents. Group activities like learning about the organization, the function of the organization, the clientele, program planning and development, Extension teaching methods, etc., could be offered to all new agents, regardless of their characteristics and background.

Footnotes

1. The National Task Force on Cooperative Extension Inservice Training, *Induction Training for County Extension Agents* (Topeka, Kansas: H. M. Ives and Sons, Inc., 1959), p. 2.
 2. David D. Jenkins, "Orientation Guide for New Cooperative Extension Faculty" (Columbus: The Ohio State University, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1975).
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