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Engagement in Extension Professional Associations: Tennessee Extension Professionals' Attitudes and Perceptions

Abstract

We sought to determine Extension agents' attitudes and perceptions related to Tennessee Extension professional associations. We conducted one-on-one interviews with association members and nonmembers and used a thematic analysis method to analyze the results. Themes common to members and nonmembers were (a) networking and connection, (b) value, and (c) membership costs. Member-only themes included (a) awards and (b) motivation to join. Nonmember-only themes included (a) lack of information and understanding of function and (b) recruitment. Recommendations for practice and future research revolve around motivation, effective recruitment, professional development, networking, and awards. Our findings and recommendations may serve as guiding elements for others evaluating Extension professional associations.

Keywords: [professional associations](#), [professional association membership](#), [Extension professional associations](#)

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Introduction

The continual deepening of knowledge and skills is an integral part of the development of any professional (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004), including Extension professionals (Debord & Sawyers, 1995). According to Boyle et al. (2004), short workshops or conference sessions are insufficient for fostering learning that alters what and how educators teach. Boyle et al. (2004) noted that activities that produce sustained learning opportunities include engagement in networks where groups of individuals link in person to explore and discuss topics of interest, pursue common goals, share information, and address concerns. Similarly, the National Research Council (2000) stated that most successful professional development activities occur over time and encourage learning communities with shared experiences and discourse.

One opportunity for professional development as described above may be through an Extension professional association (EPA). For example, all Tennessee EPAs purport to encourage professionalism and professional improvement (Tennessee Association of Agricultural Agents and Specialists, 2014; Tennessee Association of

Extension 4-H Workers, 2006; Tennessee Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2008). However, there is limited literature on EPAs. Therefore, we investigated Extension agents' attitudes and perceptions regarding EPAs, from both member and nonmember perspectives. Our findings and recommendations may serve as guiding elements for others evaluating EPAs in various settings and provide background for future research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical bases for our research were andragogy and the theory of planned behavior. Andragogy assumes that adults are self-directed and problem-centered, have experiences that can be used during learning, and possess a need to know why they should learn; that learning readiness is related to developmental tasks or social role; and that internal motivations are stronger than external ones (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The theory of planned behavior is an extension of reasoned action theory (Ajzen, 1991) and is based on the assumptions that humans are sensible and consider available information and implications of actions (Ajzen, 2005). Ajzen (1991) suggested that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control influence an individual's intentions toward or motivation for performing behaviors.

Methodology

We used a basic qualitative research design (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014), and our participants were Extension agents from the University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University. We obtained contact information for agents through the Extension directory of each university and compared the directory listings to membership lists from Tennessee EPAs. Through this process, we identified 250 association members and 75 nonmembers ($N = 325$). We randomly selected agents by using Excel's random number generator until no new information was forthcoming (Ary et al., 2014). This process resulted in our contacting 36 agents (14 members and 22 nonmembers), and seven members and six nonmembers participated in individual interviews. The demographic composition was 11 females and two males, and all agents reported their ethnicity as Caucasian. One Tennessee Association of Agricultural Agents and Specialists member, two Tennessee Association of Extension 4-H Workers members, and four Tennessee Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences members participated. Additionally, two eligible nonmembers of each of the aforementioned associations participated, and some of the current nonmembers were former members.

The interviews were approximately 30 min and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Semistructured interview guides were used. To maintain confidentiality, we assigned each member and nonmember a letter and number combination (e.g., M1, N1, respectively). We used the block and file approach to conduct a thematic analysis (Grbich, 2007) and reach consensus on emergent themes and then included appropriate data as evidence of those themes. We took these steps to create more dependability through interrater agreement (Ary et al., 2014). Credibility was maintained through the use of member checks and low-inference descriptors (Ary et al., 2014). Confirmability and dependability were created through the use of an audit trail (Ary et al., 2014). Qualitative findings are bound by the participants and contextual characteristics, which influences transferability. Therefore, readers should use caution when generalizing our findings. Rather, the findings presented here serve as a case that other Extension groups and professionals may explore for practice and research applicability.

Findings

Themes common to members and nonmembers were (a) networking and connection, (b) value, and (c)

membership costs. Member-only themes included (a) awards and (b) motivation to join. Nonmember-only themes included (a) lack of information and understanding of function and (b) recruitment.

Members and Nonmembers

Networking and Connection

Every participant perceived EPAs as providing opportunities for networking and connection. M5 conveyed the importance of networking and connection by stating that these facets of professional life are essential for success in Extension. N4 expressed that without membership, agents do not get to connect with each other because of being spread throughout the state. Furthermore, many participants viewed associations as means for making personal connections (M2, M3, M4, M5, M7, N3, N4, N5). M5 stated, "What happens in the nonformal group is so vitally important to our health, mental health, and recharging our batteries."

Value

Members and nonmembers expressed their perceptions about the value of EPAs. Some used positive terms, including "helpful" (M1), "has value" (M2), "good programs" (N4), and "a good thing" (N6), whereas N1 and N2 felt there was minimal to no value in EPAs.

Similarly, the member data revealed a divide in how regional association meetings were viewed. M1, M4, and M6 felt regional meetings were beneficial and noted that the ability to network across the regions, connectedness to other agents, and time for sharing program ideas, strategies, and successes or failures added value to membership and meeting participation. M5 provided another perspective, stating explicitly that regional association meetings held "no value." M7 suggested that regional meetings were boring and should provide learning opportunities specific to an individual's job and allow for personal interaction.

Several participants discussed state and national meetings in a positive manner (M1, M4, M5, M7). M5 remarked, "Statewide or national meetings help me realize the work I'm doing is equal to the work of someone who has a traditional Extension degree. It helps me know I'm doing a good job and also where I can do better." M4, M5, and M7 praised national-level meetings as "amazing" and placed value on meeting colleagues from other states.

As with the professional meetings, participants had mixed feelings about the value of professional development provided through associations. Most members expressed that professional development was needed (M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6), and some stated that the associations provided opportunities for programming idea and resource sharing, which allowed them to grow professionally (M4, M6). Others, including nonmembers who had previously been members, said the associations did not help them grow professionally (M1, N1, N2, N5, N6). Some did not perceive gaining career or programming benefits from association membership (N2, N5, N6). N5 stated, "A professional organization where I think I'd benefit is going to be where I'm given more skills to do my job better."

Furthermore, some felt that associations were valuable for promotion purposes (M1, M6, M7, N1). M7 stated, "Quite honestly, we are expected to be a member. . . . It just looks better on your performance appraisal. . . . [and] on your vita." N1, who was a member previously, said, "There's professional credit . . . but other than looking good, what is the return on it?"

Membership Costs

Members and nonmembers noted the high cost of dues (M1, M6, M7, N1, N2, N3, N5) and were not sure whether possible benefits outweighed costs (M1, N1, N5). M6 felt "begrudging of the money" and said, "It is a strain on young agents . . . to come up with that kind of money." N3 explained, "I'm trying to figure out a [personal] budget . . . I may not be able to join right away."

Although more than half felt costs were too high, others felt differently or had mixed emotions (M2, M3, M4, M5, N4, N6). N6 stated, "It doesn't keep me from joining, but it does make me question it." M3 suggested that agents "have a voice" and can speak up if they cannot afford the dues. M4 stated that dues "aren't ridiculously expensive" and that the webinars and the connections developed make membership "worth the money." M5 pointed out that the cost of membership goes "for good things" such as speakers and first-year-member scholarships.

Some pointed out the additional cost associated with having a split appointment. M7 stated, "It is expensive if you're a member of one or two associations." N1 said, "I would choose an association each year . . . I have never been a member of both associations [at the same time] because I won't shell out over \$200 for something I'm still not seeing [the benefit of]." N4, who also held a split appointment, anticipated joining only the association most beneficial to that split appointment; this perspective was due to time and relevance more than cost as "fee-based money" to supplement cost was available in N4's county. N5 did not feel that the cost of joining two associations was an issue but pointed out that the associations are not consistent in cost.

Members

Awards

Nearly half of the members viewed associations' awards systems as vehicles for having achievements recognized (M1, M2, M3). M3 summed up the awards process as an effective professional validation tool and noted program recognition as being key to professional advancement. However, some agents found the awards process difficult or vague (M1, M2, M4). M4 described the awards process as "time consuming" and stated that the process did not feel rewarding because agents have to self-nominate and apply. M4 suggested "having committees who recommend agents for an award." M7 believed that awards were "expected" and that agents were rated more highly on performance evaluations if they had gone "above and beyond" by receiving an award.

Motivation to Join

Motivations for joining varied among members. Members professed to have joined associations because of benefits such as webinars or professional development (M2, M4), leadership service opportunities (M2), professional affiliation and camaraderie (M3), a perception that membership and participation positively influence performance appraisals (M7), encouragement from colleagues who were already involved (M2), and recognition as a professional (M4). Additionally, M5 claimed that associations give agents "a voice." Beyond benefits, a few members articulated that regional staffs' "strong encouragement" was the reason they joined (M1, M6, M7).

Nonmembers

Lack of Information and Understanding of Function

All nonmembers reported not having enough information about the state's EPAs. More specifically, nonmembers expressed lack of knowledge or information related to how to join and what benefits the associations provided (N1, N2, N3, N4, N6). Phrases such as "I would like [the reason for association membership and participation] to be made clear" (N2), "I didn't know who was in charge" (N3), and "I think I need more information" (N4) occurred throughout the interviews. Closely related to a lack of information was acknowledgment of a lack of understanding related to the function of associations (N1, N2, N3, N4, N5, N6). N2 conceded having "zero percent clue" about the function. N2 and N3 indicated that they received "elevator speeches" instead of effective explanations of the function and noted that those elevator speeches were not helpful. N1 questioned the function of regional associations and indicated having participated in a regional association's meetings in the past but still not understanding the association's function. Similarly, N2, who had been a member in the past, professed to not understand the purpose of being a member.

Recruitment

Half of the nonmembers indicated that the majority of their recruitment by associations was via email (N2, N4, N6). N3 and N4 had received personal contact, and N1 and N3 noted that information was presented at new-agent orientation. The only recruitment N5 had experienced was as a result of coming into contact with a state officer. N6, who was once an association member, stated that associations contact members only "when [one's] dues are due or when a 'share day' is coming and to apply for awards" and described never having been contacted regarding the lapsed membership. Furthermore, N1 and N2 noted being recruited by regional and state staff, and N2 reported receiving a "negative remark" on a performance appraisal due to not being a member and receiving feedback that association involvement was a means of strengthening one's promotion packet.

Three nonmembers provided suggestions for more effective recruitment. N6 suggested that associations provide informational brochures or packets that discuss tangible benefits and answer frequently asked questions. N4 indicated that personal communication via telephone would be a great initial recruitment tool that could be used for describing joining procedures, member responsibilities, and the purpose of the organization. N3 expressed the desire for deeper descriptions of EPAs at orientations as opposed to the "hey, this is here" approach typically used, noting that hearing clearer, more comprehensive explanations and having time to ask questions would improve employees' initial understanding of the associations.

Conclusions

Members and Nonmembers

Ajzen (2005) stated that attitude toward a behavior is determined by evaluation of the outcomes associated with the behavior. We found that participants evaluated the outcomes of association membership through the lens of collectively held member and nonmember perspectives. As stated previously, Boyle et al. (2004) noted that professional development activities most likely to produce sustained learning include engagement in networks where groups link in person to explore and discuss topics of interest, pursue common goals, share information, and address concerns. A majority of participants indicated that association membership has the outcome of networking and connection on the regional, state, and national levels. The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) purports that some intentions are influenced by attitude considerations and others by social norm

considerations. With the belief among agents that associations are a source of networking and connection and involvement by nearly 77% of agents in EPAs, it is likely that Extension agents' intentions are influenced by both attitude and social norms. According to Ajzen (1991), the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm and the greater the perceived behavior control, the stronger the individual's intention to perform a behavior under consideration is. This may explain why some nonmembers indicated that they planned to join an association.

Participants' perceptions of the value of EPAs varied. Some considered associations to be extremely valuable, and others did not. Knowles (1984) indicated that adults must know the reason for learning because when they consider learning valuable they will invest considerable resources. Participants were divided regarding the value of associations relative to learning.

Concerning membership cost, participants had mixed feelings. People who believe they do not have the resources to perform a behavior are unlikely to form strong behavioral intentions, even if they have favorable attitudes toward the behavior (Ajzen, 2005). A perceived lack of personal resources may explain why some do not join associations even when they hold favorable attitudes toward doing so. Conversely, some joined because they perceived membership benefits to be cost worthy.

Members

Members perceived association awards as recognition of achievements and a motivation for membership. Knowles (1984) suggested that adults accumulate experiences that are resources for learning. Awards are means through which Extension professionals are recognized for their experience, lifelong learning, and application of knowledge. Thus, awards may spur Extension professionals to seek professional experiences that are then used to facilitate future learning and recognition, thus creating a cycle of motivation and learning.

Members also discussed their motivations for joining associations. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation stems from psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Correspondingly, the majority of members described their motivations as coming from the desire for leadership, networking, professional development, and webinars.

Nonmembers

Nonmembers indirectly described lack of information and understanding of the function of associations; some could not provide descriptions of the associations or explain how they function. Nonmembers having a greater understanding of the role of associations were considering joining or planning to join the subsequent year; thus, they likely had made more positive outcome associations with EPAs (Ajzen, 2005).

Recruitment is a type of social pressure. According to Ajzen (2005), subjective norms are a function of the perception that specific individuals (e.g., coworkers or supervisors) approve or disapprove of performing a behavior. Nonmembers perceived that they were recruited to join associations through limited means. Participants discussed limited means as minor contact, such as mentions at new-employee orientations and yearly "dues renewal" emails. Ajzen (1991) described attitude toward a behavior as an influential factor in an individual's intentions. If nonmembers are receiving limited contact or recruitment, their ability to develop an attitude toward association membership is limited.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

The recommendations we present here are specifically for Tennessee, but they hold value for the Extension system broadly and can be used when examining various EPAs' missions and objectives; communication strategies; member recruitment, recognition, and retention activities; and professional development offerings and delivery methods.

Tennessee EPAs, in particular, operate on a voluntary basis with no paid staff. Therefore, we make the following recommendations to Tennessee EPA state boards and researchers as points of consideration:

- Explore each EPA separately in regard to attitude, perception, and the motivational factors discovered in our research.
- Examine worth of membership in national EPAs and barriers to joining.
- Maintain commitments to networking and establish means for making networking a key component in all meetings and conferences.
- Determine what modes of networking benefit members the most.
- Provide communication specifically describing ways EPAs can enhance professional expertise. We suggest that each meeting or conference include a description of the opportunities for professional development and explicit connections to practical application in an Extension agent's daily programming and county-level efforts.
- Investigate what Extension professionals deem as an acceptable return on investment from membership costs.
- Develop a tool kit that describes the association's purpose, activities, and goals and return on membership investment.
- Determine the professional development topics Extension agents would prefer to have presented at regional and state meetings and conferences, and determine effective ways of providing professional development for agents with multiple appointments.
- Determine the most appropriate means for recognizing outstanding work.
- Consider creating a nominating committee to identify members who qualify for specific awards as a means of encouraging members to apply for awards, thus creating a formal structure for recognizing or identifying exemplary work.
- Evaluate the effects of a nominating committee on agents' motivation to apply for awards and their job performance.
- Examine best practices for recruitment, and implement those practices. Then, over time, determine whether implementation increases knowledge of the association among nonmembers.
- Be proactive in recruitment, and create a culture that Extension professionals want to take part in rather than rely on "strong encouragement" from regional staff and perceived negative ramifications on promotion as

motivators for joining. EPA members and leaders should engage in discourse related to the value of membership.

- Develop and provide information specific to agents with multiple appointments (e.g., agriculture/4-H agent) to aid in making educated decisions regarding whether they should join an association or which association they should join to receive the most benefit.

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