Identifying Needs and Implementing Organizational Change to Improve Retention of Early-Career Agents

Karen A. Vines
Virginia Tech

D. Adam Cletzer
University of Missouri

Donna Westfall-Rudd
Virginia Tech

Michael Lambur
Virginia Tech

Joseph R. Hunnings
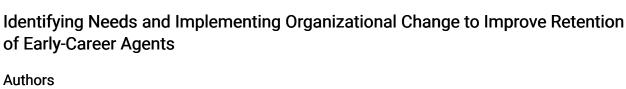*Virginia Tech*

See next page for additional authors

Recommended Citation

Identifying Needs and Implementing Organizational Change to Improve Retention of Early-Career Agents

Authors

Karen A. Vines, D. Adam Cletzer, Donna Westfall-Rudd, Michael Lambur, Joseph R. Hunnings, and Neal T. Vines

Identifying Needs and Implementing Organizational Change to Improve Retention of Early-Career Agents

Abstract

Retention of agents is important for the growth and stability of Cooperative Extension. A study of early-career agents in Virginia Cooperative Extension identified specific areas in which organizational change could be made to improve agent fit in the organization and long-term retention. As a result, numerous changes have been made, particularly associated with existing agents but also in work with prospective agents. Although this article relates specifically to Virginia, the challenges and solutions identified may be relevant to other programs and to national professional development organizations.

Keywords: agent retention, early-career agents/educators, professional development, organizational culture

Karen A. Vines
Continuing
Professional Education
Specialist
Agricultural,
Leadership, and
Community Education
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia
kvines@vt.edu

D. Adam Cletzer
Assistant Professor
Department of
Agricultural Education
and Leadership
University of Missouri
Columbia, Missouri
Cletzerd@missouri.edu

Donna Westfall-Rudd
Assistant Professor
Agricultural,
Leadership, and
Community Education
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia
mooredm@vt.edu

Michael Lambur
Associate Director,
Program Development
Virginia Cooperative
Extension
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia
lamburmt@vt.edu

Joseph R. Hunnings
Director, Planning and
Reporting,
Professional
Development, Civil
Rights Compliance
Virginia Cooperative
Extension
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia
hunnings@vt.edu

Neal T. Vines
Director for
Information
Technology and
Distance Education
College of Agriculture
and Life Sciences
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia
nvines@vt.edu

Introduction

Agent retention has been identified as a major challenge for Cooperative Extension organizations nationally (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Leadership Advisory Council, 2005; Safrit & Owen, 2010). Turnover not only results in lost investment associated with orientation, training, and replacement costs (Kutilek, 2000; Strong & Harder, 2009) but also has a lasting negative effect on the county program (Safrit & Owen, 2010). The period of time from 6 months to 2 years following employment is most critical, as this is the time when Extension agents have the greatest intention to leave the organization (Martin, 2011). Factors that

contribute to reduced turnover include organizational offerings such as mentoring (Smith, Hoag, & Peel, 2011; Strong & Harder, 2009) and orientation and ongoing training appropriate for the beginning stage of a career (Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzalez, Craig, & Haile, 2011; Safrit & Owen, 2010) as well as access to resources (Smith et al., 2011), flexibility, and opportunity to participate in research projects (Smith et al., 2011).

One factor potentially contributing to higher turnover among Extension agents is generational shift. Whereas previous generations of employees sought employment stability, only 18% of millennials entering the workforce expect to stay with an employer long term, and 38% of those employed are actively searching for new positions (PricewaterhouseCoopers International Limited, 2011). Many industries experiencing high turnover rates have expressed concern that the large number of millennials in the workforce may increase these rates (Edge et al., 2011; Kloss, 2017). Also at play are generational differences in work ethic, ability to manage change, understanding of organizational hierarchy, and expectations regarding feedback, all of which cause tension between millennials and their often older supervisors (Balda & Mora, 2011; Glass, 2007). In addition, different generations tend to have different perceptions of the role of work as it relates to their personal and family identities (Ensle, 2005). This circumstance translates into distinctions in what millenials look for when considering new positions (Kloss, 2017).

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) hired 100 new agents from 2011 to 2014. As a result of these hires, 42.5% of VCE agents in 2015 had fewer than 5 years of experience, and demographic data indicated that 32.6% were members of the millennial generation (Hunnings, 2015). We initiated the study described in this article in the summer of 2014 to identify professional development opportunities and changes in organizational culture needed to contribute to the career longevity and success of these early-career agents. The study consisted of a series of focus group sessions with a representative sample of agents hired within the preceding 3 years. As a result of recommendations stemming from our findings, VCE has implemented actions to support career longevity in a collaborative environment, taking into consideration the work–life integration and professional development needs of Extension professionals in the organization. The study (14-661) was approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board.

Our initial purpose with the focus group research was to obtain preliminary findings that would be used to develop an Extension system-wide electronic survey. However, after reviewing the findings, we determined that significant areas for improvement could be identified without the use of a system-wide survey. Instead, our research team was expanded to incorporate additional members so that we could focus on making recommendations for implementing change based on our findings. Due in large part to the people who were involved on the implementation team and the process that was followed, many of the recommended changes have been readily adopted. Findings from the study may be beneficial to other statewide Extension organizations and national professional development organizations interested in improving retention and success of early-career agents.

Methods

We used purposive random sampling to identify agents with fewer than 3 years of service, dispersed across the state, for participation in focus groups. Each of four VCE district directors submitted a list of 12 agents from his or her district who had been hired within the preceding 3 years. Consistent with focus group methodology, we randomly selected seven individuals from each district and invited them to participate in a regional focus group session. One agent failed to attend, leaving a total of 27 participants across four focus groups. Focus group sessions were conducted in August and September 2014. The ages of focus group members varied greatly, so

greater emphasis was placed on the participants' early stage in their careers than on their generational statuses. However, a majority of the participants were both early-career and of the millennial generation.

The focus group session protocol was developed through use of a priori investigation of existing literature related to professional needs of early-career and, specifically, millennial employees. It was further developed through review by a panel of experts within VCE. Protocol item topic areas included (a) agent attitudes toward continuing professional education opportunities, (b) agent perceptions of organizational support and effectiveness with regard to continuing professional education opportunities, (c) the contexts in which agents work and apply continuing professional education, (d) attitudes of early-career agents toward Extension as a career, and (e) perceived differences between early-career agents and more experienced agents. Focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and coded through the use of ATLAS.ti software for analysis. A total of 152 codes were identified. From these, the top 10 were determined on the basis of frequency of occurrence. A summary of quotes related to each code, including codes that were similar or overlapping, was developed. Three members of our research team reviewed each summary to identify emerging themes. Although our data are based on comments from a limited number of individuals, the breadth and repetition of the responses suggested that a point of data saturation was reached, as items identified were consistent across all focus groups.

A summary of themes was shared with the Extension district directors and an associate director as a basis for discussion. In the discussion, the district directors were asked to share their reactions. The district and associate directors also recommended possible solutions and provided rankings of the themes based on perceived relative importance. The expanded research team also ranked the items on the basis of perceived importance. This information was used to present a list of items for further discussion within the groups of the Extension system. Recommendations were submitted to the state Extension leadership team for possible action. The expanded research team, which included members of state staff and district directors, reviewed the recommendations and assisted with implementation.

Findings and Subsequent Action Items

Ten categories of themes were identified: career longevity, collaboration environment, work–life balance, access to specialists, job satisfaction and expectations, professional development plans, mentoring, professional development associations, professional development training preferences, and special situations. The findings and some of the changes resulting from them are identified in Table 1.

Table 1.

Findings from and Responses to Early-Career Focus Group Study

Category	Finding(s)	Recommendation(s)	Action item(s)
Career longevity	Agents were concerned about seeing people from their cohort at new-agent training leave Extension.	Human resources should work to improve the manner in which employee retention data are collected.	Exit interviews have been implemented to identify reasons agents leave the organization.
Collaboration environment	Early-career agents expressed difficulty in	Collaboration should be encouraged	District directors developed a common

	partnering with more senior agents or others outside their program areas.	through communication with all employees and the evaluation process.	matrix that included collaboration as a part of performance evaluation.
			Multigenerational training to enhance understanding and collaboration between generations was provided to all Extension agents and staff.
Work–life balance	Agents were concerned with meeting personal needs while working long hours and felt a lack of separation between their personal and professional lives.	Policies and expectations related to providing a supportive work environment need to be clarified and should address the need for early-career agents to develop skills for successful integration of personal life and work.	A working group of agents and administrators was formed to develop strategies to assist agents with achieving balance between personal life and work.
			Extension professionals, including administrators, have become more intentional in talking about family in presentations with agents and prospective agents rather than focus solely on their professional activities.
Access to specialists	Agents did not know whom to contact, what to expect, or how to initiate interaction with specialists with regard to developing their	Agents and specialists should have opportunities for interaction and should develop expectations for how to work together.	Specialists met on two occasions to brainstorm ways they might be more approachable to new agents.

	programs.		A document was developed to serve as a guide for interaction between agents and specialists. Opportunities for interaction between agents and specialists were increased. New specialists are now assigned to shadow three experienced agents as part of their orientation. In addition, time is provided for interaction as part of VCE in-service training sessions. The new program team approach has agents and specialists working together on program development activities. A panel of agents and specialists highlighted successful collaborations during new-agent orientation. A new program has been developed that highlights an academic department, programs, and personnel through a statewide webinar each month.
Job	Agents were	Greater emphasis	A "Survival Kit for

satisfaction and expectations	concerned about the isolation of working in rural communities, salary levels, and the number of hours and amount of travel required to do the job.	should be placed on the benefits and rewards of an Extension career.	New Agents" was updated by a group of more experienced agents to provide day-to-day guidance for early-career agents. An in-service training session was conducted by more experienced agents to highlight the benefits of a career in Extension.
Professional development plans	Agents were confused about the meaning of professional development as well as about how and when to participate in it. District directors were interested in methods for gathering data regarding agents' completion of professional development to use in measuring programming change.	The professional development process within VCE needs to be more clearly defined to provide benefits for both agents and district directors. Agents should be informed about what opportunities exist to help them obtain their master's degrees.	A task force is to be developed that will establish goals and track progress for agents seeking nondegree and degree opportunities. Sessions have been held at VCE in-service trainings to introduce agents to the online master's degree program provided through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.
Mentoring	Mentoring expectations were unclear to agents, who felt that their mentors either were uncertain of how to approach mentoring or lacked the time to address it appropriately.	The need for greater clarity and improved communication with regard to mentors and mentees should be addressed.	A new process introduced at the district level provides a yearlong mentoring experience for new agents. The process features use of multiple trained mentors.
Professional	Agents were confused	Professional	Information was

development associations	about the role of and possible benefits associated with membership in professional development organizations. Additionally, they were turned off by feeling forced to join and by disagreement and miscommunication among association leaders.	development associations should promote the benefits of membership and the process for joining. Additionally, associations should practice effective conflict resolution.	shared directly with professional development organizations in the state and through interaction at the Joint Council of Extension Professionals leadership development conference. Associations have been more proactive in sharing benefits of membership, extending invitations, and being intentional in providing greater inclusivity of early-career agents.
Professional development training preferences	Agents wanted training methods to match the content provided. They preferred that training presented in a face-to-face environment include hands-on activities and interaction, to justify their travel. They preferred that training used simply to provide information be presented through online webinars.	VCE should be more effective in matching training methods to training purpose.	New-agent orientation has been revised to provide more active learning experiences in a face-to-face setting. VCE in-service training is being provided through online webinars, whereas program team meetings are conducted face to face.
Special situations—persistent turnover, long vacancies,	Agents were concerned about special circumstances that existed in their individual locations.	In some situations, agents should receive additional support to counteract negative local attitudes and expectations arising	District directors became more aware of these circumstances and are now more proactive in

ineffective predecessors, multicounty roles	from circumstances over which they have no control.	supporting agents in such situations. Agents also were made aware that the district director should be the first point of contact when these situations occur.

A high level of agent turnover is costly to the Extension organization, both in resources expended and institutional knowledge lost. Further, agent turnover disrupts the function of the local community. During the focus group discussions, agents spoke of community leaders who had persistent low expectations of Extension due to high rates of turnover among agents. Agents also expressed concern as they saw members of their cohorts leave the profession. Another employee retention challenge stems from sending young agents into rural communities where out-migration means there are not many people they might consider to be contemporaries when establishing social connections. Agents described this circumstance during the focus group sessions and in many cases indicated that they had sought to return to their original home locales for work, even though those places might have been rural, to take advantage of preexisting social supports.

In addition, early-career agents' perceptions of the differences between themselves and more experienced agents were highlighted. The primary differences between early-career agents and more experienced agents identified through the project were (a) early-career agents' concern with having time to start a family and (b) early-career agents' preference to experience a more active teaching approach. The early-career agents emphasized the need for the organization to keep up to date regarding use of contemporary program planning and communication methods. The study also revealed that early-career agents value the experience and knowledge more senior agents have regarding the Extension organization and clientele. Data from the focus group sessions indicated that some of the generational challenges in local offices may have related to interactions between agents and staff rather than interactions between agents of different experience levels. The district program leadership teams initiated a training session to increase mutual understanding and communication practices among employees, faculty, and staff in each local office.

Implications

There is potential for early-career agents to provide long-established Extension organizations with new perspectives and processes that will help Extension remain current in changing environments. However, for this effect to be realized, Extension must provide a supportive environment in which these agents feel valued and see opportunities for growth and success that will lead to their making Extension a long-term career. According to findings from a recent survey of field agents conducted by the Association of Southern Rural Extension Directors (2017), in reporting programs, the average percentage of agents below 30 years of age was 17.87%, and in four states, over 20% of staff were in this age group (see Table 2 for additional findings). Clearly, Extension organizations across states should be considering the needs of this group of employees to ensure their success in retaining them. Within VCE, we hope to conduct future evaluation to determine whether we have been effective in addressing the needs identified through our study and whether there are additional issues we need to address. Although states differ in many ways, many of the issues identified herein likely are present in most states. That

is, early-career agents in other state Extension organizations likely face some of the same challenges identified by participants in our study. Likewise, some of the changes VCE has made to address these challenges may be effective in other states as well. In addition, findings related to professional development organizations and professional development training preferences extend beyond one state to national professional development organizations.

Table 2.

Makeup of Southern State Extension Field Staff by Age

State	Total agents (FTE)	% under age 30	% 30–50 years of age	% over age 50
Alabama	230	11.74%	46.52%	41.74%
Arkansas	189	20.63%	51.85%	27.51%
Florida	379	12.93%	45.91%	40.90%
Georgia	303	20.46%	52.81%	27.06%
Kentucky	396	21.46%	46.72%	30.81%
Louisiana	191	14.66%	51.83%	33.51%
North Carolina	397	19.65%	46.60%	33.75%
Oklahoma	183	16.94%	42.08%	40.98%
South Carolina	138	16.65%	46.33%	37.65%
Tennessee	265	19.62%	42.64%	37.74%
Texas	508	18.90%	51.97%	29.13%
Virginia	216	20.83%	55.09%	24.07%

Note. Source: Association of Southern Rural Extension Directors. (2017). [Updated survey of agents]. Unpublished raw data. FTE = full-time equivalent.

As a side benefit of our study, agents realized that the organization is interested in their success. Many agents involved in the interviews expressed appreciation for being asked to participate and share their feelings. In the Extension organization, with our history of meeting community needs through our strong connections to residents, it is important that we emphasize internal relationships as well.

Conclusion

Support of early-career agents is evident among personnel in all levels of the VCE organization, including administrators, state specialists, and more experienced agents. This support has been demonstrated through their backing of the research project and emphasis on implementing the findings. As a result of the project, numerous changes have been made in the approaches and processes used to support early-career agents. Changes highlighted in this article are those directly associated with current Extension agents. However, changes

also have taken place in work with prospective Extension agents, both those participating in internships and those taking an introduction to Cooperative Extension course provided through the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education. Faculty involved with the course have begun including photos of family and talking about hobbies and personal interests as a way of presenting their personal and professional roles in a more integrated fashion. Faculty also have been more intentional in defining their career paths, leading students to remark on the fact that they can join Extension and have opportunity for change within the organization. As has been noted, we will undertake additional study in the future to consider how endeavors implemented with the existing and future workforce are addressing the issues we have identified and what new issues may be surfacing.

References

Association of Southern Rural Extension Directors. (2017). [Updated survey of agents]. Unpublished raw data.

Balda, J. B., & Mora, F. (2011). Adapting leadership theory and practice for the networked, millennial generation. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *5*(3), 13–24.

Brodeur, C. W., Higgins, C., Galindo-Gonzalez, S., Craig, D. D., & Haile, T. (2011). Designing a competency-based new county Extension personnel training program: A novel approach. *Journal of Extension*, *49*(3), Article 3FEA2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2011june/a2.php

Edge, R., Codkerham, J., Correale, C., Dion, B., Figueroa-Altmann, A., & Geether, C. (2011). Is your facility struggling with millennial nurse retention? *Nursing Management*, *42*(6), 19–23.

Ensle, K. M. (2005). Burnout: How does Extension balance job and family? *Journal of Extension*, *43*(3), Article 3FEA5. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2005june/a5.php

Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Leadership Advisory Council. (2005). *2005 report.* Washington, DC: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

Glass, A. (2007). Understanding generational differences for competitive success. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, *39*(2), 98–103.

Hunnings, J. (2015, Apr 6). *Agent demographic slides.* Paper presented at VCE Winter In-service Training, Blacksburg, VA.

Kloss, B. (2017). Attraction & retention: Employer's needs—Part I. *Employee Benefit Plan Review*, *72*(2), 14–15. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/1944270298/fulltext/F807F9F76484EF6PQ/1?accountid=14826

Kutilek, L. M. (2000). Learning from those who leave. *Journal of Extension*, *38*(3), Article 3IAW2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2000june/iw2.php

Martin, M. J. (2011). *Influence of human resource practices on employee intention to quit.* (Ph.D. dissertation). Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

PricewaterhouseCoopers International Limited. (2011). Millennials at work: Reshaping the workplace. Retrieved from https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/services/consulting/documents/millennials-at-work.pdf

Safrit, R. D., & Owen, M. B. (2010). A conceptual model for retaining county Extension program professionals.

Journal of Extension, *48*(10), Article 2FEA2. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2010april/a2.php

Smith, S., Hoag, D., & Peel, K. (2011). Lessons from outstanding county agents. *Journal of Extension*, *49*(4), Article 4FEA2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2011august/a2.php

Strong, R., & Harder, A. (2009). Implications of maintenance and motivation factors on Extension agent turnover. *Journal of Extension*, *47*(1), Article 1FEA2. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2009february/a2.php