

AGENT TURNOVER IN OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to determine the reasons why agents voluntarily leave Ohio State University Extension. Between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994, 67 county agents voluntarily left OSU Extension. The specific objectives of the study were to: a) describe county agents who voluntarily left OSU Extension based on selected characteristics and b) determine the percentage of county agents who voluntarily left OSU Extension due to organizational, individual work-related, and individual non-work related factors. Based upon the findings of the study, agents who voluntarily leave OSU Extension are most likely to be Caucasian females, in their early thirties holding a Master's degree who are married with no children. They are also more likely to be in a non-tenure track position in a single county working in the 4-H program area. Furthermore, the results of this study reveal county agents are most likely to leave OSU Extension because of other priorities in their lives, other job offers, insufficient pay for the amount of work performed, family obligations, too many late night meetings, too many work responsibilities, and attraction to more money elsewhere.

Turnover refers to the voluntary termination of participation in employment for an organization, excluding retirement or pressured voluntary withdrawal, by an individual who received monetary compensation from the organization (Rossano, 1985). The causes of turnover in organizations are generally attributed to four classes of determinants (Mobley, 1982). The first determinant is comprised of external factors, such as the availability of jobs and unemployment levels. Organizational factors, such as supervisory style, pay, job content, reward system, and work environment comprise the second determinant. Individual factors make up the last two classes of determinants. Individual factors are related to turnover in two ways: first, individual non-work related factors, such as a lack of job autonomy or the work not challenging or interesting to the employee (Mobley, 1982).

As in any organization, Ohio State University Extension (OSUE) can be affected by employee

turnover. The impact of turnover is especially apparent in educational organizations like Extension, where the bulk of the organizational production system is dependent upon its employees (Clark, 1981). OSU Extension agents play an important role in introducing and developing educational programs at the county level where most citizens directly benefit from Extension programs. Extension agents develop and adapt programs to assist local people in identifying and solving problems. Furthermore, the most effective programs are developed after the professional grasps an understanding of the needs and resources of the local community.

When county Extension agents voluntarily leave their positions, an interruption in the local Extension programming is likely to occur. Even if the position is filled quickly, the replacement agent will need time to become familiar with the local situation to be effective. Agent turnover often times results in

disrupted programming efforts while the new agent is being selected and undergoes an acclimation period to the local situation.

Besides the reduction of organizational effectiveness, scarce resources are also used in selecting and training new Extension personnel. Administrative effort is necessary for proper recruitment, selection, and training of replacement agents. When financial resources are used for dealing with the consequences of turnover, those costs reduce the amount of available resources to accomplish the primary mission of the organization—the delivery of educational programs (Clark, 1981).

Between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994, 67 county agents voluntarily left OSU Extension. This study was designed to investigate the reasons for county agent turnover and how they might be classified according to three categories of determinants: a) organizational; b) individual work-related factors; and, c) individual non-work related factors.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons why county agents in all program areas voluntarily left OSU Extension. The following objectives were developed to guide the study:

1. describe county agents who voluntarily left OSU Extension between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994 based on 21 selected personal and professional characteristics at the time of turnover.
2. determine the percentage of county agents who voluntarily left OSU Extension between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994 due to organizational, individual work-related, and individual non-work related factors.

Methodology

Population and Sample

A descriptive design was used in this study. The population of the study consisted of all OSU Extension county agents who voluntarily left the organization between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994. Sixty-seven agents made up the total population of this census study.

Instrumentation

The research instrument, which was created by the researcher, was a mail questionnaire that consisted of four sections. The first three sections focused on organizational, individual work-related, and individual non-work related factors.

Each of the items in the three sections were rated on a Likert scale from one to five. If the former agent circled the number 1, then he/she was indicating that the statement definitely did not describe a reason why he/she left OSU Extension. On the other end of the scale, a rating of five indicated that the statement definitely described a reason why the respondent left OSU Extension.

The final section of the instrument gave the former agents an opportunity to list the main reason they left OSU Extension. Space was also provided for agents to write additional comments about why they left OSU Extension.

Content validity of the instrument was established by a panel of experts. The following points were examined by the panelists: item content and clarity, wording, length of the instrument, format, and overall appearance. In addition, the instrument was field tested by seven Extension agents who were presently working in OSU Extension.

For reliability purposes, the instrument was pilot tested by surveying agents currently employed by OSU Extension who had left another organization prior to coming to OSU Extension (n=18). Test re-test procedures were used to determine the reliability for Parts I, II, and III of the instrument. When perfect matches were considered, the percent agreement for the two administrations of the pilot instrument had an overall average of 74 percent. When matches within one scale number deviation were considered, the percent agreement for the two administrations of the pilot instrument averaged 94 percent.

Data Collection

Demographic data were collected from the personnel files of OSU Extension, rather than from respondents, in an attempt to reduce measurement error. This second instrument was a data gathering form. The instrument collected data on selected personal and professional characteristics available in the personnel files.

The questionnaire packet was mailed to all subjects on January 6, 1995. The final deadline for data collection was February 9, 1995. Sixty-one of the total 67 questionnaires were returned (91%). The six non-respondents were compared with the respondents on selected demographic characteristics (i.e., age, salary, and years in OSU Extension). No statistical significant difference was found between respondents and non-respondents.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data including means, medians, standard deviations, percentages, and frequencies. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS/Windows 6.1) computer program obtained from The Ohio State University.

Summary of Findings

Objective 1: To describe county agents who voluntarily left OSU Extension on personal and professional characteristics.

The mean age of the county agents was 32 years at the time of turnover with 66 percent being female and 90 percent Caucasian. Sixty-four percent of the former agents were married when they left OSU Extension. Seventy-nine percent were involved in a committal relationship, and 38 percent had children at the time of turnover. Fifty-seven percent of the former county agents possessed a Master's degree, with 24 percent majoring in Home Economics. Fifty-four percent of the subjects had non-faculty status, and 98 percent did not have tenure at the time of turnover. Almost half (49%) of the agents were in the program area of 4-H/Youth Development when they left the organization.

Examination of other demographic factors indicated 74 percent of the former agents had received medium performance ratings. The average number of years the former agents had worked in OSU Extension was three and a half years, while 57 percent of the subjects said that OSU Extension was their first career choice, and 74 percent of the former agents had worked in single county positions. Further inspection revealed nine months was the average amount of time the former agents thought about leaving the organization prior to actually doing so. Seventy percent of the subjects have had only one job since leaving OSU Extension, and 92 percent are currently employed. The types of jobs the former agents currently hold vary, with 27% as teachers in the public schools. The average salary of the former agents when they worked for OSU Extension was \$24,790.

Objective 2: To determine the percentage of county agents who voluntarily left OSU Extension due to organizational, individual work-related, and individual non-work related factors.

The organizational factors that received the highest number of responses in the “Definitely” and “Great Extent” categories, as reasons why agents left the organization, included insufficient pay for the amount of work performed, too many work responsibilities, too many requirements for advancement, and a lack of recognition for a job well done.

Individual work-related factors that received the highest number of responses in the “Definitely” and “Great Extent” categories included other priorities in life, too many late night meetings, and the values of the organization and personal values being in conflict.

The individual non-work related factors that received the highest number of responses in the “Definitely” and “Great Extent” categories included receiving another job offer, family obligations, being attracted to more money elsewhere, work conflicting with personal responsibilities, and not having enough time for developing and/or maintaining personal relationships.

The responses to the open-ended question “What is the main reason why you left OSU Extension?” included all three factors of voluntary turnover addressed in this study. The most common reason stated for leaving the organization was due to a career change or another job offer which is an individual non-work related factor. Excessive time and job requirements (including evening and weekend obligations) was the second most commonly stated reason, which is individual work-related in nature. Family responsibilities, an individual non-work related factor, followed as the next most frequently cited reason for turnover. Lack of a competitive salary, an organizational factor, was also cited as a reason for leaving the organization.

The additional comments about why agents left OSU Extension also illustrated that all three of the factors of voluntary turnover were instrumental in

the former agents’ decisions to leave OSU Extension. Excessive time and job requirements, individual work-related factors, were the most common reasons for leaving the organization, followed by family responsibilities, a non-work related factor, and changing/unclear policies and politics, which is an organizational factor. Money, an organizational factor, was the next most commonly shared comment.

Conclusions/Implications

Based upon the findings of the study, the researcher concludes that agents who voluntarily leave OSU Extension are typically Caucasian females, in their early thirties holding a Master’s degree and are married with no children. Agents who voluntarily leave the organization are also more likely to be in a non-tenure track position in a single county working in the 4-H program area. Upon leaving the organization, former agents are likely to obtain a public school teaching position.

The findings of the study are congruent with the information found in the literature relative to employee turnover. Pay is addressed in the literature as an organizational factor related to job turnover. Mobley (1982) indicated a direct relationship between pay levels and turnover rates. In this study, low pay was found to be a reason why the former agents left their positions in OSU Extension. Gavin (1990) also cited low pay and decreased benefits as leading contributors to personnel loss. Many agents indicated that by leaving OSU Extension, they were able to make more money and work less hours. The individual work-related factors of excessive time requirements and late meetings were found to be key reasons why the former agents left their former positions. Balfour & Neff (1993) indicated that overtime hours were one of the key variables contributing to voluntary turnover. Family responsibilities, an individual non-work related factor, is also discussed in the literature concerning turnover. Muchinsky & Tuttle (1979) found a positive relationship between

family responsibility and turnover. Turnover associated with family obligations is also dictated by whether or not the employee is the primary wage earner in the family. The findings of this study show that former agents repeatedly gave family commitments and responsibilities as major reasons for leaving OSU Extension.

Demographic characteristics associated with voluntary turnover have been addressed in the literature (Mobley et. al, 1979; Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Porter & Steers, 1973; Price 1977) indicating that younger employees are more likely to leave their jobs and younger employees may have more entry level job opportunities and fewer family responsibilities which would make their job mobility less complicated. In this study, the majority of the former agents who voluntarily left the organization were in their early thirties.

Based upon the results of this study, the researcher concludes that county agents are most likely to leave OSU Extension because of other priorities in their lives, another job offer, insufficient pay for the amount of work performed, family obligations, too many late night meetings, too many work responsibilities, attracted to more money elsewhere, conflicts with personal responsibilities, no time for personal relationships, too many requirements for advancement, conflict with values, and lack of recognition for a job well done.

Figure 1 illustrates the causes of turnover based upon the findings of the study. As illustrated in the model, OSU Extension agents are voluntarily leaving the organization due to a variety of organizational, individual work, and individual non-work related factors.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based upon the findings and conclusions of the study:

1. OSU Extension administrators at the state, district, and local levels should address the problems of excessive work and time requirements of county agents. Excessive night and weekend meetings were commonly cited as a reason for voluntary turnover among the former agents. The nature of the county position and its probability for success are dependent on the commitment of the agent to attend to such obligations. To deal with the agents' frustrations, however, the organization should reward the agents with higher pay for a job well done or additional professional development opportunities. Perhaps an awards program for exceptional agents could be considered.
2. OSU Extension administrators should address issues dealing with pay. The findings of this study and the literature show that lack of a competitive salary is a major reason for voluntary turnover. The former agents consistently indicated that private industry pays higher salaries for similar positions. Salaries should be adjusted to compensate the agents for the amount of work performed and should be comparable to positions in the public and private sectors.

Recommendations for Further Study

1. OSU Extension should conduct a study to determine an acceptable annual turnover rate based on turnover cost to the organization. This study will help OSU Extension to determine where the organization stands in terms of turnover and identify the costs of replacing a county agent.
2. OSU Extension should conduct a comparison study with an Extension organization of comparable size and mission. This study will give the organization a benchmark as well as an awareness of the norms within other state Extension organizations.

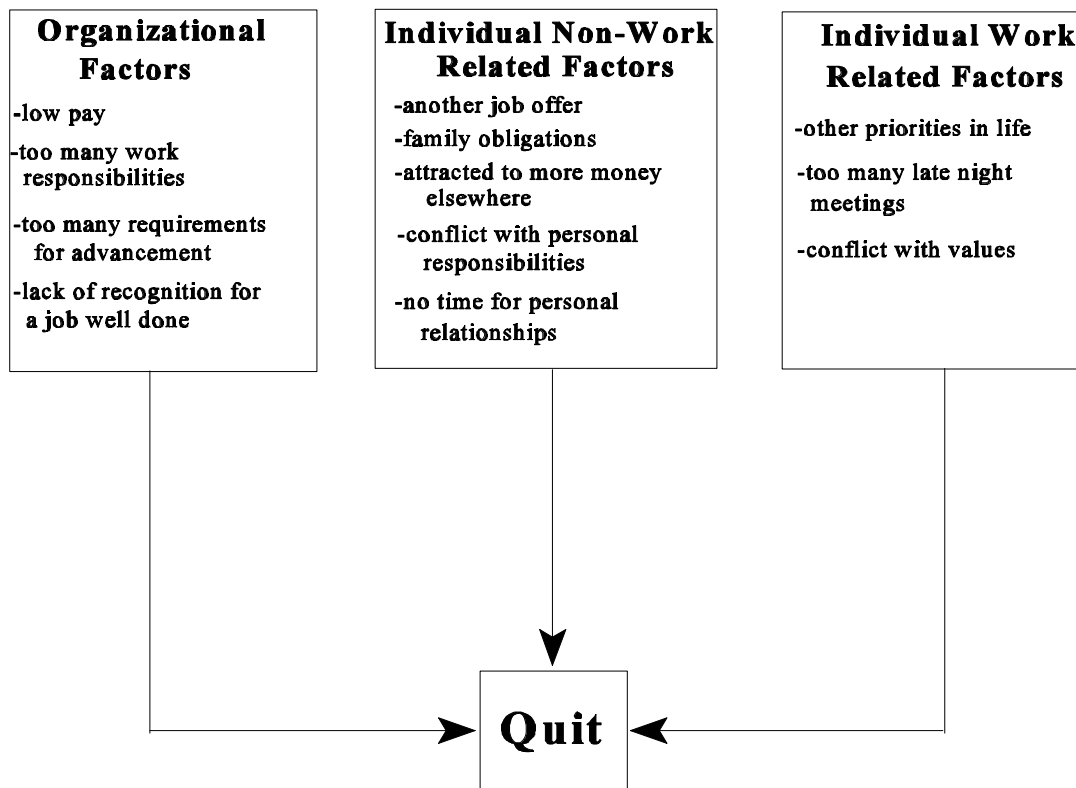


Figure 1. A Model of Voluntary Turnover of OSU Extension Agents

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