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## Solutions to Burnout and Retention as Perceived by County Extension Agents of the Colorado State University Extension System

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# **Solutions to Burnout and Retention as Perceived by County Extension Agents of the Colorado State University Extension System**

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*This study explored solutions to the issue of burnout and retention of Extension agents. Extension agents experience burnout for reasons such as long hours, stress, and organizational factors. As Extension administration addresses job satisfaction and performance of Extension employees, burnout and retention issues identified in this study can facilitate efforts to enhance the effectiveness of a statewide Extension program. Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory was the theoretical framework for this study. Researchers used the constant-comparative method of analysis to identify recurring themes from the open-ended items of an online-administered survey. Twelve primary themes emerged, including (a) compensation, (b) hiring practices, (c) promotion and advancement within Extension, (d) organizational support regarding agent development, (e) organizational support regarding administration, (f) organizational support regarding colleagues, (g) reporting, (h) recognition, (i) resources, (j) personnel and staffing, (k) evaluation of administration and specialists, and (l) workload. Results suggest that Extension administration should focus on the maintenance factors of compensation, workload, and internal promotion and advancement, as well as motivating factors, to improve retention of Extension agents.*

*Keywords:* Extension, burnout, retention, solutions

## **Introduction**

The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) is an agency for change and problem solving. Extension brings the rewards of higher education and turns them into educational programs for anyone wishing to participate. The educational programs of Extension are research-based and teach people to identify problems, analyze information, decide among alternative courses of action for dealing with those problems, and locate the resources to accomplish the preferred course of action (Rasmussen, 1989; Seevers & Graham, 2012).

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Although Extension agents provide invaluable knowledge and skills to clientele, they face numerous challenges, such as stress, burnout, long hours, and turnover (Ensle, 2005). Cooperative Extension must strive to reduce these challenges and retain agents. High-quality agents are leaving the Extension system due to organizational factors, such as a lack of professional development opportunities and adequate training (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002b).

Organizational efforts need to be directed at understanding the recruitment and retention of Extension agents. Chandler (2005) estimated replacing Extension agents could cost Extension from \$7,185 to \$30,000 per agent. The cost of turnover can be extremely high, and the highest turnover rates within an organization are found among the newly hired employees (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003).

According to Arnold (2007), “the ability to retain long-term, high-quality professionals is a direct reflection of a successful organization and must be a priority for Extension to remain a viable educational outreach system” (p. 18). Few studies have investigated potential solutions to Extension agent burnout and retention as perceived by the Extension agents themselves. Retaining new professionals is a key research question of the National Research Agenda of the American Association of Agricultural Scientists (Doerfert, 2011). This research was conducted to address that critical gap in what is understood about retention in Extension.

### **Literature Review**

Burnout and agent turnover remain causes of concern among Extension administration and researchers (Bradley, Driscoll, & Bardon, 2012). Ensle (2005) described burnout as “the result of overwork, not dislike of the work itself” (para. 2). Factors leading to increased burnout and turnover in Cooperative Extension were identified as low salaries, downsizing, and increased workload (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy’s Leadership Advisory Council, 2005). Other burnout factors include lack of time with friends and families, unrealistic due dates and expectations, little or too much supervision, roadblocks, and lack of resources and staffing (Bradley et al., 2012; Ensle, 2005; Peters, Zvonkovic, & Bowman, 2008).

Staff turnover and burnout also raise many issues for the Extension organization. Friedman, Galinsky, and Plowden (1992) estimated an organization can spend as much as 150% of an exiting employee’s salary to refill the same position. In addition to this financial burden, “turnover of local Extension educators often leads to a loss of accumulated knowledge and experience, loss of valuable relationships in the community, temporary voids in programming and volunteer participation, and additional strain on the remaining staff” (Bradley et al., 2012, Introduction, para. 1).

Kutilek (2000) conducted exit interviews of employees of The Ohio State University Extension. Interviews and questionnaires were used to gather data covering five different categories: (a) positive aspects of Ohio State University Extension, (b) supervision and support, (c) working conditions, (d) benefits and salary, and (e) career development. Participants reported that job stress, low pay, and concern about lack of supervisory support were reasons for leaving the organization (Kutilek, 2000).

In a follow-up study, Kutilek, Conklin, and Gunderson (2002a) surveyed The Ohio State University Extension agents regarding work/life issues. Some of these issues were workload, control and balance, family needs, work spillover at home, inadequate training, and poor supervision. Participants also reported solutions for these work/life issues: flexible working arrangements, reduction of workload, and administrative support. Similarly, Riggs and Beus (1993) found Extension agents reported the following factors of job satisfaction and coping strategies: (a) salary with fringe benefits, (b) authority to run Extension programs to meet clientele needs, (c) liked by supervisors, (d) opportunity for growth, (e) Extension as an organization, and (f) helpful colleagues.

Young, Stone, Aliaga, and Shuck (2013) examined job embeddedness theory, which explains why employees stay with an organization. Extension agents from two states were surveyed on whether specific job embeddedness factors could predict their intent to stay with an organization. Sacrifice organization, which is the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits forfeited by leaving one's job, had the highest predictive ability. Young et al. (2013) explained Extension administrators should focus on successful hiring and emphasize the following regarding potential employees: (a) health benefits, (b) professional development, (c) respect that Extension agents receive, and (d) prospects for continuing employment.

Arnold (2008) explored the motivational factors of Extension agents to remain in a career within the Extension organization. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight Florida Extension agents at different career stages. Arnold (2008) reported seven categories identified by agents regarding their motivation to remain in the Extension organization: (a) internal satisfaction, (b) community leadership, (c) career benefits, (d) external motivators, (e) change agents, (f) network of support, and (g) Extension work environment.

Strong and Harder (2009) investigated the determining factors of why Extension agents leave the Extension organization by reviewing literature related to Extension agent turnover, identifying motivator and maintenance factors affecting job satisfaction. Strong and Harder (2009) reported agents left the Extension organization due to a lack of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction. Extension agents were dissatisfied with salary and work/life balance. Former agents cited low salaries, downsizing, and increased workload as factors leading to agent turnover. Factors that

motivated agents to stay employed within Extension were a rewards system, job satisfaction, and mentoring (Strong & Harder, 2009).

Significant attention has been and continues to be placed on Extension agent burnout and retention. The cost to replace an Extension agent can be high and is a financial burden to the Extension organization. Job satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors directly impact an employee's work motivation and intent to remain employed in Cooperative Extension. These factors include (a) internal satisfaction, (b) salary and benefits, (c) support network, (d) work environment, (e) professional development, and (f) supervision.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Motivation-Hygiene Theory explains the motivating factors of an employee's level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with his or her job (Herzberg, 1968). Job satisfaction and dissatisfaction function separately, and motivating factors influence employees more than maintenance factors (Herzberg, Mausner, & Synderman, 1959). Motivation factors, which affect Job satisfaction, are characterized by achievement, receiving recognition, nature of the work, responsibility, advancement, awards, and individual development (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Herzberg, 1968). When these basic needs of personal growth are met, the employee will experience positive feelings and improved work performance.

Job dissatisfaction results from different factors affecting the context of the work place. Maintenance factors, which affect job dissatisfaction, are characterized by the employee's position, company's policies and administrative practices, physical working conditions, employment, income, and benefits (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Herzberg 1968). According to Herzberg (1968), an organization must focus attention on its employees' maintenance factors in order to decrease turnover. Employees will leave the organization if maintenance factors such as salary are not satisfied. Strong and Harder (2009) stated, "Satisfying employee maintenance factors will enable them to develop motivation via their position" (Introduction/Theoretical Framework, para. 4).

### **Purpose and Objective**

The purpose of the study was to explore possible solutions to Extension agent burnout and retention as perceived by Extension agents. The objective of the study was to identify common themes of retention solutions to burnout as described by Extension agents.

## Methods

The findings presented in this article are part of a larger study investigating agent retention in Colorado. In March 2013, a census was conducted of county Extension professional staff. The survey population was all county-based Extension agents, Extension associates, and county program coordinators in Colorado. The term “Extension agent” was used in this study to pertain to the entire study population. IRB approval was obtained from both universities involved in the research. At the time of the study, there were 140 potential participants.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was administered online through Qualtrics. Statements were derived from several sources, including previous related research (Benge, Harder, & Carter, 2011), a focus group of agents within Colorado, and the researchers themselves. The entire questionnaire contained 87 questions, the majority of which were summated rating scale items related to motivation and factors affecting job satisfaction. Several open-ended questions solicited more detailed input from respondents. Responses to the prompt “As you think about some of the issues that might affect agent burnout/retention, also think about solutions to these issues. Please offer your thoughts about possible solutions to address retention issues” formed the basis of the study data reported here.

Dillman, Smyth, and Christian’s (2009) Tailored Design Method was followed to collect data. Potential participants ( $N = 140$ ) were contacted using the e-mail feature within Qualtrics. All e-mail addresses were valid. There were 115 questionnaires submitted, for a final response rate of 82.14%. The data being considered in this paper are qualitative in nature, and therefore, ability to generalize is not a pressing concern. However, it is worth noting that there is generally believed to be minimal threat of nonresponse bias when response rates exceed 80% (Moore & Tarnai, 2002).

Respondents for the survey reported having an appointment in the following program areas: 4-H ( $n = 97$ ), agriculture ( $n = 37$ ), family and consumer science ( $n = 27$ ), horticulture ( $n = 27$ ), natural resources ( $n = 30$ ), administration ( $n = 26$ ), and other ( $n = 16$ ). Professionals in Colorado often have split appointments between program areas, with 4-H being a program area commonly included in split appointments. Thirty-one (27%) respondents were county or area directors. Ninety-nine (88%) respondents were Extension agents/associates, while 13 (12%) respondents self-identified as county 4-H coordinators/4-H program assistants. The majority ( $n = 77$ , 68%) of respondents had children; 41 (36%) respondents reported having children who did not live with them. Most ( $n = 82$ , 71%) respondents were married, and many ( $n = 72$ , 64%) respondents lived in a multiple-income household. There were more female respondents ( $n = 73$ , 66%) than male respondents ( $n = 37$ , 34%). Respondents tended to be older ( $M = 45.3$  years) but with few years of Extension experience. Forty-three (38%) respondents reported fewer than 5 years of experience, while only 11 (10%) respondents had over 20 years of experience. Respondents

tended to work in offices with approximately eight coworkers; although working in smaller offices was frequently reported, as well.

One of the three researchers conducted the initial analysis of the data using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). The constant comparative method is used to reduce data into identifiable, recurring themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was addressed in several ways. The full team of researchers collaborated on the final interpretation of the data in a form of triangulation. The final interpretation of data was then shared with a small group of agents in Colorado for their confirmation as a member check. An audit trail was maintained throughout the data analysis, while direct quotes from respondents were used to create a thick description of the findings.

Bias from the researchers can affect the way qualitative data is analyzed and interpreted (Shenton, 2004). All of the researchers for the study reported here are Extension professionals. The first researcher is an agent in Florida. The second researcher is a state specialist at the University of Florida who has prior experience as an agent in Colorado. The third researcher is a program leader in Colorado with prior experience as a state specialist and agent in two other states. All three researchers had 4-H responsibilities at the time of the study. The researchers acknowledge a “pro-agent” bias inherent to their viewpoints. An effort to control this bias was made by conducting a peer debriefing with a university professor without an Extension background.

## Findings

Twelve primary themes emerged from the open-ended answers provided by participants. Summaries of each theme are provided, and respondents were coded to ensure confidentiality. To help the reader understand the findings, an overview of the organizational context of Colorado State University Extension has been provided prior to the presentation of the themes.

In November of 2012, during the course of an annual information exchange between the Colorado Extension Director and the representatives of the Extension employee professional associations (Colorado Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Colorado Association of Agricultural Agents, Colorado Association of Family and Consumer Sciences Agents), the issue of agent burnout and retention was expressed as a major topic for Colorado Extension administration to address. Based on that input, Extension administration took the first action step to conduct a statewide survey of county Extension agents on the topic. To operationalize this effort, an agent retention committee of seven county Extension agents and one Extension administrator was established. Committee membership was representative of all Extension program areas and also provided equal representation of the three Extension regions of the state.

As appropriate, findings of the study have been shared with all Extension employees in an effort to address identified burnout and retention issues.

### **Compensation**

Respondents (R) identified higher salaries (R13, R51, R79, R82, R99), merit raises, and bonuses (R23) as solutions to agent turnover. In addition, wage compaction (R36) and salary compression (R40, R47) were identified as causes for turnover. Respondent 102 bluntly stated, “Bottom line: pay more. Retaining young people with a master’s in an organization with no pension and no social security, why would they stay in a stressful, lower-paying job?” Extending campus benefits to all Extension employees (R22, R29) and equal benefits for county-funded positions (R27) were identified as solutions by respondents. Respondent 97 explained that small incentives, such as an iPad or a bonus, would bring up morale.

### **Promotion and Advancement Within Extension**

Opportunities for promotion and advancement within Extension were reported as a solution to Extension agent turnover (R47). Internal promotion was embraced (R13). According to Respondent 115, “Agents should be promoted to management positions instead of being passed over for outsiders hired all the time.” Advancement allows Extension professionals to grow and change (R52) and should be set in place rather than agents having to move to gain advancement (R39). Respondent 52 stated, “Give an opportunity for all employees to grow and change their positions within Extension,” and Respondent 55 stated, “Figure out a path to help agents advance their careers and position.”

### **Workload**

Reducing the workload of Extension agents was identified by respondents as a key theme in the retention of Extension agents. Unrealistic and stressful workloads (R22, R87), coupled with working many nights and weekends (R24, R79), make it very difficult for Extension agents to be successful. Respondent 19 reported:

Campus staff continually add to agent responsibilities, especially in 4-H. Things that have been added are Cowboy Ethics, truck raffle, and more state fair contests. There is pressure to do these things and still continue everything else we are expected to do.

Agents are expected to work too many hours on a regular basis without proper professional scheduling (R67). Less committee work (R87), less traveling (R46), and keeping the work level more consistent (R17) were equated with increased retention by respondents.

## Reporting

Respondents indicated reporting was a burden and a factor of Extension agent burnout. R106 stated, “the reporting system seems to be the biggest frustration for most people.” The reporting system should be more user-friendly and highlight the actual work that is done (R25), and it should be easier to input data (R87). Respondent 106 recommended Extension administration “find a way to make reporting less intrusive and more accurate. If we do not feel like what we do counts, it makes us feel undervalued.” Respondent 102 stated:

CPRS is a systemic source of frustration. Figure out the core info [sic] needed from that and ask for no more. It is a labyrinth to navigate. Make sure new staff know that it is a small part of their output and value to Colorado.

## Resources

Respondents identified resources as important for curtailing Extension agent turnover. An increase in 4-H projects, curriculum, and STEM programming resources (R46) was needed at the county level. Respondent 61 stated, “Give us the specialists that we need for our subject area. Don’t cut them from the budget and then expect us (county agents and volunteers) to have to cover the cost.” The amount of resources Extension agents have access to was perceived to be impacting turnover. Respondent 19 provided an explanation to help resolve this issue: “We are continually being asked to do more with less. There needs to be a good look at what we do now that we will no longer do in the future.”

## Hiring Practices

Job qualifications were reported by respondents as an important solution regarding Extension agent turnover (R2, R8, R51, R82, R108). Respondent 2 explained:

I think we need to be more patient in selecting county directors and work harder at hiring people who have a background in Extension into those positions. I’m not seeing many positives when we get tired of looking and hire the best of a bad pool, or think we can teach them what they need to know. It isn't working.

In addition, filling vacant positions with larger pools and qualified applicants (R53, R90), providing accurate job descriptions (R91, R109), and involving Extension staff in the search and screen committee process (R68) were suggested to improve hiring practices. Respondent 2 stated:

I think working with county directors to make sure, especially when they have no background in Extension, what Colorado Extension expects in terms of agents' time is important. The message needs to come down from above that there is not an expectation for agents to be on call 24/7, and when we are off, let us have the time and not still be tied to work.

### **Personnel and Staffing**

Personnel and staffing were identified by respondents as instrumental for Extension agents "to do a good job" (R98). An increase in staffing would alleviate the workload among Extension agents, especially in single-agent counties (R41, R62, R82), and R82 stated, "We need more staff badly, but it cannot be inexpensive, undereducated staff. We need more people with master's degrees and doctorates in the area that they will be teaching." The Extension organization must strive to find alternative funding sources (R52) and permanent funding sources (R46), and to hire more staff that are qualified and experienced (R82). Respondent 92 stated, "Funding for additional staff [is necessary] so that we don't kill the good agents that we have."

### **Recognition**

Recognition of Extension agents was reported by respondents as a factor for increasing retention (R70). Respondent 56 stated Extension should "recognize agents for their time, energy, and accomplishments more frequently and with things they can use." Recognition should focus on building morale (R96), be for doing good work (R97), and not for overworking (R24). Respondent 84 stated, "Just a simple thank you and job well done from regional and state staff would be enough." Alternative recognition other than Colorado awards should be provided (R20). Respondent 115 specified, "Agents should be recognized for their work and not just 'punished' all the time for their work."

### **Evaluation of Administration and Specialists**

Respondents suggested modifying the evaluation process for Extension administration and specialists as a solution to Extension agent turnover. Respondent 47 stated, "Having more input into State Specialist performance evaluations might get them working with us, helping us be successful, instead of chasing their own tenure goals while ignoring our requests." Extension agents and staff should be able to provide input in the evaluation of Extension administrators, supervisors, directors, and specialists (R23, R74, R66).

### **Organizational Support: Extension Agent Development**

Revising the onboarding (i.e., orientation) process was reported by respondents as an important solution regarding Extension agent turnover. Increased (R8, R33, R39, R41) and specific (R2)

new agent training was suggested by respondents. Respondent 60 reported, “New agents are basically left to the wolves with the direction they get at the moment. They are free to go program as they would like, but finding the need upon arriving is difficult and some direction would be helpful.” New agents also experience the “sink or swim” (R102) phenomenon, and an orientation should occur immediately after being hired (R20).

Regarding mentoring, Respondent 16 stated that having “time to problem-solve with our mentors and other agents is never a waste of time.” The current mentor system needs to be improved (R2), and mentor relationships should be better paired “based on skill and program” (R56), rather than personal preference.

Providing more professional development and training opportunities was cited as another solution to Extension agent burnout (R79). An increase in funds (R95), conducting meetings via distance (R61), and better scheduling for Extension agents (R50, R74) were also suggested by respondents. Areas of training needs were cited as well: volunteer management (R59), leadership development for county and district directors (R100), and conflict resolution (R59). Teaching skills were also cited as an important area for training: “We hire people with subject matter expertise/knowledge—and expect them to be good educators of people without any education training” (R110).

### **Organizational Support: Administration**

Increased support from Extension administration was reported as a solution to Extension agent turnover (R59, R85, R115). Respondents indicated a need for increased trustworthiness (R34), for clear leadership (R47), and for administration to take active interest in the county programs (R34). Respondents indicated shared governance and an increase in dialogue (R111) would be beneficial to Extension agents and the Extension organization. Respondent 66 acknowledged, “Helping agents feel they are a valued part of the system in decision-making is a very difficult thing to do.”

Increased support from supervisors and directors was also reported as a solution to Extension agent turnover. Agents complained, “It is pretty obvious that a couple of directors are on a power trip” (R55) and “directors and Colorado campus Extension admin [*sic*] for the most part have very little concern for agents in the field” (R60). Supervisors and directors need to be more relational (R111), supportive (R105), and creative (R91) when interacting with county staff.

Administration, supervisors, and directors need to have a better understanding of the work Extension agents do. Respondent 82 shared the viewpoint, “The constant calls from our administrators to ‘do more with less’ has become a bad joke, and another example of how out of touch and insensitive they are,” while Respondent 36 noted a need to “try to get campus

[administrators] to understand life in the field.” Furthermore, respondents explained that administrators, supervisors, and directors “are reluctant to admit there are burnout and morale issues” (R75). The depth of frustration was evidenced by Respondent 61, who simply said, “I don’t feel that our Extension Directors have a clue.”

### **Organizational Support: Colleagues**

Collegial support was indicated by respondents as necessary to alleviate Extension agent turnover. The organization needs to increase support for collaboration and program sharing (R20). Motivation would increase if there were stronger relationships with campus departments and colleges (R47). Coping with the stresses of the job would be decreased with more support from peers and colleagues (R71). Respondent 2 stated:

New agents come on without any sort of life raft. In most offices, no one knows really what the person before did, because they are too busy doing their own job. That support and insight from other agents in other counties is critical.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Respondents provided many observations, opinions, and solutions to reduce the current burnout and turnover of Colorado Extension agents. The key themes identified by respondents were (a) compensation, (b) hiring practices, (c) promotion and advancement within Extension, (d) organizational support regarding agent development, (e) organizational support regarding administration, (f) organizational support regarding colleagues, (g) reporting, (h) recognition, (i) resources, (j) personnel and staffing, (k) evaluation of administration and specialists, and (l) workload. It is important to note that the qualitative nature of the data provided means the conclusions are not intended to be generalized beyond the respondents; however, a concerted effort to provide a detailed account of the context and responses has been made to assist the reader in determining the transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of results to his or her own Extension context.

Solutions addressing both motivational and maintenance factors were offered. Maintenance solutions related to compensation (increased salaries, merit raises, and bonuses), decreased workload, hiring practices, personnel and staffing, resources, and internal promotion and advancement. Many motivational solutions to job satisfaction were identified by Extension agents, including organizational support (agent development, administration, and collegial), recognition, reporting, and the evaluation of administration and specialists.

Herzberg (1968) explained an organization must first focus its attention on its employees’ maintenance factors in order to decrease turnover. Strong and Harder (2009) explained that

satisfying maintenance factors would increase motivation for their job. Extension administrators should be concerned about agents leaving the organization due to unsatisfied maintenance and motivational factors.

Wage compaction and salary compression are important to the livelihood of Extension agents, and an increase in compensation would alleviate this maintenance factor. Increased compensation would be a financially burdensome solution to the organization. Though compensation enhancement would have a high financial cost to Colorado State University Extension, Extension agents leaving the organization due to turnover is also a financial burden to the organization (Chandler, 2005). According to Herzberg (1968), increasing compensation would decrease agent turnover. Internal promotion and advancement should be given careful attention by Extension administration. The cost of promotion and advancement would not have an increased financial cost to the organization; however, the most important aspects of filling a position are the qualifications and fit of the applicant in the applicant pool.

Decreasing workload and improving available resources could decrease the burnout of Colorado Extension agents. Agents currently work long hours and many nights and weekends with limited and decreasing resources. Improving the available resources, such as providing specialist support, program resources, and more staff, would decrease the workload of agents and may improve the quality of Extension programs. A major factor to Extension agent burnout is time away from friends and family (Bradley et al., 2012). Decreasing Extension agent workload would enable employees to pursue a healthier work/life balance.

Satisfying motivating factors increases job performance but does not decrease agent burnout and turnover (Herzberg, 1968). Satisfying the identified motivating factors could be more easily managed by Extension administration because they are less financially constraining than satisfying maintenance factors. Every function of business has an associated cost; however, satisfying motivating factors would require less of a financial burden than satisfying maintenance factors. The identified solutions to motivating factors require more attention from administrators, as well as administrators' time away from the office and into the field. Agent development, such as training for both new and seasoned agents, professional development, and more effective mentorship programs could be essential steps to decreasing burnout.

Extension professionals have access to professional associations to provide additional support for their programmatic areas. These associations offer professional development opportunities, mentoring, recognition, and awards for their members. Extension administration should continue to support these opportunities, as well as provide recognition and awards outside of the professional associations. Extension also needs to explore new and innovative methods to increase the professional development opportunities of its agents in order to increase the job satisfaction and retention of its employees. It must also be noted that the professional

associations in Colorado provided the impetus for this study to be conducted by providing input to Extension administration, which was then acted upon.

Colorado Extension agents identified the evaluation of administration and specialists as a motivating factor solution. Accountability is an important and highly regarded attribute of Cooperative Extension, both at the state and county levels of Extension personnel. Agents expect their administrators to understand life in the field and to know the issues in the counties.

A limitation of the study is that county-level Extension agents and program assistants were the only personnel included in the population. Input from state-level and regional Extension administrators was not gathered, limiting the perspectives provided.

### **Recommendations**

Extension administration should continually strive to offer support to Extension agents. Extension administration should be visible in the counties. Administrators can increase their visibility by attending programs and events, as well as conducting needs assessments of county Extension agents. This study was conducted because of the action of Extension administration in Colorado and is a positive indicator of their commitment to addressing retention issues. Extension administration and Extension agents are also to be commended for the creation of agent action teams to help drive solutions to the issues identified in this study. Examples include teams created and empowered to improve the reporting system and the new staff orientation process. These actions were implemented shortly after results of the study were made public.

Maintenance factors are the most important factors and directly impact the turnover of employees (Herzberg, 1968). Securing and stabilizing the financial assets of the Colorado Extension organization is extremely important in today's uncertain economic fluctuations. A single departing Extension agent can cost the organization significant money. Reducing agent turnover and burnout will improve the organization financially, which will increase the financial resources available to support current agents. The Colorado Extension Service must make compensation a high priority in order to increase the retention rate of Extension agents in Colorado. Providing promotional and advancement opportunities, increasing staffing and resources, improving hiring practices, and decreasing workload will provide a better work environment and improve the retention and burnout of Extension agents.

Increased membership, participation, and encouragement in professional associations can decrease stress and increase collegial support. Additional opportunities for collaboration and partnerships would also provide additional support among colleagues, and the current mentor system should be evaluated or restructured to provide ample collegial support for new agents.

An evaluation of administration and specialists should be established. This would increase the accountability of administration and specialists to Colorado Extension agents.

Future research should examine the potential costs and benefits of implementing specific solutions proposed by agents in this study. An economic analysis can help Extension determine which solutions offer the highest return on investment, thus helping the organization allocate limited resources in the most efficient manner. The widespread prevalence of burnout throughout all Extension systems—not just in Colorado—also indicates there would be value in replicating this study elsewhere and using those results to conduct a broader-scale quantitative study that would allow for generalization across a larger population. Such efforts may help Extension overcome its long struggle retaining high-quality personnel.

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