

Extension agent retention: practices that improve job satisfaction and agent longevity

by

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Abstract

K-State Research and Extension (KSRE) is experiencing record high extension agent turnover. Turnover in local unit agent positions creates a burden on local and state extension systems. When an agent makes a career separation from KSRE, the organization experiences a financial loss, local programs are disrupted, and local unit employees are burdened with additional work responsibilities until the agent vacancy is filled. Employee turnover is not unique to extension, however the repercussions of an agent position vacancy create a strain on the organization.

While agent retention data is lacking at the federal level, KSRE has extensively tracked extension agent retention since the early 1990s. KSRE has a presence in each of the 105 counties and has 220 extension agent positions in local unit offices. According to agent retention data collected by KSRE, as of August 14, 2023, of the 220 agent positions currently filled, 91 have less than five years of experience and 74 agents have less than three years of employment with KSRE.

The purpose of this collective case study was to understand practices that influence agent retention in local extension units. A sample of 24 local unit agents with at least five years of service with KSRE was selected. Study participants were invited to a one-on-one interview based off their years of extension experience, program area, administrative region, sex, and type of unit served in, county or district.

The R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model was the guiding framework for this extension agent retention study. The interview protocol was designed to gather field experiences related to the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model from the participating agents. The study examined the role of local unit agents and experiences regarding professional development, organizational and office culture,

and relationships with supervisors. The aim of this study was to identify best practices for KSRE to improve agent retention. The research questions were: 1) How has engagement in professional development influenced the success of agents? 2) How does organizational culture and office culture environments impact agent job satisfaction? 3) How do relationships between agents and their supervisors influence agent retention?

The experiences shared in this extension agent retention study are varied, like the uniqueness of each extension unit's local community. Themes were identified from multiple rounds of coding including open, axial, and selective coding methods. Six themes emerged from the coding process: 1) relationships with supervisors, 2) relationships with extension council boards, 3) access to professional development, 4) organizational culture, 5) organizational loyalty, and 6) work practices. Each theme represents a factor that influences agent job satisfaction and ultimately agent retention.

KSRE has a strong and well-understood culture of continued professional growth. Agents acknowledge high-quality professional development is available to extension professionals. More experienced agents prefer to participate in trainings that align with their program area of focus, while newer agents tend to participate in more general professional development to build a foundation of organizational knowledge. For equitable access to professional development to be a reality for KSRE, funding outside of the local unit's extension council budget needs to be provided. Not all local unit budgets allow for agents to travel and pay registration fees for training that is not in close proximity to the unit's office.

Local unit organizational culture has greater influence on an agent's job satisfaction in comparison to the regional and state level organizational culture. Agents desire a local unit culture that includes colleagues who have shared values and who work toward the organization's

mission. Agents shared expectations for trustworthy and communicative coworkers. From the agent's perspective, supervisors also influence their team's organizational culture.

KSRE local unit directors are in positions of leadership and influence an agent's professional growth and day-to-day job satisfaction. Agents value a supervisor who is accessible and has the capacity to support agents beyond transactional requests. The majority of the study participants reported a positive relationship with their supervisor. Adversely, agents shared past and current experiences of working with a supervisor who lacked the human resources, interpersonal, and communication skills to successfully lead a local unit.

Implications for practice include developing best practices for local unit agents to improve job satisfaction and employee retention. Emphasis needs to be put on practices that foster strong and supportive relationships between extension agents and both their direct supervisor and their local extension council board. In addition, supplemental funding outside of the local unit budget needs to be available to provide equitable access to professional development. Lastly, an opportunity exists to create practices for local units to recognize and celebrate employee success.

In the present study, agents emphasized how the role of the unit director is critical in ensuring agent success and creating the environment that establishes the local unit's organizational culture. The study collected data about the field experience of an extension agent but the story from KSRE local unit directors remains untold. Additional research is needed to gather perspectives of local unit directors in order to establish best practices to support both local unit agents and directors.

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Dedication

To K-State Research and Extension's past, present, and future extension agents. Keep pushing boundaries and doing hard things. Change doesn't happen by being content with the status quo.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Overview of the problem

Employee turnover is a challenge all sectors of the global workforce face. While the issue of employee retention is not unique to extension, the repercussions of agent turnover create a financial strain on the organization and disrupts work progress in local communities. Generally, when an agent leaves the organization, staffing capacity is reduced and other office colleagues end up taking on additional responsibilities.

K-State Research and Extension (KSRE) is experiencing the highest rate of extension agent turnover since employee retention data have been tracked. Extension agent retention is a persistent issue that creates a strain on local and state extension systems. While extension agent retention studies exist, research specific to the current situation for KSRE is lacking. Research focusing on practices that result in job satisfaction and agent retention are needed to establish best practices to improve employee retention.

Introduction

KSRE is experiencing a considerable amount of employee turnover at the local unit level. While extension agent retention data is lacking at the federal level, KSRE has tracked employee retention for many years. Statewide, KSRE is in each of the 105 counties and has 220 extension agent positions in local unit offices. According to agent retention data collected by Jennifer Wilson, Extension Operations Leader, as of August 14, 2023, of the 220 agent positions currently filled, 91 have less than five years of experience and of those, 74 agents have less than three years of employment with KSRE (J. Wilson, personal communication, August 14, 2023).

Cooperative Extension has a rich history of bringing research-based information from land grant universities to local communities since 1914 (Dunbar, 1990). “The Smith-Lever Act

of 1914 established cooperative extension service to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information relating to agriculture and home economics.” (Dunbar, p. 4) The extension model in Kansas has provided agent support for each of the 105 counties. Since the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, extension agents have been educating the people by addressing community needs (Dunbar, 1990). According to Russell et al. (2019) “At a time when agricultural, nutritional, financial, and environmental challenges are mounting extension is as relevant today as ever” (p. 2).

Extension agents frequently identify as a leader in the community they are serving (Harder et al., 2014). Agents who feel like they are making a difference in their local communities are more likely to stay in their positions. It is critical the extension system addresses the issue of agent turnover to remain relevant in local communities (Harder et al., 2014). Each time an agent position is vacated, local communities suffer the loss of a leader and the extension system is burdened with hiring and training new replacements (Vines et al., 2018).

According to Jennifer Wilson, KSRE loses more than one staff person when an agent resigns. The organization will pay more than \$7,500 to onboard and orient a new extension agent (personal communication, August 25, 2023). From August 2021 to August 2023, K-State Research and Extension hired 98 new local unit agents (J. Wilson, personal communication, August 14, 2023). Staffing capacity is also lost when an agent leaves the organization. Generally, there is a disruption in programming and staff in local units end up taking on additional responsibilities when an agent position is vacant. Jennifer Wilson shared the average timeframe to advertise, screen applications, and interview a new agent is 12 weeks (personal communication, August 25, 2023). The generational diversity of today’s extension workforce shifts the office dynamics of local units. In a 2022 KSRE agent retention report, 13% of the

agents were baby boomers, 33% generation x, 15% generation z, and 39% millennials (J. Wilson, personal communication, August 25, 2023). Organizational loyalty varies among generations, resulting in varied times spent in roles (Millennials or Gen Z: who's doing the most job-hopping, n.d.). According to Career Builder, the average length of time spent in a role are as follows: baby boomers, eight years and three months; generation x, five years and two months; millennials, two years and nine months; and generation z's average time in a role is the shortest with two years and three months (Millennials or Gen Z: who's doing the most job-hopping, n.d.).

The everchanging landscape of extension work necessitates the need for extension systems to prioritize efforts to improve agent retention (Berven et al., 2020). Extension agents need to be equipped to meet the daily challenges of their roles. Berven et al. suggests, it is not only important agents have the appropriate educational background for their program area, but also the proper agent training once they are hired (2020). Extension agent turnover is costly to the county program and lost financial investment and staffing time for the new agent onboarding process (Vines et al., 2018).

Agents of all career phases require support from local, regional, and state administration. Extension agents provide research-based knowledge and skills to clientele, all the while facing challenges including burnout, long hours, and stress (Benge et al., 2015). System-wide efforts need to be directed at understanding agent longevity. Few studies have been conducted to gather information from extension agents themselves about what factors avoid burnout and support agent retention (Benge et al., 2015).

Research Purpose

KSRE is experiencing record high extension agent turnover rates (J. Wilson, personal communication, August 14, 2023). More concerning is the agent retention data show 74 agents (34%) have less than three years of employment with KSRE. The considerable rate of agent turnover has repercussions for KSRE. Not only do agent vacancies result in a reduction in staffing capacity, but it also causes a disruption in programs and services to local communities.

The purpose of this collective case study was to understand practices and factors that result in retention for individuals serving as agents in local K-State Research and Extension units. The study examined the role of local unit agents and their field experiences regarding professional development, organizational and office culture, and relationships with supervisors. The aim of this study was to identify best practices for K-State Research Extension to improve agent retention. The research questions were:

1. How has engagement in professional development influenced the success of agents?
2. How do organizational culture and office culture environments impact agent job satisfaction?
3. How do relationships between agents and their supervisors influence agent retention?

Limitations and Possibilities of Study

The results of this extension agent retention study can inform KSRE administration, extension council members, and extension directors who supervise and support local unit extension agents. The data collected can be used to create best practices that promote job satisfaction and organizational loyalty. Rather than focusing on why agents decide to make a career exit, this study is intended to share agent experiences that result in agent retention.

This extension agent retention study is limited to the experiences of the study participants. The uniqueness of each local extension unit and its local community creates equally

differing experiences of extension agents. The researcher has a 14-year career as an extension agent that may have influenced the results of this study.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

Extension administrators and researchers have been studying agent retention and the causes of burnout for many years (Benge et al., 2015). Agent turnover and burnout cause many challenges for the cooperative extension system. Agent turnover not only negatively impacts extension's staffing capacity at the local level but also puts a financial strain on the organization (Vines et al., 2018). Vacancies in agent positions present challenges for local extension programs, including a multitude of losses, such as relationships with community partners, programmatic efforts, and relationships with volunteers (Benge & Harder, 2018). Recruiting and onboarding a new agent not only requires time but additional financial resources from the organization (Vines et al., 2018).

The Great Resignation

Turnover is not a dilemma that is unique to extension. "In 2021, roughly 47 million Americans voluntarily quit their jobs, the highest rate on record. Workers, tired of being underpaid and unfulfilled, left their jobs in search of higher wages, better benefits, and more flexible work options" (Fetter, 2022, p. 2). After the uncertainty of the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees sought job opportunities with more flexibility (Fetter, 2022).

The Great Resignation, also referred to as the Great Reshuffle, has been a prominent theme in the U.S. labor market since the economy started to emerge from its stagnancy during the pandemic (Iacurci, 2022). Not all turnover is motivated by pay. Benefits, job stability, flexibility, and retirement benefits are the top reasons employees move to different job

opportunities. “Almost half of employees, 44%, are looking for a new job or plan to soon” (Iacurci, 2022, p. 2).

An employee-led workforce where employees take ownership of their career goals and are quick to pursue new job opportunities also has contributed to the “Great Resignation”. Employees left positions with the confidence they would find a better offer with improved pay, benefits, flexibility, and leadership (Tessema et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic caused workers to reprioritize what they expect from an employer, including improved work-life balance. Lack of organizational support also surfaced as a driver of resignations after the COVID-19 pandemic (Tessema et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how employees worked and stretched the perspective of the traditional 9-to-5, 40 hours a week, five days a week work scenario. During the pandemic, many employers offered a flexible work arrangement, often with the option of working remotely (Tessema et al., 2022). While a flexible work arrangement has been a desirable benefit, the pandemic resulted in employees expecting flexibility and the ability to work remotely. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 5% of American employees worked from home. At the height of the pandemic in May of 2020, more than 60% of American employees were working remotely (Tessema et al., 2022). A Gallup survey in June of 2022 reported five in 10 employees were working hybrid, three in 10 were working exclusively remotely, and two in 10 were reporting to their work on-site (Wigert & Agrawal, 2022).

Changing Jobs

The practice of seeking a new employer or even a new profession in hopes of increasing job satisfaction is not new to the workforce (Garthe & Hasselhorn, 2021). Changing employers often results in a more desirable work schedule, an increase in income, lesser workloads, and

more opportunities for promotion. Garthe and Hasselhorn (2021) explain younger employees are more likely to seek new job opportunities compared to older counterparts. The risk of losing pensions, wage loss, and insecurity about their own skillset and qualifications are factors as to why more employees with more longevity with an organization opt to not seek new job opportunities.

Physical health, seniority, marriage status, and relationship with supervisors also influence if an employee considers a change in employment (Garthe & Hasselhorn, 2021). According to Garthe and Hasselhorn (2021), increase in income is not the only determining factor when an employee is contemplating a change. Employees with poor physical health, living in a single income household, or having a good relationship with their current boss are less likely to consider a change in employment.

Increase in income is a primary factor for employees seeking new positions with new companies. A Pew Research study showed Americans cite unsatisfactory pay as one of the top reasons they quit their job in the last year (Kochhar et al., 2022). The majority of workers (60%) saw an increase in their wages with their new employer (Kochhar et al., 2022). Kochhlar (2022) also reported as of March 2022 one in five workers were likely to look for a new position within the next six months. Increased cost of living expenses and an unstable economy are also influencers on employee retention (Kochhlar et al., 2022).

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has become a frequently discussed topic when employers look at job satisfaction within an organization. Organizational culture is defined as a set of shared values about how employees should act and standards for what is normal within an organization

(Limeade, 2020). Another determining factor of organizational culture is the relationship between employees and leadership (Tsai, 2011).

Through a Science of Care study, the Limeade Institute found employees who felt their organization genuinely cared about them had stronger loyalty toward their job (Limeade, 2020). A strong organizational culture results in an overall better employee experience with more highly engaged employees who felt a sense of belonging. The study also reported 86% of the participants responded that an organization's culture determines whether they keep working in their current position (Limeade, 2020).

For organizational culture to change, an organization must first assess the current environment, identify the desired culture, and commit to a plan for change (Barrow, 2019). Barrow explains "Organizational culture is unique to each organization and acts as a powerful determinant of group behavior" (2019, p. 3). Organizational culture is a result of an organization successfully adapting to an environmental change. Strong organizational culture is when the beliefs and values of both the employees and the organization align (Barrow, 2019).

The federal government has been operating in a staffing deficit for decades (Wang & Brower, 2019). High-quality federal employees have been seeking positions elsewhere because of their dissatisfaction with pay, lack of promotion opportunities, and resources available to carry out their position duties (Wang & Brower, 2019). Wang and Brower studied federal employees' job satisfaction and the effect of their perceived compatibilities between their jobs, colleagues, and supervisors (2019). Wang and Brower's study showed federal employees' job satisfaction correlated with the level of compatibility between the person and the expectations of the position. More specifically, federal employees were more satisfied with their jobs if their talents and skill sets aligned with the daily work duties (Wang & Brower, 2019).

A hierarchical structure is more common in public sector organizations compared to private sector organizations, which are more prone to have a varied structure and leadership style (Barrow, 2019). Barrow (2019) points out that public sector organizations are less focused on market factors and more focused on stakeholder interest and even political agendas. This practice causes public sector organizations to be more reactive to employee and organization needs instead of proactive.

Leadership behavior influences employee job satisfaction (Tsai, 2011). Bengte and Harder (2018) studied the relationships between extension agents and their direct supervisor. The relationship between an agent and his or her direct supervisor influences an agent's work productivity and retention. In Bengte and Harder's (2018) study, agents who had an unfavorable relationship with their director also reported lower job satisfaction. Employees having a positive relationship with their supervisor are more likely to have higher job satisfaction and less likely to plan a career exit (Bengte & Harder, 2018).

Understanding the relationship between agents and supervisors is imperative to understanding one of the root causes of agent turnover (Bengte & Harder, 2018). According to some, directors are promoted into leadership roles with little human resources and management experience (Bengte & Harder, 2018). Extension has practices that allow for promotion within a local unit team. There are instances where this results in an agent being promoted to a director role without the skillset to effectively manage a team (Bengte & Harder, 2018). Intentional leadership development is needed for all new local unit directors (Bengte & Harder, 2018). Bengte and Harder (2018) explain individual training programs tailored to each director's skillset are needed to ensure directors have the tools to successfully guide and coach new agents.

Local unit extension directors are pulled in multiple directions by demands from clientele, community partners, funders, and their unit staff. Extension has fostered a culture of ‘deliver more with less’, including working with fewer staff and either stagnant or declining budgets (Villard & Earnest, 2006). Several factors influence satisfaction with a supervisor, including, trust, coaching style, work conflicts, job expectations, and work environment. Each of the influencing factors requires the time and energy of the local unit director (Windon, 2017).

Organizational Commitment

Research on the topic of organizational commitment has existed since the 1980s (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In the 1980s, the term ‘Organizational Citizenship Behaviors’ emerged from workplace research (Grego-Planner, 2019). Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) describes an employee’s behavior and how it has a positive influence on the organization. Grego-Planner (2019) explains OCBs are employee behaviors that are not necessarily in a person’s job description, but rather attributes that contribute to organizational performance. According to Grego-Planner (2019), “There are seven main categories of citizenship behavior: helping behavior, sportsmanship, organizational loyalty, organizational compliance, individual initiative, civic virtue, and self-development”. Job attitudes influence the type of organizational commitment associated with an employee. The organizational commitment theory categorizes loyalty to an organization into three categories: 1) affective 2) normative, and 3) continuance (Grego-Planner, 2019).

The most desirable type of organizational commitment is affective commitment (Grego-Planner, 2019). Affective commitment is demonstrated when an employee stays with an organization because he or she enjoys the work and has a positive attitude toward the organization. Grego-Planner (2019) explains that affective commitment is influenced by several

factors, including peer cohesion, equity, appreciation, and management behavior. Employees who have affective commitment are more dedicated to the organization's mission and achieve greater work productivity (Grego-Planner, 2019).

Normative commitment is when an employee stays with an organization because of a sense of obligation (Grego-Planner, 2019). Grego-Planner (2019) explains that normative commitment may be influenced by the reciprocal relationship between the employee and the organization. Meyer and Allen's (1991) model of commitment describes normative commitment as an obligation to remain loyal to an organization. Normative commitment is when an employee "considers it morally right to stay in the company, regardless of how much status enhancement or satisfaction the firm provides" (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 66).

Continuance commitment includes a decision to stay with an organization because of the fear of missing out on a job-related benefit due to career separation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Continuance commitment is associated with a benefit and loss calculation when employees stay with an organization because they have invested time and energy into a position and the costs of leaving are too high (Grego-Planner, 2019). Grego-Planner (2019) explains, a professional's attachment to an organization that is based solely on the financial benefits including health insurance, retirement, and accrued leave is experiencing continuance commitment (2019).

Generational Differences

The topic of generational differences in the workplace has been a longstanding controversial question (Stiglbauer et al., 2022). The root cause of the controversy of generational divides in the workplace starts with the interpreted definition of a generation. Stiglbauer et al. noted, "The idea of a generation was to the reference to individuals born within the same

historical and socio-cultural context who made comparable formative experiences within a set of historical events they experienced with more or less the same age. A generation was suggested as a set of individuals who hold the same collective memories” (2022, p. 3).

Today’s workforce population includes four generations. Stiglbaurer et al. (2022) define the generational cohorts as (1) Baby Boomers, born between 1950 and mid-1960s; (2) Generation X, born between the early 60s or mid-80s; 3) Generation Y/Millennials, born between mid-80s and late 90s; and (4) Generation Z, born between the late 90s and early 2010s. Categorizing employees by generations often categorizes individuals by age and not necessarily by their work ethic or social tendencies (Stiglbauer et al., 2022). Organizations looking at improving employee retention need to recognize generational differences to create a workplace environment that encourages cohesion and cooperation between generations.

It is predicted that by 2025, millennials will make up 75% of the global workforce (Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019). Millennials in the workforce are known to be high achievers but also have a reputation for being the highest maintenance generation in the workplace. Millennials want continual feedback on their work progress, acknowledgement when success is achieved, and a supervisor who is present and accessible (Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019). According to Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, millennials favor collective action and are more likely to volunteer for committees or special projects compared to their counterparts in other generation cohorts (2019). Omilion-Hodges & Sugg (2019), said, “Millennials have also out-ranked older cohorts for their ability to see others’ perspectives and are predicted to be strong future managers fueled by their high standards, worth ethic, and follow-through.”

Millennials are described as the inclusive and open-minded generation (Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019). The millennial generation tends to be more accepting of cultural differences

compared to their other generation cohorts. Millennials desire for inclusivity also carries over to their expectations for cultural acceptance from their supervisor (Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019). Millennials want a leader who is in tune to the interpersonal needs of their employees who value democracy over a dictator leadership style.

The newest generation to enter the workforce is generation Z (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Organizations need to acknowledge when a new generation joins the workplace and prepare for modifications in the work dynamics and organization culture. Human resources management also will need to adapt onboarding practices for the entry of a new generation (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Benítez-Márquez et al. (2022), shares generation Z consists of tech-savvy employees who are looking for employers offering cutting-edge technology and encouraging use of technology. Businesses most often adapt to the generation Z workplace population by offering a friendly work environment, the latest technologies, internships, competitive benefits, and social activities (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Employers will be forced to adapt to the preferences of generation Z. Compared to the previous generations, generation Z will not conform to using outdated technology or adapt to organizational environments that do not offer flexibility and a positive office culture (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022).

R.E.T.A.I.N.S. Model

Safrit and Owen's R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model (2010) is the conceptual framework for this extension agent retention study. The R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model identifies opportunities for extension organizations to train, support, and improve job satisfaction among local unit agents (Safrit & Owen, 2010). The model guided the framework for this extension agent retention study. The

research questions for the present study were designed to collect experiences in relation to topics within Safrit and Owen's R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model.

The R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model is a seven-themed model for retaining extension professionals in local unit positions (Safrit & Owen, 2010). The seven themes are: **R**ecruit authentically; **E**xpand on new employees' experiences and abilities; **T**rain, train, train; **A**dvocate for both the employee and the position; **I**nspire, invest in, and empower employees; **N**urture connectivity among employees; and **S**how appreciation through effective recognition. To recruit and retain talented extension professionals, administration from all levels needs to prioritize each component of the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. Model (Safrit & Owen, 2010).

Table 1

Operational Definitions for the Seven Themes Comprising the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. Conceptual Model

| Model Theme | Operational Definition |
|--|--|
| Recruit authentically | Communicating to prospective employees the job's professional responsibilities as well as critical aspects of the total organization's and specific workplace's cultures critical to success in the position |
| Expand on new employees' experiences and abilities | Hiring employees who have substantial overlap between their personal needs, interests and goals and those of the total organization and immediate workplace |
| Train, train, train | Providing moral support and material resources for the continuous professional education (CPE) of the newly-hired employee so s/he may meet and exceed basic professional competencies (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations) needed to ensure professional success |
| Advocate for both the employee and the position | Ensuring that both the employee and his/her position to grow and evolve together as the organization's mission/vision and employee's needs/goals evolve |
| Inspire, invest in, and empower employees | Dedicating time and energies to best understand the needs of each individual employee and then developing and sustaining a workplace environment within which s/he thrives and succeeds |

| | |
|---|---|
| Nurture connectivity among employees | Building strategic linkages between people and people, ideas and ideas, and people and ideas so as to strengthen each employee's internal and external workplace environments |
| Show appreciation through effective recognition | Using appropriate intrinsic and/or extrinsic resources to effectively communicate appreciation to each employee for workplace excellence |

Note. From “A Conceptual Model for Retaining County Extension Program Professionals” by Safrit, R. D. & Owen, B.M. (2010) *The Journal of Extension*, 48(2), Article 2FEA2. <https://archives.joe.org/joe/2010april/a2.php>

Recruit Authentically

Communicating job expectations, specific daily responsibilities, and real-life demands of an agent position are important when recruiting new extension professionals (Safrit & Owen, 2010). When filling vacant positions, supervisors need to communicate the reality of agent job responsibilities accurately and truthfully.

Recruiting high-quality employees in an employee-driven marketplace requires an innovative and intentional plan for recruitment, orientation, and retention (Angima & Carroll, 2019). Implementing new recruitment practices can attract higher quality applicants, resulting in agents delivering higher quality educational services and programs. Angima and Carroll’s (2019) study recognized a commonly used recruitment strategy includes personal invitations from current extension staff asking potential applicants to apply.

Extension agents often have work expectations outside of the Monday through Friday, 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. work schedule (Benge & Beattie, 2021). Agents experience burnout from the added stress of working evening and weekend activities. Benge and Beattie (2021) explain, Transparency about the expectations of a local unit agent is important during the recruitment process.

Effective recruitment also includes identifying competency expectations prior to the new employee hiring process (Benge et al., 2011). The Professional Development Model depicts career stages, motivators for each stage, and organizational strategies to support an employee in the corresponding career stage. Pre-entry competencies need to be considered when recruiting for an open position (Benge et al., 2011). According to the Professional Development Model, “The pre-competencies needed include self-management, program development process, communication skills, interpersonal skills, technical/subject matter expertise, and teaching skills” (Benge et al., 2011, p.7).

Expanding on New Employees’ Experiences and Abilities and Train, Train, Train

The next two components of R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model are expanding on new employee’s experiences and abilities and Train, train, train (Safrit & Owen, 2020). While the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model separates each of these concepts, the literature points to overlapping themes that apply to both agent retention practices. According to Safrit and Owen’s (2010) model, extension should take into consideration each candidate’s previous work experience and personal goals when designing each new agent’s training program. New agents should have an individual professional development plan reflective of their goals and training needs (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Training goes beyond the first years of an agent’s employment. Providing and promoting ongoing professional development that aligns with performance review systems retains talented employees (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Professional development plays an important role in employee retainment and development of extension’s human capital. According to Vines et al. (2018), because agents are more likely to leave the organization earlier in their career, the timespan between six months and two years of an agent’s tenure with extension is the most crucial for organizational support and professional development.

Initial professional development needs of a new agent may involve education about the extension system and the role of an extension professional (Benge & Beattie, 2021). Benge and Beattie gathered data from local unit directors about their perceptions of the skill sets of new agents (2021). Directors discussed how the agents' lack of understanding of land grant universities and extension created difficulty during the orientation process. Directors noted they had to invest more time and energy into agents who did not have a basic understanding of the extension system (Benge & Beattie, 2021).

As the scope of work for local unit extension employees continues to evolve to include more complex work with an emphasis on solving emerging community challenges, the need for more intentional training also becomes more urgent (Berven et al., 2020). The change in extension's landscape requires the prioritization of hiring, training, and retaining a workforce equipped with the technical and adaptive skills necessary to meet the needs of local communities. While it is important to identify subject matter competencies prior to hiring a new agent, it has become apparent there is also a need to possess noncognitive or soft skills (Berven et al., 2020).

Tennessee Extension conducted a study to prioritize adaptive leadership traits for extension agents utilizing the Delphi technique (Berven et al., 2020). The Delphi technique is a method for collecting information from a group of participants about key ideas and themes without influence from other study participants. The highest ranked competencies included professionalism skills, educational design skills, leadership skills, and communication skills (Berven et al., 2020). Intentional and high-quality professional development plans are needed to ensure the professional growth of local unit agents. Agents desire to have access to professional

development to build their leadership, communication, and program facilitation skills (Berven et al., 2020).

Providing relevant training for agents first involves a competency prioritization process (Berven et al., 2020). From the competency priority study, Tennessee Extension created a new system for assessing and developing competencies: EXCELS (Extension Competency E-Learning for Success). EXCELS includes a handbook for agents that introduces competencies, an explanation of the competency assessment process, and a timeline for completing each assessment and competency e-course (Berven et al., 2020).

Benge et al. (2011) introduced a modified professional development model that provides motivators and organizational strategies for four career phases, including 1) pre-entry, 2) entry, 3) colleague, and 4) counselor and advisor stages (Benge et al., 2011). Benge et al., describe the entry phase as a time for the organization to provide peer mentoring, coaching, and on-the-job training (2011). The entry stage is a phase for new agents to learn essential skills to perform the job, establish relationships with internal partners, and practice initiative and creativity. The end goal in the entry phase is to move from dependence to independence (Benge et al., 2011). Programmatic areas of expertise and identity in professional community are refined during the colleague phase. An interdependence relationship where the employee can work independently but also values working together as a team is the ultimate goal of employee relationships during the colleague phase (Benge et al., 2011). During the colleague phase, agents move from independence to interdependence (Benge et al., 2011).

Benge et al.'s modified professional development model also addresses motivators and organizational support practices for the counselor and advisor stage (2011). The counselor and advisor stage is when agents may have opportunities to attain leadership positions or move into

an administrative role for their organization. Additional motivators during this phase could be engaging in organizational problem solving by serving on special committees or task forces (Benge et al., 2011). Agents in the counselor and advisor stage may also find themselves in a coaching role for other extension professionals. The end goal for this phase is for the professional to achieve a position of influence within the organization (Benge et al., 2011).

While having subject matter expertise is important for extension agents, being proficient in soft skills such as communication and relationship building is critical for career success (Berven et al., 2020). Today's extension work requires agents to have adaptative skills to successfully build relationships with stakeholders and community partners to work collaboratively to solve community issues. Assessing soft skill competencies of agents and creating a tailored professional development plan will lead to increased job effectiveness, greater job satisfaction, and increased confidence. According to Berven et al (2020), agents who are equipped with the proper soft skill competencies are more likely to experience job satisfaction and are more likely to stay with extension.

Appreciation

Extension offices need to have a plan to regularly recognize programmatic success. Directors should regularly recognize agent performance on a timely basis (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Celebrating agent success should be ongoing and intentional (Safrit & Owen, 2010).

Lack of recognition is a risk factor for psychological distress in the workplace and the number one reason most Americans leave their jobs (Benge, 2018). Employee recognition impacts many areas of employee satisfaction including morale, retention, organization loyalty, and a sense of belonging. It is important for employers to understand not every employee will

value the same type of recognition (Benge, 2018). Employers should expect to recognize staff through a variety of practices that meet the needs of their employees.

Brun and Dugas (2008) suggest an employee recognition practice that involves four main forms: 1) personal recognition, 2) recognition of results, 3) recognition of work practice, and 4) recognition of job dedication. Each employee appreciation practice takes intentionality from leadership (Benge, 2018).

The first form of Brun and Dugas' employee recognition model is personal recognition (2008). Personal recognition can be given one-on-one, in team meetings, or at company gatherings (Benge, 2018). Verbal accolades and personalized letters are examples of personal recognition. Involving employees in organization decisions is also a practice for employee recognition.

Brun and Dugas' model suggests recognition of results is the second form of employee recognition (2008). Practices for recognition of results tend to be more tangible in nature compared to the three other forms of recognition (Benge, 2018). Examples of recognizing staff for their productivity are merit-based raises, certificates or plaques, gifts to mark career milestones, or notes to the office team highlighting staff success (Benge, 2018).

The third form of recognition in Brun and Dugas' model is recognizing work practices (2008). Benge (2018) said examples for celebrating employee practices include spotlighting an employee's contributions or creativity. Leaders can also recognize staff work ethic by assigning staff special projects or committees (Benge, 2018). Verbal praise is often an overlooked practice of showing staff appreciation. Staff report they want to be verbally acknowledged in front of their colleagues for good work (Benge, 2018).

Recognition of job dedication is the final practice of employee appreciation in Brun and Dugas' model (2008). At the start of the Great Resignation, almost half of all employees in the United States was looking for a new job or planning to look soon (Iacurci, 2022). Loyal employees who show organization commitment should be recognized for their job dedication (Benge, 2018). Practices for recognizing job dedication include praise from peers and leadership, recognizing overtime, and encouraging employees to take time away from the office to recharge.

Inspire, Invest In, and Empower Employees

Agents value a connection between their work and praise shared by their supervisors. The relationship between an agent and supervisor is dynamic and multidimensional. The supervisor serves as an administrator and a colleague for an agent (Benge & Harder, 2018). Extension agent supervisors need to have a plan to provide genuine feedback that includes ongoing coaching and celebrating agent success (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Agents should develop a sense of ownership in their work and the success they experience. "The relationship between an extension supervisor and agent has a direct impact on the agent's work productivity and retention" (Benge & Harder, 2018, p. 201).

There are generational differences when it comes to how employees interact with their supervisors (Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019). Millennials expect to be included in conversations and decisions that were once left up to higher management. Millennials want a communicative and interpersonal relationship with their supervisor (Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019). Omilion-Hodges and Sugg (2019) suggests managerial communication between a leader and millennial employee is more than a dictation of tasks and should include meeting the interpersonal needs of the employee. Millennials, the high-achieving generation, have high expectations for their supervisors and expect them to be transparent, ethical, and open-minded.

Many factors influence an agent's career commitment. Siegelin, et al. (2021) defines career commitment as the predicted time to separation and to retirement. Relationships with a supervisor are a determining factor that influences an agent's job satisfaction. The longer an agent has been employed with extension the stronger the correlation is between an agent's satisfaction with the co-located supervisor and job satisfaction (Siegelin, et al., 2021). Siegelin's study found the opposite was true for early-career agents. Relationships between a supervisor and a new agent did not have a negative impact on career commitment probability (2021).

Positive relationships between supervisors and agents result in greater employee success. Bengé and Harder's study (2018) utilized Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory to examine the relationship between agents and their direct supervisor. Significant relationships were found between an agent's overall job satisfaction and the ratings on their management within the hygiene factors. Agents having a favorable relationship with their supervisor experienced more success with programming, performance, and increased job satisfaction, thus increasing the likelihood of higher agent retention rates (Benge & Harder, 2018).

There are benefits of understanding and high-quality relationships when employees and their supervisors work well together (Benge, 2019). "Leadership is not a one-way street, but rather a highway the leader and employee pave together," (Benge, 2019, p. 1). High-quality relationships between a supervisor and their agent led to increased productivity, efficiency, and ultimately job satisfaction. High-quality interpersonal relationships allow agents to feel more valued and connected. Negative relationships result in the opposite and lead to turnover (Benge, 2019).

Intentional training specifically for extension supervisors is needed to provide administrators the tools to successfully build and maintain relationships with their agents (Benge

& Harder, 2018). For many extension systems, very little supervisory or management training is provided for supervisors. Professional development for supervisors should provide an intentional focus on human resources, management, and leadership training (Benge & Harder 2018). Benge and Harder (2018) suggest an onboarding leadership academy to provide training about the roles and expectations of an extension supervisor.

Nurturing Connectivity Among Employees

Creating opportunities for collaboration with office coworkers is key to building relationships (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Safrit and Owen's model explains agents who create relationships with colleagues feel a sense of belonging and a part of a team. Agents reporting healthy relationships with coworkers report higher levels of job satisfaction (Safrit & Owen, 2010).

Human capital is a core factor of success in any organization that employs paid staff (Cetinkaya et al., 2021). Understanding both formal and informal workplace relationships is important when studying the phases of relationship building among office colleagues. Cetinkaya et al.'s (2021) study evaluated the quality of workplace relationships and how it forms a foundation for the organization's work. Coworker relationships positively influenced job satisfaction and organizational commitment. A high-quality workplace relationship lowers the level of stress and improves overall well-being among colleagues (Cetinkaya et al., 2021).

Social connectedness refers to the different ways people connect to others physically, behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). According to Holt-Lunstad (2018), social connection can be characterized in three major components 1) structural support via the physical or behavioral presence of relationships; 2) functional support that is cognitively perceived to be available; and 3) quality support through the emotional nature of relationships.

All three types of social connections involve connection to others, support, inclusion, and sense of connection.

For social connectedness to be achieved, workplaces must include a culture that encourages colleagues to socially engage (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). Employees who feel estranged from their coworkers are more likely to feel a lack of belongingness in the workplace and have lower organizational commitment (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). Research also suggests social cohesion in the workplace results in higher productivity (Holt-Lunstad, 2018).

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to piecing together the social cohesion of a workplace (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). A starting point is to create structural supports for socialization, including open-space offices, social hour gatherings, and staff lunches. Holt-Lunstad shares, “Given the evidence of workplace conflict and bullying, employers need to recognize that not all social interaction is positive”, (2018, p. 1309). To foster high-quality relationships among employees, organizational efforts will need to include leadership training that promotes teambuilding and connection between staff and leaders.

The COVID-19 global health pandemic presented a list of unprecedented challenges for the United States’ workforce (Brown & Leite, 2022). During the shelter-in-place orders, many government employees worked remotely without any in-person interaction with their colleagues. Previous studies support the positive relationship between social connectedness and better physical and mental health (Brown & Leite, 2022). Organizational connections create a culture of support and collective self-efficacy. According to Brown and Leite (2022), working remotely allowed certain organizations to continue operations but caused a disconnect between employees and their colleagues.

Building relationships between leadership and staff is also important. The Leader-Member Exchange Theory is a relationship-based model that explains relationships between a leader and follower (i.e., extension supervisor and agent) (Benge, 2019). The Leader-Member Exchange Theory suggests a relationship between a leader and follower grows over time, starting in a stranger phase and progressing through acquaintance and partner phases. The final partner phase is achieved when the leader and follower have mutual trust, obligation, and respect for each other (Benge, 2019). Supervisor and agent relationships also start as transactional and move to transformational (Benge, 2019).

Chapter 3 - Methods

The purpose of this collective case study was to understand practices that influence extension agent retention for individuals in local KSRE units. A collective case study examines one issue that is illustrated through multiple case studies (Creswell, 2018). Utilizing collective case study design, the focus of this study is agent job satisfaction. The study used 24 cases to describe the field experience and job satisfaction of agents who have been employed with KSRE for at least five years.

A qualitative study design was selected to collect more detailed data from extension agents about their field experiences. Due to the varied experiences and realities of each participating extension agent, a quantitative collection method may not have derived the same depth of field experiences. The present qualitative study design allowed for more detailed data collection from study participants.

Researcher Subjectivity

I am currently employed as a local unit agent for K-State Research and Extension Douglas County. I have a 14-year career and have served in two local units and in two different agent roles. Serving as an extension agent has been my only professional position. For the last twelve years of my extension career, I have served as a new agent mentor and on the new agent coaching team. I assist with training and supporting new agents in the first 18 months of their career. As a new agent coach, I have mentored some of the early and mid-career study participants. During my tenure with KSRE I have served on many state taskforces, advisory committees, and in leadership roles for professional development associations. While there were study participants I had never formally met, there were study participants who I had worked closely with professionally.

Study Population

A bounded system was established by inviting participants employed as local unit KSRE agents for a minimum of five years. Participants were invited to participate in the study based off years of extension service, program area, administrative region, gender, and the type of unit, single or multi-county.

The population for the agent retention study included 94 local unit agents who had been employed with K-State Research and Extension for five years or more. Local unit directors with supervisory responsibilities were not included in the study population. A racially and ethnically diverse representative sample was selected by the researcher, totaling 24 local unit extension agents. Data were collected through individual participant interviews conducted during a three-week span from February 20 to March 10, 2023.

Data Collection

Participants were invited and agreed to participate in one-on-one interviews either conducted in person or virtually. The sample included 15 females and nine male agents. Participant tenure with KSRE ranged from five to over 35 years. The mean number of years of extension service was 20, while the median years of service was 21. The age of the study participants ranged from 30 to 68 years old. The mean age of the study participants was 50 years old, and the median age was 51.

Participants' programmatic responsibilities were as follows: four 4-H youth development agents; nine agriculture and natural resource agents; nine family and consumer science agents; and two horticulture agents. The data also noted agents in smaller units may have a split programmatic appointment with additional 4-H youth development responsibilities. Agents were selected from each of the administrative regions, including nine from the central region, nine

from the eastern region, and six from the western region. Of the 24 agents interviewed, 10 were from extension units that operate as districts and 14 were from individual county units.

The first step in interview protocol design is to create and test the interview protocol (Creswell, 2018). The interview protocol was built on the themes of the R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model to address the study objectives. Questions were designed to learn about the field experience of the local unit extension agents who had at least five years of experience. The interview questions were written to gain understanding of participants' experiences regarding ongoing professional development, organizational and office culture, and relationships with supervisors. After the protocol was drafted, the interview protocol questions were tested during a pilot interview with two extension agents. The two agents interviewed in the pilot phase were not included in the final analysis.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with each study participant. During each interview, agents answered a series of 22 scripted questions and additional follow-up questions as needed for clarity and elaboration. The interviews were conducted in person or virtually on Zoom, with 17 agents opting to participate in the interview in person and five requested Zoom interviews due to scheduling conflicts.

To ensure trustworthiness in a single investigator research study, criteria from Guba and Lincoln's (1985) measures of trustworthiness were utilized during the data collection and analysis process. To maintain confidentiality, names were not included in the data collection and coding process. Dependability can be measured by transcribing and saving collected data in an easy-to-share and understandable format (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Data were collected and audio recordings were transcribed through Otter.ai.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the interview participant data by completing multiple rounds of coding using open, axial, and selective coding methods. Six themes emerged from the coding process: 1) relationships with supervisors, 2) relationships with extension council boards, 3) access to professional development, 4) organizational culture, 5) organizational loyalty, and 6) work practices. Each theme represents a factor that influences agent job satisfaction and ultimately agent retention. After themes were established, a peer to the researcher reviewed a sample of the interview transcripts and themes to confirm validity.

Chapter 4 - Results and Discussion

In this collective case study, agents shared their experiences with local unit directors, local unit extension council boards, professional development, organizational culture and loyalty, and work practices that improve job satisfaction. For each theme that emerged in the data coding process, agents had experiences that were positive, while others had negative experiences related to the topic. The data presented in this chapter are first organized by theme and reflect the uniqueness of each local extension unit.

The data collected in this study reflects the field experiences of extension agents who have served in a local unit agent position for five or more years. Study participants shared lived experiences, both present and past. Many study participants reflected on previous experiences where job satisfaction was low and there was a difficult period of time related to one of the studied topics: relationship with director and board, organizational culture and loyalty, and work practices. Also noted, the majority of participating agents find themselves present day in high-functioning local units with a supportive director and board, strong organizational culture, and work practices that support a healthy work-life integration.

Relationship with Director

KSRE agents are supervised under one of three administrative models: 1) local unit county director in the same office location, 2) local unit district director possibly officed in a different office location, or 3) a regional director officed in an offsite location. A relationship between an extension agent and his or her supervising director influences the agent's job satisfaction. A summary of exit interview data collected in 2022 from KSRE's administration team shows an agent's relationship with their director is one of the top four reasons for the agent's career exit (J. Wilson, personal communication, August 25, 2023).

The participating agents' experiences with their supervisor were mostly positive, especially with agents who had a local unit director in the same county or district office. The majority of the study participants spoke highly of their director's leadership and dedication to seeing others succeed. Agents shared appreciation of their director and the coaching role they facilitated. Supervisors who are accessible and have the capacity to be available to help agents problem solve are favored by agents. Scheduling intentional coaching sessions with agents was a practice appreciated by agents.

A variety of employee and supervisor practices were shared in the agent interviews. Agents shared an appreciation for supervisors who were trustworthy and followed through on commitments they made. Agents want to be included in conversations about change within the organization and want to feel like their opinions have been heard and are valued. It was also noted that agents wanted their leaders to be authentic and acknowledge if the leader has made a mistake. Addressing administrative mistakes and making commitments to improve administrative practices strengthens the trust between the employee and supervisor.

Local Unit Director Relationships

Agents with a county or district director have expectations for the support they would ideally receive from their team leader. Agents expect a leader who encourages a culture of democracy and collaboration. Participants in the study valued trust from their director and agreed they do not have a desire to be micromanaged. Transparency is also important to agents, and they want to be involved in the decisions made for their local unit. Participant B said, "I feel like there is accountability on both sides. We have a director who is very interested in what we are doing. She sets up routine coaching sessions where we can check in, update her on what's happening, and communicate any needs we might have."

Overwhelmingly, participating agents expressed a positive relationship with their unit director. Participant H said, “My relationship with my director is really good. I’ve never been afraid to call her and ask her a question. On the flip side of it, I think for most employees, she is someone that is easy to talk to. And so, if there is something that you know we feel like she may disagree on, she’s the type of person that we can say, you know, well, we don’t agree and that’s going to be ok.” Participant R said, “He’s not the real hands-on type that is a micromanager. And if he was, I probably wouldn’t be here. To be honest, I believe in hiring good people who know what they are doing and letting them do their job, rather than feeling like they have got to be watched over all the time and told what to do.”

Adversely, a small group of participants shared experiences of working with unengaged directors who lack interpersonal skills. Participant K: A previous director we had was terrible and at the time our office culture was toxic. I was verbally attacked many times and witnessed this behavior with other colleagues. The only thing that made me stay was the relationship with the clients I serve.” Agents dissatisfied with the direct supervisor shared frustration with the co-governance structure of KSRE and current practices not holding directors accountable for lacking supervisory skills.

As reflected in the agent quotes below, study participants appreciated a trustworthy relationship with their supervisor that includes a genuine interest in the agent’s work and a shared vision for KSRE. Participant D said, “I have a very good relationship with our local unit director. We have the same vision for what extension could be. We have a trusting relationship and I know if she says she is going to do something, she will follow through. I also do not feel micromanaged. I know if I need someone to talk through a decision my director is available, and I feel like that’s important.”

In the research study, a small group of participants shared negative experiences with either a current or past supervisor. While the poor director and agent relationship was not the voice of the majority of the sample population, it is important to acknowledge agent discontent related to the relationship they have with their supervisor. Participant I said, “I would say I am not supervised. My relationship with my director is nonexistent. It seems like our director only has conversations with one agent and does not communicate with the rest of us.”

Participants with less than favorable relationships with their supervisor shared a desire for KSRE to provide additional human resources and leadership training for local unit directors. In the scenarios with a dysfunctional director and agent relationship, the agents mentioned their organization loyalty was influenced by the community they served and not the relationship they had with their supervisor. Participant S said, “We just had a new director hired; I think this is her third year. Totally different leadership styles. That’s what makes it kind of frustrating for a staff to unite and be more of a team. When we have to adjust to different leadership styles, but that’s part of being in my position. So, my ideal is to not have a micromanager and to let us do our job that we were hired for. And I believe we have a micromanager which makes it very difficult for our team.”

When hiring for a local unit director position, one of three scenarios presents itself: 1) hiring internally an agent who is already employed by the unit, 2) hiring internally from a different extension unit, or 3) hiring externally. Each hiring scenario brings its own challenges and advantages. Participant D said, “I think one of the problems in extension, especially some of the smaller units, is that it’s the Peter Principle. They just promote the most senior person in the local unit, and they may not understand how to manage people. That is not a healthy situation.”

Hiring internally based on an agent's organization loyalty may not result in a director with the motivation or appropriate leadership and administrative skills.

External hires for director positions also present challenges for a community-serving organization like KSRE that has been in existence for more than 100 years. Directors hired from outside of the KSRE organization have a learning curve when it comes to developing a stronger understanding of day-to-day operations and the grassroots culture of extension. Agents who were satisfied with their director who was hired externally shared an appreciation for the outside perspective and leadership skills their supervisor brought to the local unit.

Participant X: Our current unit director had a history with extension before doing something else in the world and then coming into the fold. We have a unique relationship. He really is a champion of the agents and it's always been like that since he came to our local unit."

Participant O: My director has less years of experience than I do. But comes with a good extension background. Again, communication is good. We talk about pretty much everything openly.

Participant P: Unfortunately, I had two previous directors and the relationship was highly strained. And then this person came in as the new director and our relationship started very very strained because they allowed the board chair at the time to kind of manipulate them, instead of being a director. My criticism of K-State is that they have people who want to be in leadership and they might have been around for awhile but do not have the training or even the leadership skills to serve in that role.

Regional Director Relationships

KSRE local units with three or less agents are supervised by their regional director. Regional directors provide administrative support for a geographic region and have offices located outside the local extension units. Relationships with agents who have their regional director as their supervisor is reactive in nature. Study participants shared that regional directors are stretched thin and have limited capacity to support local unit agents beyond answering questions. Proactive coaching, program planning, and leadership development are areas agents would like to see supported by their regional director. The administrative demands on a regional director result in a more transactional relationships with the agents they supervise.

Participant A: My regional director does a fairly good job if you're willing to reach out to them. They have always been responsive when I reach out to them. You need to feel like your director has your back. If you want to try something new, or want to take on new professional development, I feel like you should feel comfortable going to them and asking for what you need.

Relationship with Extension Council Board

KSRE local units are administratively supported by a co-governance structure that includes oversight from both Kansas State University and a locally elected extension council board. To be eligible to serve on the extension council board, council members must first be elected as a program development committee member from one of the four programmatic areas: 1) community development, 2) agriculture and natural resources, 3) 4-H youth development, or 4) family and consumer science. District and county units have different extension laws that dictate either the appointment or election process and term limits for committee members.

Much like the agent and director relationships indicated, agents shared varied experiences working with their local unit's extension council board. The inevitable turnover on an extension council board makes orienting and building relationships with board members an ongoing process. Agents shared experiences where they were glad when a board member with a strong agenda termed out of their role on the board. On the opposite end of the spectrum, high-functioning and supportive board members leave their positions, especially in a county where the law dictates a board member can only serve two, two-year terms. Participant D shared, "I think that relationships with boards ebbs and flows depending on the culture and who's on the board. There have been good times and also bad. I think it all depends." Agents serving in a district shared how it can be difficult to work with board members under a governance that allows appointed board members to serve indefinitely. Participant F said, "In a district you can get a toxic board member on your board and the extension law doesn't set a term limit."

While turnover on extension council boards creates a level of uncertainty as new board members are either appointed or elected, the change can also be healthy for the organization. New board members bring a fresh perspective and new ideas. Often new members to the board have relationships with community partners who could potentially collaborate with extension. Participant F said, "I have a positive relationship with my program development committee. It's an eclectic group of people. I try to bring in people from the community that have points of view that are completely different than my own."

Study participants shared how new board members who are new to the organization may question extension practices and even encourage agents to consider new programs or community partnerships. Participant P said, "We have a new board chair. She's retired and she has worked in human resources and county administration. So, she knows politics and everything. She goes

to the partnership meetings and is active in program development committee meetings.”

Participating agents explained being pushed outside of the lane of what extension has historically done is good for an agent and the organization. Participant F said, “I tried to diversify the program development committee. I don’t know that since I have been an agent, we have had a better board. The extension council members help connect agents to new community partners and identify community issues. I credit the board and how they are to our director.”

The co-governance between the university and local boards also includes supervising local unit agents and directors. Agents explained, the regional director, in tandem with the local unit board and unit director, where applicable, supervise agents. Agents expect supervisors to provide feedback about their performance throughout the programming year and during the annual performance review. Participant S said, “The board does a good job of outlining what is expected of us. As you know board members change and expectations can change as well. That’s the only thing that’s maybe a little frustrating and challenging. You think you have it figured out and then they go off the board and someone new brings a different set of expectations.”

Agents want boards to be advocates for extension while keeping focus on the bigger picture and the mission of KSRE. Participant F said, “When an agent does a great job our board members point out the success. They are nothing but champions for our team.” Situations have emerged where a board member has criticized an agent on a program or a particular client interaction. Agents shared how board members who are more proactive in their approach to working with local unit agents are more helpful to the organization as a whole. Participant R said, “I feel like we have good relationships with our board. They are very interested in what we are all doing. Very supportive of what we are doing and asking if there are other resources that we need to do our work.”

Board members represent one of the four program development committees and tend to have bias toward the program area of familiarity. A common topic was difficult 4-H parents who end up on the board with a self-serving agenda. One board member can shift the dynamics of the board for good or bad. Participant D said, “Sometimes you get a couple of self-serving people on the board. And in my experience, it’s usually 4-H representatives that are just there to push their own agenda and don’t have the entire program at heart.” Participating agents explain their expectations for board members to set aside programmatic preferences or expertise and focus on the work of the entire extension unit.

Professional Development

Participants in the study agreed agents have access to a plethora of professional development opportunities. There is a culture that shares an expectation of continual growth for KSRE agents. Participant X said, “Admin is very open and encouraging for professional development. They provide many opportunities and even allow for agents to seek out their own trainings. They are happy to let you go and continue your education. As educators we are always learning ourselves.” The commitment to continuous professional development is formalized by an annual professional development plan approved by the extension council board that is customized to an agent’s needs and interests. Participant D said, “I believe our organization has a very proactive approach to professional development.” Agents are encouraged to explore training that aligns with their professional growth and programmatic expertise. Participant P said, “I think our culture toward continued growth is probably one of the best kept secrets that this organization has.”

Systems within KSRE exist to ensure agents have access to timely and relevant professional development. Agents look to their program specialists, regional director, program

focus team, and even their respective professional development associations for training.

Participant I said, “The state specialists in my program area are great about hosting trainings in person and virtually. We need these opportunities to make sure we are sharing the most-up-to-date research to our local communities.” Study participants shared how professional development associations and program focus teams do a superior job of collecting input from agents about their training needs. Participant D said, “My program focus team plans and hosts professional development each year. I find their trainings to be very relevant to my agent role and cutting-edge topics in my program area.”

Deciding how much professional development to participate in is a matter of balance for agents. In-person workshops generally take agents away from the office and out of their communities. Participant Q said, “Every time you are out of the office for a workshop, there could be calls coming in and requests to go look at trees or something like that. So, it’s a balancing act.” Participant C said, “When I first went to new agent training, I remember admin saying something about 10% of your time should be spent on professional development. I was like, wow, that’s a lot.” Agents recognize there are some months out of the year where there are not any workshops and other months where there are several. Agents prioritize their participation in trainings depending on how relevant the topic is to their day-to-day job. Agents shared they appreciated administrative updates and surface level information to be shared on a webinar. More in-depth training is preferred to be experienced in person. Participant D said, “At this point in my career, I really pick and choose what training I will participate in. Over the years I have probably gotten more professional improvement from something like a bus tour or master gardener tour, because you really see what’s going on in the industry.”

Professional development is available to agents either virtually or in person.

Overwhelmingly, agents shared they preferred in-person experiences that allowed them to connect with other KSRE employees. Participant M said, “There are times I don’t feel like the lessons were as beneficial as the networking with other agents. I think sometimes I get more out of meeting other agents than the content of the training. I think there’s something important about being together.” Agents shared stories about meeting some of their closest friends at state or national extension conferences. Participant K said, “I met a group of agents at a conference, and it turned out we were all family and consumer science agents. In 2014 we decided to start a newsletter and we still collaborate on this project today.” Attending conferences in person allows agents to build comradery with colleagues outside of their local unit. Agents value a sense of belonging in the larger KSRE system.

While KSRE’s culture toward continued professional growth is strong, equitable access to attend is lacking. Participant F said, “Our organization needs to level the playing field. We need to give every agent the opportunity to participate in professional development. I don’t know structurally exactly what that would look like from a financial standpoint and where the pool of funding would come from.” Just because an agent has the desire to participate in a training, there may not be local funds available to cover the expenses. Participant C said, “Just because admin says they want you to have it doesn’t mean your office will have the budget to support travel for trainings. There are times you have to come up with that funding on your own and it makes things difficult.” A perception exists that agents in smaller units with limited extension council budgets do not have the funding to cover travel expenses and registration fees.

Area and state meetings are typically less cost prohibitive and are easier for agents to attend without straining tight local unit budgets. National conferences are more costly, including

flight tickets, higher registration fees and higher per diem rates. While professional development associations and program focus teams offer scholarships to offset the cost of travel for conferences, the reality is that the scholarships only cover a portion of the total cost.

Participant A: Because there is so much of a difference in funding for different unit sizes. Larger counties and larger districts that have more money to send agents to bigger professional development versus smaller units that are having budget issues. The smaller units can't afford to send agents. I think there is a disparity there and it causes hard feelings.

Organizational Culture

Agents shared experiences that support a favorable organizational culture at the local levels. Varied opinions exist about the regional and state-level organizational culture. The study participants also shared opportunities to improve KSRE's organizational culture. KSRE's co-governance structure presents challenges when operational or human resource challenges arise. Agents shared situations where the local board executes the majority of the decisions regarding the agent's role and that may not be the fairest practice for agents. Board members have a lack of human resource training and may push their self-serving agenda.

Organizational culture at the local unit level was reported as team oriented. Agents value communication among unit coworkers and want to feel like they can trust their team. Communication about schedules and when colleagues will be in or out of the office is valued. Participant E said, "We do have shared values on our team. We are very teamwork oriented and are willing to help each other out. It helps we have competent and capable people in our unit." Each employee in a local unit brings his or her own strengths to the team. Participant G shared, "I appreciate the fact that we play to our strengths and help each other out. Being in a district we

can be more specialized. I don't have to attempt to be an expert in a program area I know nothing about."

Local unit directors influence organizational culture in local units. Agents shared current or past experiences of working with directors who were not effective communicators and did not cultivate a team-oriented culture. A local unit director can make or break a local unit's organizational culture. Participant H shared, "For a couple of years we had a toxic district director. I watched talented and long-tenured agents leave our organization because of poor leadership." Participant H also explained that they trusted the organizational culture of their local unit and knew with time the director would leave or be asked to leave. Less experienced agents may not have the trust in the system to endure poor leadership situations.

Organizational culture can be different depending on the priorities of the unit's regional director. Participant N said, "Some are more focused on certain things than others. Whether it's reporting, diversity, civil rights, or specific program." Turnover in regional director positions creates uncertainty and a learning curve for extension agents. It takes time to build relationships between agents and a new administration. New administrators create their priorities while establishing their leadership style. State and area program specialists also bring their own priorities and values to the organization. Between regional directors, state specialists, local unit directors, program development committees, and community needs, there are a lot of factors that determine an agent's priorities.

A common topic of discussion was the expectations of an extension agent's job responsibilities. What is expected from KSRE administration is clear: agents are to serve the public. Participant L said, "There's never been a question about what administration expects agents to do. You are expected to come to work and serve the community you work in." The

execution of how agents serve the public is refined at the local unit level. Participant M said, “In our unit we focus on meeting people where they are at and trying to find what meets their needs and expectations, and still doing it within equality.” Cohesive extension units have a mutual understanding regarding the mission of the organization and the desire to be public servants. Participant E said, “Having competent and capable coworkers makes a strong organizational culture. We all have the same values and work to serve our community.” There’s a shared perspective that agents not getting the job done are a strain on the system.

Opinions regarding the organizational culture of KSRE at the state and regional levels were varied. While some agents were satisfied with the organizational culture of KSRE beyond the local unit, others shared frustration and discontent with the organizational culture at the regional and state levels. Agents’ discontent with regional and state levels of KSRE administration is from the lack of communication regarding new policies or mandates agents are expected to implement. Participant D said, “There is sometimes a disconnect between the local unit and state administration. I think most of our admin is out of touch in regards to what is happening at the county level. When new policies are dictated without consideration for local communities and agent input, it burdens our system.”

Agents shared that while organizational culture is understood by more tenured agents, they observe the opposite to be true for newly hired agents. Experienced agents feel new agents have difficulty understanding KSRE’s organizational culture and the expectations of a local extension agent. Participant R said, “There are multiple layers to our organization. I see new agents struggle to understand the expectations of their role as an agent. It’s nearly impossible to describe from a to z what an agent is expected to do. Our culture takes time to learn.”

Work Practices

Extension agent work practices are varied depending on program area, geographic location, community needs, unit structure (county or district), and local unit leadership. In each interview agents shared work practices they felt led to agent longevity and adversely, practices that led to agent burnout. Utilizing professional scheduling, access to professional development, and professional creativity were themes that emerged in regards to practices improving agent longevity. Participant F said, “Access to professional scheduling is more than saying we have a policy. Agents need to be encouraged to practice stepping away from their work to tend to personal matters.” Work practice themes were present on both sides of the agent retention spectrum. Participant F said, “Poor organizational culture, let’s be real, bad relationships with an office coworker and the workload causes good people to leave our organization.”

Celebrating Success

When asked about how their unit celebrates success, the majority of the study participants shared a desire for their unit to be more intentional about celebrating agent and staff success. Agents admitted the fast-paced work environment, frequently resulted in finishing a program and then quickly pivoting to the next task or project that demands attention. Participant L said, “We need to be more intentional about celebrating our wins. It’s easy to get caught up in the next thing on our to do list, instead of pausing to acknowledge our successes.” The nature of an agent’s programming calendar makes it easy to continually look forward to the next task at hand and forget to acknowledge programmatic success. Participant S said, “Sometimes there may be a thank you from our director for a job well done. I think the day to day demands of our work gets in the way of celebrating our success.”

While intentional acknowledgement of success in the extension workplace is not a common practice, some units do regularly celebrate the success of their employees. Practices for celebrating success included acknowledging agents for their efforts during unit meetings, hosting staff lunches to celebrate a team success, and written success stories in office newsletters.

Participant H said, “Our director started this practice where every month we do our board reports and include our monthly direct contact numbers. So just a fun little way she celebrates is by presenting a traveling trophy to the agent with the highest number of contacts each month.”

Participant D said, “If we have a huge success we will include in our office monthly newsletter that goes to 9,000 people. We may even have an office potluck to celebrate.” Sharing success with extension council boards through either written or verbal reports was also mentioned as a practice for celebrating extension agent success. Agents acknowledged an appreciation for when their director shared praises for a job well done. Participant F said, “We have a person on our team whose love language is acknowledgement. We nominated her for a county award and she won. It was great and you could tell it made her feel good about the effort she gives to her work”

Professional Scheduling

To promote work life integration, KSRE has a local unit professional scheduling policy. According to KSRE’s employee resources website, professional scheduling is a privilege for agents to have the flexibility to achieve a balance of professional and personal time. Agents are exempt from being paid overtime when they work in excess of 40 hours any given week. Professional scheduling allows agents to use up to four consecutive hours to take care of personal commitments during office hours.

KSRE has become more family friendly in recent years. Participant A said, “I do feel we have gotten a lot better on being flexible with agents who are parents than we were 15 years ago

when I started. Having a practice like professional scheduling acknowledges that my job requires my time outside of office hours and gives me the flexibility to take care of my family during the workday. Working remotely has also given me more flexibility.” The typical schedule for a local unit agent includes evening meetings and working over the weekend for certain programs. KSRE’s professional scheduling policy offers agents the opportunity to have flexibility during the workday. Agents can step away from their job responsibilities for up to four hours at a time without taking annual leave. Utilizing professional scheduling is a work practice that leads to agent longevity.

When agents were asked why they stay, the flexibility professional scheduling offers was a common reason. Having the ability to go to a personal appointment, attend a child’s sporting event, or taking care of a sick family member were all scenarios that surfaced during conversations about professional scheduling.

Participant N: I stay because of the flexibility. I could not go anywhere else and make the salary I have and have the sick and annual leave and the flexibility I currently have. You can’t put a price tag on that because I get to spend time doing things I enjoy without having to make excuses.

Professional Creativity

The role of an agent is continually evolving to meet the needs of local communities. When agents were asked about their typical day as an agent, unanimously, agents shared that no two days in extension were the same. Agents appreciate the lack of monotony and the space to creatively meet the needs of their local community. Participant B said, “There’s a lot of opportunity to try new things. As an agent you figure out what is worth your time and what isn’t. You learn to peel off the meetings or classes that don’t have much return,” Extension has a

reputation in communities as a trusted partner and convener. Agents who have built relationships with their stakeholders are often asked to serve on coalitions, attend meetings, and lead efforts on taskforces. The reality for many agents is there is a never-ending supply of requests and demands on their time. Participant C said, “Every agent I know is a problem solver. I try not to overextend myself. I have a tendency to say yes, a lot. You try to get things going and then someone else in the community notices and they ask you to do something. Its important agents can decide how much they can do and take on.” While agents appreciate being looked to as a leader in the local community, it can be easy to get overwhelmed if they do not prioritize what is a good use of their time and continually assess their professional capacity.

Building Relationships

Relationships with colleagues and clients were a factor that contributed to agent longevity. Agents valued relationships with office colleagues and noted a healthy office culture is important. Building relationships with the public and community partners is also important for agents to prioritize. Study participants talked about how relationships with the public are typically not established sitting at their desk. Talking with producers at the sale barn, attending a 4-H event, or visiting a local food bank are examples of how agents can meet clients and build relationships.

Participant S: I think you’ve got to have those relationships with people. You must be a people person or you’re not going to make it. If you don’t like to work with people, if you don’t like to talk to people, you’re not going to make that connection that is needed for them to come back and ask you more questions. It’s that people connection that you’ve got to have to be successful.

Agents who build relationships with the public become trusted experts and even leaders in their local community. Relationships with stakeholders allow agents to experience a sense of belonging and contribute to agent longevity.

Managing Expectations

Determining how to manage the demands of an agent can be challenging for many. Expectations for an agent are dictated from internal and external stakeholders, including program development committees, extension council boards, community partners, local unit directors, KSRE administration, and program specialists. Participant X said, “It can be frustrating to understand the multiple levels of supervision and university processes. It’s especially difficult when not all parties are not on the same page about program priorities.” Agents have to make decisions about how to weigh stakeholder input as they prioritize program plans and community collaborations.

Agents acknowledge the reality of their job expectations require an agent to be an early adopter and to have the ability to pivot to meet the needs of their local community. Study participants shared a concern that for newly hired agents, it is nearly impossible to paint an accurate picture of what an agent role involves. Participant X said, “I think people are hired and don’t realize they will be traveling or working evenings and weekends. I think that can be difficult for people.”

Technology has changed how agents interact with the public, KSRE colleagues, and external stakeholders. Advancements in technology including smart phones and laptops have made reaching an extension agent outside of the workday possible, and even an expectation in many local units.

Participant D: I think technology has changed our jobs. When I started in extension I would get to my desk and have a stack of pink slips that would have notes about missed phone calls while I was out. There were days I would have 10-15 of those slips. But at least it stopped at five o'clock. We didn't even have answering machines. People could not get ahold of me during the weekend. The 24/7 access is what's changed the job. A lot of people want to get out of the job because it never goes away.

Agents hear from administrators that they should unplug and avoid answering incoming calls, text messages, and emails outside of business hours. Participant D shared, "I have asked our leadership during meetings about what our system can do to combat the 24/7 demands of an agent. I have been told to turn off notifications if I am away from the office. That's not realistic. There is sometimes a disconnect between what administration says and what the reality is in a local unit." It can be difficult for an agent to decide how to manage setting boundaries with requests outside of office hours with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders.

Organizational Loyalty

The study population included agents who have served in an agent role for five years or more. Study participants shared what experiences influence their organizational loyalty. Mostly, participants shared an affective commitment to KSRE. Agents overwhelmingly communicated a passion for their work and the communities they serve. Participant A said, "I like the people and the community I serve. I really do enjoy helping people. That's why I like working here."

Affective Commitment

Agents shared a passion for working with people and leading change to improve their local communities. Study participants shared a desire to help people, which also aligns with the organizational culture of KSRE that communicates a mission of serving local communities.

Participant F said, “I will always be passionate about working with young people. I have a personality where I could never be stuck say in a classroom all day. I just think extension is so unique and that you have all these crazy opportunities. It’s fascinating to be able to work with young people in this capacity.” Extension agents appreciate a work environment that presents endless opportunity to improve the communities they serve.

Extension agents are in positions of leadership in their communities. Participant S said, “I love the job. I love working with producers. You’d be amazed how many people just stop by because we are in the courthouse. They stop by just to chat because we have built those relationships. When I go the grocery store, church, or even a school activity, folks talk to me and it’s because of the connection to this position.” Agents have a desire to meet their clientele where they are and enhance their farming, gardening, or consumer practices. Study participants shared a passion for helping others and getting to know their clients. Building relationships with extension users strengthens agents’ affective commitment to KSRE.

Continuance Commitment

While the theme of affective commitment emerged in data collection, it is important to acknowledge not every study participant shared experiences that align with having a passion for their work and a desire to serve others. Continuance commitment includes a decision to stay with an organization because of the fear of missing out on a job-related benefit due to career separation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In most cases in the study, participants who shared a continuance commitment did not want to lose access to health benefits, accrued leave, professional scheduling, or retirement benefits. Participant L said, “If I wasn’t so close to retirement age, I would have left. I don’t know that I believe the state office sees the turnover

problem. It's not just the pay. It's a lot. It's a lack of training. I think it's a lack of expectations of what the new person coming in will do."

Normative Commitment

Normative commitment was the least identified commitment type of organizational loyalty. Normative commitment is a less common approach that includes an obligation to remain with an organization, disregarding the employee's job satisfaction (Meyer & Allen, 1991). A scenario in the study was shared where an agent was dissatisfied with their local unit's organizational culture and had a poor relationship with the director. In this situation, the agent shared that while overall job satisfaction is lacking, they stay because of the people they serve. Participant I said, "I stay because of the people that I help. That's what's kept me here this long. I know we're making a difference in the work we do."

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Implications

The following is a summary of the data collected to address each research question presented in Chapter One. The themes within the interview data revealed practices that are relational to agent job satisfaction and agent longevity.

RQ 1: How does providing and encouraging ongoing professional development influence agent success?

The study participants claimed KSRE supports and encourages ongoing professional development. Options for programmatic subject matter training, leadership development, and other professional conferences are abundant to KSRE agents. As agents become more tenured with the organization, they share a common practice of becoming more particular in what professional development they chose. Earlier career agents participate in broader professional development as they learn the organization and establish their area of expertise. Regardless of the amount of professional development an agent decides to participate in, agents agreed KSRE has a culture that supports ongoing professional growth. Participant Q said, “We have a well understood culture that supports professional growth. It’s an expectation.”

The study participants each have either one or more program areas assigned to their agent position. Agents shared that access to professional development allows them to be more knowledgeable in a program area and work toward becoming more specialized. While KSRE has formal education requirements for hiring eligibility, agents said they learned a lot about their subject matter area through trainings after they were hired for the agent role. Agents also agreed access to ongoing professional development allows them to stay current on research and practices. Participant R said, “There is not a question about the expectation to participate in

professional development. As educators we are expected to be learning the most up-to-date research.”

Funding is not always available at the local unit level for agents to participate in professional development. Participant N said, “I wish there was more funding available to participate in trainings. Some years our budget is tight, and we don’t have the funds to pay for agents to travel outside of the state.” While some study participants shared they felt like there was adequate funding from their extension unit for professional development, other agents said the lack of financial resources in their respective units restricts their participation in professional development. Participant D said, “I am very fortunate because I have a county that has the budget to train. I don’t believe that’s true for all of our extension colleagues.”

The appreciation toward KSRE’s culture of continued professional growth is consistent with Safrit and Owen’s (2010) R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model. The model emphasizes the importance of training beyond the first year of an agent’s career (Safrit & Owen, 2021). Study participants shared a desire for more specialized professional development as they advanced in their extension career, which also follows Berven et al.’s research (2020) that shows agents required more focused training topics as they established their area of expertise. Participant D said, “I am pretty specialized in the work I do with agriculture. I am picky about the trainings I go to and want to make sure it aligns with my work. I don’t want to waste my district’s money or time of workshops that don’t have anything to do with my work.”

RQ 2: How does organizational culture and office culture environments impact agent job satisfaction?

KSRE’s organizational culture is generally well understood at the local unit level. Agents shared an appreciation for their unit colleagues and the work each team member puts into serving

their community. Agents desire an office culture that includes trustworthiness and respect. Participant X said, “Our office culture is a work in progress. In a district it can be tricky because we are not all in the same office location. Creating a cohesive office culture takes effort for our team.” Study participants agreed organizational and office culture at the local unit level highly influences their day-to-day job satisfaction. Participant X said, “The local unit culture affects how I feel about my job. Thankfully I work in office with talented coworkers who are leaders and respect each other.”

Agents want to be part of a local unit team that is inclusive and team oriented. It is important for agents to feel a sense of belonging and to feel connected to their colleagues. Participant U said, “We have our own culture, and it fits our office. We try to create a culture where everyone feels included and valued.” Local units with a desirable culture create opportunities for employees to connect during the workday and encourage cross-programming collaborations. Additionally, agents acknowledged the importance of celebrating work success with colleagues, extension council members, and stakeholders. Participant T said, “Everyone wants to feel valued. It is important we recognize when a team member has done great work. Our boards and community partners also need to know.”

The local unit director sets the tone for the unit’s organizational and office culture. Agents described situations when poor leadership resulted in less than desirable unit culture. Ideal local unit culture includes a director who creates an environment where communication and teamwork are practiced. Agents expect local unit directors to hold team members accountable for maintaining the local unit’s organizational culture.

Input regarding regional and state organization culture was varied. Agents either responded with opinions of strong organizational culture or adversely, agents expressed

discontent with the organizational culture beyond the local level. Agents who spoke favorably of KSRE's organizational culture felt the expectations for agents and organization values were clearly understood. Participant F said, "We have a culture where communication is expected. This helps our team respect and trust each other. We are all on the same page about what expectations are." On the other end of the spectrum, agents who were not satisfied with KSRE's organizational culture shared the opinion that over extended administration and the everchanging policies at the state and regional levels are negatively impacting local unit agents. While organizational culture at the regional and state levels is valued among study participants, it does not influence day-to-day job satisfaction to the extent local unit culture does. Participant F said, "The structure of our system makes it easy to not allow higher levels of admin affect my job at the local level. I listen and jump through the hoops, but I mostly want to make sure my local board is happy."

Agents' desire to feel a sense of belonging closely follows the Nurturing Connectivity Among Employees section of Safrit and Owen's R.E.T.A.I.N.S. model (2010). The model explains the importance of agents feeling like they are a part of a team and how relationships with coworkers influences job satisfaction. Agents who do not feel a sense of belonging are more likely to separate from the organization (Safrit & Owen, 2010).

The study participants put more emphasis on local unit culture compared to organizational culture at the regional and state levels. The importance of local unit culture discussed by participants aligns with Barrow's research on organizational culture. Barrow's study explains the uniqueness of organizational culture and how it differs from office to office (2019). Similarly, each extension unit's culture looks and feels different and is influenced by team members, the local unit director, and the local unit extension council.

RQ 3: How do relationships between agents and their supervisors influence agent retention?

The role of director in a local unit goes beyond administrative responsibilities. Agents expect directors to be approachable, communitive, and trustworthy. Study participants value a relationship with their director that is beyond transactional. Participant A said, “I want to know by director has my back. She sets up monthly meetings with each agent to do coaching and check in.” Ongoing coaching and celebrating programmatic success are practices agents expect from their supervisors. Agents want directors who are visionary leaders who acknowledge unit success and are ready to navigate difficult situations. Participant B said, “My director is very interested in what I am doing. She is willing to help if needed but also is careful to not be a dictator. If I get in a bind she’s happy to help talk through solutions.”

The consensus of the study participants showed agents are generally satisfied with their supervisor whether that be a local unit director or regional director. Discrepancies arise when agents do not have a local unit director and are supervised by a regional director. Relationships between agents and regional directors are more transactional in nature. Participant A said, “I am in a smaller unit and am supervised by my regional director. They do a fairly good job if you are willing to reach out to them. If I have a question they have always been great about responding. Otherwise they are stretched too thin to do more than answer questions.” While regional directors are readily available to answer questions, their capacity for coaching and relationship building is limited.

Agents acknowledge the influence local unit directors have on an agent’s job satisfaction. While participants were generally satisfied with their current director, several study participants had prior experience with a less-than-desirable local unit director. Participant D said, “There is a

past director who was so terrible we don't even mutter their name. They failed to communicate or even learn about our team. That period of time caused a mistrust among our team." Poor local unit leadership results in employee turnover, mistrust, and overall poor office morale. Participant D said, "I've been through five directors and one thing I have learned is that the director sets the tone for the entire unit."

The relationship between a director and an agent depicted in the research study closely follows the literature regarding employee and supervisor relationships. Bengue and Harder's (2018) extension agent and supervisor study showed a correlation between an agent's relationship with his or her supervisor and the agent's work productivity and overall job satisfaction. Participant H said, "We had a terrible director. I stayed because I knew their behavior was not something our organization would support. The director treated agents terribly and was a bully." Agents who are unsatisfied with their local unit leadership are more likely to plan a career exit. Participant X said, "The first director I worked with had their thumb on you and it felt like we were being micromanaged. Thankfully, that person left and now we have a director who treats us like the professionals we are." Understanding agent and director relationships is essential to solving one of the root causes of agent turnover (Bengue & Harder, 2018).

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Many key takeaways regarding agent job satisfaction emerged from the agent retention study. Relationships is a topic repeatedly woven throughout the study findings. Relationships with colleagues, administrators, supervisors, extension council members, stakeholders, and clients were discussed in each participant interview. Participant D said, "In this job you have to like people. It's about building relationships with the people we work with inside and outside of

our office.” Relationships with internal and external stakeholders influences job satisfaction and organizational loyalty (. Participant H said, “Even while we had a terrible director, I stayed because of the clients I work with. I love the people I serve.” To improve agent retention, it is important KSRE design and promote best practices to strengthen relationships with internal and external organization stakeholders.

Encouraging successful relationships with employees and supervisors starts with hiring candidates who possess the interpersonal, administrative, and human resource skills to lead a team effectively. It is important KSRE administration works with local extension council boards to authentically communicate the expectations and needed skills of a successful director. Additional human resources and staff coaching training also need to be provided to local unit directors. More specifically, directors should devote scheduled coaching sessions with agents to discuss emerging issues and leadership development. Participant B said, “One of the things I appreciate most about my director is the initiative she takes to schedule monthly coaching sessions with each of us agents.”

One area of improvement that emerged from the agent retention study was the need to create practices for celebrating KSRE employee success. While agents reported success in their roles, they shared their units do not regularly acknowledge agent success. Best practices for celebrating KSRE employee success are needed to encourage local unit leadership to create and implement a plan for acknowledging employee success. Participant Q said, “This is something we need to do better at. Our unit has great agents who are successful in their efforts and we get caught up in the day to day and don’t make time to celebrate the wins.”

To improve relationships between agents and board members, additional training needs to be provided for both parties regarding responsibilities of board members and best practices for

supporting agents. Unconscious bias training is also needed to assist board members with identifying their own bias. Boards also need access to conflict management training and a mediator. Conflict is inevitable and having resources to work through difficult situations diplomatically can improve the integrity and overall effectiveness of an extension council board. Participant E said, “There have been times the board has had conflict about hiring and even managing staff. In my experience we do not equip our board members with strategies to have difficult conversations diplomatically.”

Additional funding is required to ensure more equitable access to high-quality professional development. Units with restricted budgets need access to funding outside of their council budget. Participant H said, “Our professional development associations offer \$500 scholarships for agents to go to national conferences. The reality is a national conference costs \$2,000 or more. The \$500 helps but doesn’t cover the total cost.” A recommendation is for KSRE administration to offer a professional development fund that more appropriately covers the total cost of attending a conference. Having access to additional funding could result in more agents attending more in-depth trainings, thus being more specialized in their programmatic area.

Recommendations for strengthening organizational culture at all levels of KSRE include consistent and clear messaging from upper administration to local unit boards and agents about KSRE’s shared values and mission. Best practices for a healthy local unit culture need to be established by state administration and communicated to regional and local unit directors. Participant T said, “We know colleagues want to feel like they belong to a team. In our organization, I am not certain we have recommended practices or even expectations for office culture. Often it’s not even the agent or director setting the tone, it’s an office professional who has been around for 30 years and thinks they run the place.” Social connectedness is a driving

factor when an employee makes a career exit (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). Directors who do not commit to best practices will need to be held accountable by KSRE administration and local unit boards. A reward and consequence system enforced by KSRE administration could aid in the implementation of best practices. Organizational culture best practices can also be included in the new agent orientation process.

Implications and Recommendations for Future for Research

This study focused on work practices and organizational systems that influence extension agent retention. The field experiences in this study are from participants who have been with the organization for five or more years. The study gathered data from agents who are mostly satisfied with their employment and are still currently employed with the organization. To truly address the root causes of agent turnover, research is needed to gather perspectives of individuals who have left the organization.

The present study included interviews with 24 local unit extension agents. Coding 24 interviews with more than 500 pages of transcripts was a lengthy and challenging process. Due to the interviews being scheduled in person and requiring the researcher to travel, all 24 interviews were scheduled prior to the start of data collection. Data saturation was met prior to the conclusion of the interview schedule. If the study was replicated, a smaller sample population would likely result in similar data themes.

The researcher opted to hold the majority of the interviews in-person. Collecting data in-person required funding for travel and two weeks of traveling throughout the state of Kansas. Due to KSRE's familiarity with virtual meetings, the interviews could have been hosted on a virtual platform and similar data could have been collected.

As illustrated in the literature review, agent retention research does exist (Benge & Harder, 2018). The complexity and differences in extension systems and day-to-day operations makes it difficult to compare existing agent retention literature and the current situation for KSRE. Due to the unique co-governance structure of KSRE, additional research is needed specific to the KSRE organization.

In the present study, agents explained the influence local unit directors have on the unit culture and agent job satisfaction. The agent retention study only included the perspective of the agent. Research outside of this study also shows how the relationship between a supervisor and the agent influences job satisfaction (Benge, 2019). To better understand the relationship between an agent and their supervisor, additional research is needed to gather insight from local unit directors. Future research is needed to evaluate supervisor capacity, training needs, and factors that contribute to positive relationships between agents and their supervisors.

Generational differences influence the workplace and organizational culture (Stiglbauer et al., 2022). The data collected in this study did not present themes regarding age differences among colleagues. Differences between each generation's work practices and preferences create divide in an office (Stiglbauer et al., 2022). Further research about generational differences could help guide best practices for promoting a healthy office culture and improving employee retention.

Summary

Employee turnover is a challenge that is present in today's workforce. Extension agent retention is a challenge KSRE will likely continue to face in the foreseeable future. Local unit agents participating in this agent retention study desire to have equitable access to high-quality professional development, a supervisor who is accessible and a visionary leader, and

organizational culture that is understood and practiced at all levels of the organization. To improve extension agent retention, best practices are needed to promote a healthy organizational culture and to hire and provide ongoing training for local unit directors.

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Appendix A - Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. I am in the process of gathering data for my thesis project. I am studying extension agent retention. As someone who is a trusted educator in your community, I appreciate your honest feedback about your role as an extension agent. Your name will remain anonymous in the data gathering and reporting processes. Details about your administrative region, program area, and size of local unit will be collected and possibly shared as a collective report. Before we get started, what questions do you have for me?

- 1) First can you share your agent title and which administrative region you are in?
- 2) Do you work in a district or county unit?
- 3) How many agents work in your unit, if you are fully staffed?
- 4) How long have you worked as an extension agent?
- 5) What made you interested in applying for an extension agent position?
- 6) What does your typical day as an extension agent look like?
- 7) What do you enjoy most about your role as an extension agent?
- 8) What do you find the most challenging about your role as an extension agent?
- 9) K-State Research and Extension offers a variety of professional development opportunities. How would you describe our organization's culture toward continued professional growth?
- 10) What can K-State Research and Extension do to strengthen ongoing professional development opportunities for agents beyond the new agent orientation process?
- 11) Organizational culture is defined as a set of shared values about standards for what is expected and valued within an organization. How would you describe your local unit's organizational culture?

12) How does K-State Research and Extension's organizational culture influence your job satisfaction?

Prompts:

- Be sure to think beyond your local unit.
- What does organizational culture look like at the regional and state levels of K-State Research and Extension?
- How are shared values and standards communicated in the K-State Research and Extension system?

13) What can K-State Research and Extension do to improve organizational culture?

14) Describe how you are supervised?

Prompts:

- Local unit director with supervisory responsibilities.
- Extension council board.

15) Describe your relationship with your local unit director. If you do not have a director, describe your relationship with your extension council board.

16) What would an ideal relationship look like between a local unit director with supervisory responsibilities and extension agent?

17) How does your local unit recognize and celebrate agent success?

18) In extension we work with extension council boards and program development committees (PDC). Describe your relationship with your local board and PDC members in your program area.

19) What work practices do you feel result in agent longevity?

20) What work practices do you feel contribute to agent turnover?

21) What has made you stay with extension?

Prompts:

- Normative commitment- organizational commitments.
- Affective commitments- emotional attachments, commitment to achieve the goal of the organization.
- Continuing commitment- remain in an organization because of different investments.

22) What do you find the most rewarding about your role as an extension agent?

Appendix B - Study Participant Invitation Email

Hi (participant name),

I am in the process of completing my master's degree program. My thesis research is about extension agent retention for K-State Research and Extension. I am hosting individual interviews with agents who have been employed with K-State Research and Extension for five years or more. I will be collecting data about your experience as an extension agent.

The interviews will be conducted in person. I will be in your area (insert dates) and hope you will consider participating in an in-person interview on (insert date(s)) at (insert timeframe). I will be hosting interviews at (insert location). The interview will be approximately one hour. If participating in an in-person interview does not work with your schedule, I am happy to find a time to host a recorded Zoom interview.

Prior to participating in the interview, I will be sending you an IRB informed consent form to complete.

Please confirm your willingness to participate by (insert date).

Thank you.

Kaitlyn Peine

Appendix C - IRB Approval

Proposal Number IRB-11493

TO: Jason Ellis
Communications & Ag Education
Manhattan, KS 66506

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 02/16/2023

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Extension Agent Retention: Practices That Improve Job Satisfaction and Agent Longevity."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

Approval date: 2/16/2023
Expiration date: 2/15/2026

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:
No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 02/16/2023 1:22 PM ET

Appendix D - Coding Guide

| Name | Description |
|--|---|
| Relationships with supervisors | |
| Local unit | The extension office the agent works in. |
| Local unit director | A director with administrative and supervisory responsibilities in a local unit. |
| Regional director | A regional director with supervisory responsibilities for multiple local units. |
| Positive relationship | An agent and director relationship that includes open communication, mutual respect, and trust. |
| Agent and director coaching | When a director intentionally plans regularly occurring coaching sessions to support agent growth and success. |
| Dysfunctional relationship | An agent and director relationship that is lacking communication. The director is unengaged and does not recognize agent success. |
| Poor leadership | A director lacking leadership skills and misusing the influence of their position. |
| Relationships with extension council boards | |
| Co-governance | Supervision and administrative support provided by both KSRE administration and local extension council boards. |
| Extension council board | An elected or appointed board who provides supervision for local extension unit operations. |
| Supportive board members | Board members who are advocates for extension. Connect extension staff with community partners and expand the reach of extension audiences. |
| Board member bias | Situations where a board member shows bias to a program area or a certain staff member. |
| Access to professional development | |
| Professional development | A training or learning experience that adds to the professional competencies of a staff person. |
| Equitable access | The opportunity for agents to have a similar level of access to participate in professional development. |

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Funding | The financial support an extension council board has to pay for agent professional development. |
| Organizational culture | |
| Organizational culture | A set of shared values about standards for what is expected and valued within an organization. |
| Shared values | A mutual understanding and loyalty to the local unit's mission and commitment to serving the local community. |
| Director influence | The effect a director has on the organizational culture of their local unit. |
| Agent job responsibilities | Agent expectations communicated from local extension council boards and KSRE administration. |
| Organizational loyalty | |
| Organizational loyalty | The type of commitment an agent has to KSRE. |
| Affective commitment | A commitment to stay with KSRE because the agent loves their work and has a passion for what they do. |
| Continuance commitment | A decision to stay with KSRE because of the fear of missing out on a job-related benefit due to career separation |
| Normative commitment | An agent's obligation to remain with KSRE, disregarding agent's job satisfaction |
| Work practices | |
| Celebrating success | The intentional recognition of agent success. |
| Professional scheduling | A KSRE policy and practice that allows agents to take time to take care of personal matters away from the office. |
| Professional creativity | The flexibility for agents to evolve in their work practices to meet the needs of their local communities. |
| Building relationships | Establishing a respectful and collaborative relationship with KSRE colleagues and community partners. |
| Managing expectations | Understanding and prioritizing expectations from board members, KSRE administration, and local communities. |