

before you resign . . .

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The resume is updated and letters of reference have been requested. A watchful eye is being kept on job openings. You or colleagues have begun the job search that will take yet another experienced field staff member from the ranks of the Cooperative Extension Service. Have the factors that influence resignations been carefully studied in your state? Can you point out to colleagues some reasons in favor of maintaining their positions?

Resignations of experienced field staff is a national drain that affects program continuity, reduces effectiveness, and costs dollars for recruitment and training of new personnel. Government programs are currently looked at with scrutiny. Any factor that increases costs or reduces effectiveness will affect future funding and support. Nationally, about 10% of county and area agents resign annually, according to a USDA Division of Science and Education source. In the 1981-82 County Agents Directory, there were 12,112 county and area agents in the United States.¹ This amounts to about 1,200 resignations each year.

Idaho Study

In Idaho, 56 field staff (of the 105 field staff positions) resigned from the Cooperative Extension Service over a 5-year period from 1974 to 1978. Of these 56 staff, 25 resignations occurred before 2 years of service had been completed. Because of these facts, a study was conducted to determine why Idaho Extension Service employees stay or leave the service.

Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and mailed to 112 individuals—56 who had resigned in the last 5-year period and 56 present field staff members who had 4 or more years of tenure

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and were equally and randomly selected from throughout the state. This questionnaire was designed in part after a study conducted by Sterrett with Maryland 4-H agents.²

Findings

Of the 112 questionnaires sent, 92 (82.1%) of the sample group responded. This percentage included a 71.4% response from resigned staff members and a 92.8% response from staff presently employed. Of the sample group, 43.5% were agricultural agents, 31.5% were home economists, 19.6% were 4-H agents, and 5.4% were community resource development agents.

The mean age of the total sample group was 39.6 years. The respondents who had resigned from the Cooperative Extension Service were generally younger (33.8 years) compared to those individuals still employed by the service (43.7 years). Of the respondents who resigned, 82.5% were under age 40.

People who participated in the survey were asked to respond to a list of 25 factors relating to their employment with Extension. They were asked to rate these factors according to level of influence ranging from 1 = no influence through 5 = very much influence. Tables 1 and 2 give the mean score for each of the 25 factors and standard deviation from the mean. Note some striking differences in responses between those who stayed and those who left Extension.

The study determined the factors that influenced Idaho field staff to stay or to leave their jobs. Those who quit were influenced to do so by factors that limited both professional and personal growth and satisfaction. Those who stayed were influenced by job freedom and diversity. . . .

According to Table 1, the factors that surfaced as most influential for leaving were: (1) chance for advancement and promotion, (2) evening and weekend work, and (3) salary. An analysis of variance comparing primary program areas revealed that agricultural agents were more highly influenced to leave because of salary and chance for advancement than were home economics, 4-H, and community development agents. Home economics and 4-H agents were more influenced to leave because of evening and weekend work than were agricultural agents.

Table 1. Factors that influenced Extension staff's decision to quit.^a

Factor	Mean ^b	Standard deviation
1. Chance for advancement and promotion	2.76	1.54
2. Evening and weekend work	2.73	1.58
3. Salary	2.71	1.37
4. Community (location and lifestyle)	2.36	1.45
5. State administered programs	2.31	1.35
6. Supervision by district supervisor	2.30	1.32
7. Relations with county co-workers	2.30	1.41
8. Recognition received from administration	2.18	1.37
9. Evaluation systems of staff	2.15	1.24
10. Freedom to plan and carry out own program	2.13	1.43
11. Coordination with county chair-person	2.10	1.33
12. Reporting systems (IEMIS, POW)	2.05	1.31
13. Professional improvement and degree requirements	2.02	1.42
14. Job description and definition	1.89	1.14
15. Responsibility associated with job	1.83	1.19
16. Relations with public (youth)	1.78	1.09
17. Relations with public (adult)	1.73	1.03
18. Recognition received from clientele	1.71	1.03
19. Job security	1.68	1.23
20. Organizing events and activities	1.68	0.90
21. Flexibility of working hours	1.65	1.14
22. Diversity of day-to-day tasks	1.65	1.02
23. Prestige associated with job	1.47	0.89
24. Vacation policies	1.41	0.96
25. Civil Service retirement	1.35	0.95

^aListed from most influential to least influential.

^b1 = no influence; 2 = little influence; 3 = some influence; 4 = much influence; 5 = very much influence.

Table 2 shows that freedom to plan and carry out their own program and the diversity of day-to-day tasks were highly influential in field staff's decision to stay. Staff appreciated the relative unstructured nature of their work. Factors that had little influence on staying were those that didn't contribute to job freedom: reporting systems, state administered programs, and staff performance appraisals. Employees are more

Table 2. Factors that influenced Extension staff's decision to stay.^a

Factor	Mean ^b	Standard deviation
1. Freedom to plan and carry out own program	4.30	0.70
2. Diversity of day-to-day tasks	4.17	0.73
3. Community (location and lifestyle)	4.13	1.11
4. Relations with public (adult)	3.69	0.91
5. Relations with public (youth)	3.65	0.94
6. Responsibility associated with job	3.61	0.88
7. Civil Service retirement	3.57	1.16
8. Flexibility of working hours	3.48	1.09
9. Relations with county co-workers	3.47	0.96
10. Job security	3.44	0.91
11. Recognition received from clientele	3.25	1.04
12. Vacation policies	3.25	1.08
13. Salary	3.19	0.97
14. Prestige associated with job	3.09	1.14
15. Supervision by district supervisor	3.05	1.10
16. Organizing events and activities	3.00	1.16
17. Coordination with county chairperson	2.91	1.11
18. Recognition received from administration	2.67	1.24
19. Job description and definition	2.59	1.13
20. Chance for advancement and promotion	2.51	0.95
21. Professional improvement and degree requirements	2.46	1.01
22. Evening and weekend work	2.13	0.99
23. Evaluation systems of staff (performance appraisal)	1.94	0.80
24. State administered programs	1.88	0.73
25. Reporting systems (IEMIS, POW)	1.72	0.75

^aListed from most influential to least influential.

^b1 = no influence; 2 = little influence; 3 = some influence; 4 = much influence; 5 = very much influence.

highly influenced to stay by factors that allow them to "do their own thing."

Several comparisons were made using analysis of variance: primary program area, sex, age, Extension district, years employed, and income level. Results revealed several significant differences:

- Salary had a greater influence for staying on the job for home economists and 4-H agents than for agricultural agents.

- 4-H agents were less encouraged than all other agents to stay due to prestige associated with the job recognition from clientele, freedom to plan and carry out programs, and diversity of day-to-day tasks.
- As age increased, job description and definition and job security become more influential for an employee to stay.
- The employees in the 50-years-and-over category were more tolerant of the reporting systems than were the younger employees (ages 20-29).

Community (location and lifestyle) was an important influence both for those who decided to quit and those who decided to stay. This factor deserves additional attention in recruitment and placement of employees.

Summary and Recommendations

The study determined the factors that influenced Idaho field staff to stay or to leave their jobs. Those who quit were influenced to do so by factors that limited both professional and personal growth and satisfaction. Those who stayed were influenced by job freedom and diversity. A study of motivation and morale problems in Virginia by Giegold and Shelton produced similar findings to this study.³

Based on findings of the Idaho study, here are some recommendations for field staff and administration:

1. Salaries and promotion are an area of concern, particularly for agricultural agents. Field staff need to be more adequately informed on how advancements are made and on career opportunities available within the Extension Service. To retain staff, salaries must remain competitive with industry, business, and other agencies.
2. Evening and weekend work is a dissatisfier that may require innovation. Perhaps field staff who find this a burden could try early morning, sack lunch, or after school meetings. Or they could consider, when appropriate, using newsletters or other media for dispensing information. The potential need for evening and weekend work should be carefully explained to prospective Extension staff so they know what's expected before the job is accepted.
3. Job freedom and diversity should be safeguarded and retained for field staff. Those who contemplate quitting could be urged by colleagues and administrators to consider these factors of job satisfaction carefully. Not many jobs allow the freedom and diversity enjoyed

by Extension employees. State administered programs, reports, and requirements should be kept at a minimum to continue to allow the employee freedom and flexibility.

4. The community has an effect on the field staff's decision to stay or leave. In the recruitment and placement process, a complete description of the community including population, largest town, distance to shopping, and community opportunities could be of help in placing staff in communities they enjoy. Field staff should consider the community closely before transferring or selecting a county in which to work.
5. Job rewards for the 4-H agent need to be examined. The study indicated 4-H agents felt less prestige and recognition from clientele. Finding ways to allow more freedom and diversity may also contribute to keeping 4-H agents in their jobs. Further study needs to be conducted in this area.
6. Younger employees apparently haven't appreciated the value of reporting systems such as the Extension management information system and plan of work. Training may be needed to provide reasons for the reports and constructive use of such data on the local level. Young field staff should insist on receiving feedback on this aspect of their jobs.
7. An exit interview should be conducted to continue to determine reasons that field staff resign.

Conclusion

Resignations affect program effectiveness, continuity, and future funding—not only in Idaho, but also nationwide. The studies noted from Virginia, Maryland, and Idaho could provide a basis for improving longevity and job satisfaction throughout Extension. Factors can be identified in your state that influence the decision to stay or leave an Extension job. Field staff and administration can alter some aspects of the working environment to enhance job satisfaction. The seven recommendations in this article could also apply to your state. Positive aspects of the job can be reviewed with colleagues who are considering quitting. If it's your resume that's prepared, you're encouraged to look carefully at the prospective job and consider the long-term benefits of employment with Extension.

Footnotes

1. *1981-82 County Agents Directory* (Skokie, Illinois: Century Communications, Inc., 1981).

2. Richard Sterrett, "Factors Influencing Job Satisfaction in Present and Resigned Maryland 4-H Agents," *News and Views*, XXXII (January, 1979).
3. William C. Giegold and William E. Shelton, "Pinpointing Morale Problems," *Journal of Extension*, XIV (May/June, 1976), 6-9.

