Employee Job Autonomy and Control in a Restructured Extension Organization

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Abstract

This descriptive cross sectional census study identified the perceptions of Extension and Outreach employees of Iowa State University in the United States about job autonomy and control after two years of a major restructuring. Employees perceived autonomy and control over expressing views and ideas about their work and spending time on the job but perceived little influence over budget allocations and shaping organizational strategies. They felt administrators and external funding sources influenced programming. They perceived contributing most to program implementation and marketing. The findings from this study have implications for operations and programming in Extension and other organizational settings.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States economic recession that began in 2007 and the subsequent financial crisis of 2008 left many public organizations reassessing their financial foundations and value proposition. In response, these organizations employed various strategies to maintain their services (Holz-Clause *et al.*, 2012). Organizational restructuring, one strategy adopted during difficult financial times, has become an important strategic response to budget cuts (McKinley & Scherer, 2000). This strategy has been utilized in the Cooperative Extension System (CES) within the United States, as state and federal budgets have been declining in relative terms. Many CESs have restructured their services in the past 20 years with varying degrees of success (Ahmed and Morse, 2010; Bartholomew and Smith, 1990; Hutchins, 1992; Jayaratne and Gamon, 1998; Rockwell *et al.,* 1993; Schafer, 2006; Schmitt and Bartholomay, 2009; Suvedi *et al.*, 2000; Tondl, 1991).

A recent example of restructuring is a CES at Iowa State University. Financial realities required a plan that addressed revenue reductions while maintaining an orderly reduction to staff and consistent delivery of programs. The goal was a more efficient administrative structure. The argument was presented that it was appropriate to move from the anachronistic geographically focused structure to an issues-based one. The result was a regional administrative model with far more local/county control and responsibility. The main components of the regional model included (1) elimination of the five area administrative positions and associated office and staffs, (2) elimination of all 100 county extension education director positions, (3) creation of 20 new Extension regions with 20 regional directors (REEDs) overseeing the operations and programming of group of counties in the region, and (4) reduction of the five main Extension programs to three by combining 4-H Youth Development with the Families program area and Community Economic Development program area with the Business & Industry program area. This restructuring resulted in layoffs while concurrently changing work jurisdictions and new partnerships for program implementation. This meant a major realignment of employees and a disorienting effect on the organization. McKinley and Scherer (2000) stated that organizational restructuring of any kind results in both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes, and organizations should consider the effects of restructuring on job performance of its employees (Jayaratne & Gamon, 1998). It is only through subsequent assessment that we understand the accuracy of what was anticipated or the nuance of what was not.

Research on impact of organizational restructuring on employees shows both positive and negative outcomes, but organizational restructuring by itself is not good or bad (McKinley and Scherer, 2000). Schmitt and Bartholomay (2009) found that regionalization of Extension resulted in improved work attributes of Minnesota Extension employees. Similar results were recorded by Ahmed and Morse (2010). However, Jayaratne and Gamon (1998) found that restructuring Extension in Illinois resulted in increased anxiety levels in employees. Similarly, McKinley and Scherer (2000) stated that organizational restructuring may lead to a sense of disorder in the organization and a bifurcation between managers and other employees. These results tend to only inform us that the outcomes are uncertain since the underlying circumstances of leadership, staff demographics, client perceptions, etc. are among the many variables.

Of the various factors that contribute to organizational success, job autonomy and control are important for sustaining and improving employee contribution to the organization. Kroth and Puets (2011) stated that job autonomy is one of the required factors for creating a supportive work environment. Similarly, Extension educators identified lack of job autonomy and control as a major challenge to their work (Kuetelik *et al.*, 2002). Schmitt and Bartholomay (2009) found that regional educators perceived a significant gain in their autonomy whereas local educators perceived no such difference as a result of the regionalization of Extension services. This study identified the perceptions of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

employees about three aspects related to their job autonomy and control after working in a re-structured regional model for two years. The purpose was to create a baseline that can be used in the future to gauge employee perceptions about job autonomy and control.

Objectives of the Study

The study had three specific objectives:

1- Identify the perceptions of employees about their job autonomy and control.

2- Identify the perceptions of employees about the influence different entities have on Extension and Outreach programming.

3- Identify the perceptions of employees regarding their contribution to organizational success or decline.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional census survey was used for this study. The population consisted of all 956 paid employees working for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, which included county-based employees and university paid faculty and staff both located on campus and in the county offices. The Institutional Review Board at the Iowa State University approved this study. An electronic questionnaire developed using SurveyMonkey® was employed for this study. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers and validated for face and content validity by an expert panel consisting of select leadership team members of the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with randomly selected employees, and the data were used to establish the reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's α was computed from the pilot test data and values of 0.929, 0.961, and 0.962 were reported for the three sections, respectively indicating 'excellent' reliability (George & Mallery, 2003). The participants were emailed the questionnaire, including an introductory message informing them of the purpose of the study. This introductory email indicated that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Par-

ticipants' consent for the study was assumed if they filled out and returned the questionnaires. After that, a total of three follow-ups (Dillman, 2007) were sent weekly.

A four point Likert-type scale was used for all three sections of the survey. There were 8 (Section 1: perceptions about job autonomy and control), 14 (Section 2: perceptions about influence of different entities on programming), and 14 (Section 3: perceptions about their contribution to organizational success or decline) items under each section, respectively. For measuring the perceptions about job autonomy and control and the perceived contribution to organizational success or decline the scale used was from 1 (None) to 4 (Significant); 1 (No influence) to 4 (Significant influence) was used for measuring the perceived influence of different entities on programming. A four-point scale was employed so employees take either a positive or a negative stance, and not stay undecided about any statement in the questionnaire, as this study was conducted to create a baseline that can be used in the future to gauge employee perceptions about job autonomy and control.

Data were analyzed using PASW® Statistics 18. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the data analysis. Frequencies (f), mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and percentages (%) were used for analyzing the perceptions and demographic information of the participants. An independent samples t-test was used to test for any statistically significant differences between early and late respondents. Early respondents were operationally defined as those participants who responded to the first mailing and the first follow-up, and those who responded after that were considered as late respondents.

RESULTS

Four hundred fifty-four employees responded to the survey for a response rate of 47.5%. A majority were female (70.3%). Forty-one percent of the employees were based in counties followed by 32.2% on campus and 26.8% in field offices. The employees had a

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Table 1: Perceptions of Employees Regarding Their Job Autonomy and Control

Statement related to job autonomy and control	f				M	SD	N
	1	2	3	4			
To what degree do you comfortable expressing ideas and views about your work	6	66	234	141	3.14	0.70	447
To what degree you feel you have control over the time you spend on your job	3	86	215	140	3.10	0.72	444
To what degree do you have control to make decisions about your work	2	70	269	104	3.06	0.63	445
To what degree do you feel you can shape the organization's programming strategies	56	191	162	34	2.89	0.80	443
To what degree do you feel you contribute to Extension's fiscal health	40	142	198	61	2.63	0.83	441
To what degree do you feel you have control of the use of the money you raise	79	137	155	58	2.44	0.94	429
To what degree do you feel you can shape the organization's operational strategies	90	232	105	19	2.11	0.77	446
To what degree do you feel you have control over Extension budget allocations	217	182	32	11	1.63	0.72	442

Note. 1 = None, 2 = Little, 3 = Good, 4 = Significant

wide range of work experience with 29.6% more than 20 years followed by 21% with 3-5 years, 16.7% with 1-2 years, 16.7% with 6-10 years and 16% with 11-20 years of work experience.

Objective 1: **Identify the Perceptions of Employees about their Job Autonomy and Control**

Employees clearly articulated three areas of their work where they perceive significant autonomy and control: 1) expressing ideas and views about their work, 2) spending time on the job, and 3) making decisions about their work. They also indicated that they felt little autonomy or control over: 1) budget allocations and 2) shaping the organization's operational strategies (Table 1).

Objective 2: **Identify the Perceptions of Employees about the Influence Different Entities Have On Extension and Outreach Programming**

Employees perceived program directors to be

Table 2: Perceptions of Employees about the Influence of Different Entities on Extension and Outreach Programming

Entities	f				M	SD	N
	1	2	3	4			
Program Directors	13	58	216	137	3.12	0.75	424
External Funding Sources	10	93	185	140	3.06	0.79	428
Campus faculty/staff	17	97	191	126	2.98	0.82	431
Field Specialists	8	89	245	89	2.96	0.69	431
Vice President of Extension and Outreach	26	100	159	134	2.95	0.89	419
Clients	7	123	236	66	2.83	0.69	432
Key Constituency Groups	17	112	209	74	2.82	0.76	412
Programmatic Partners	10	112	235	56	2.81	0.68	413
County Staff	19	146	199	63	2.71	0.76	427
County Extension Councils	11	171	188	60	2.69	0.73	430
USDA	30	149	157	72	2.66	0.85	408
Regional Extension Education Directors (REED)	32	146	192	52	2.62	0.79	422
ISU Provost	46	158	124	85	2.60	0.93	413
ISU President	45	165	122	82	2.58	0.92	414

Note. 1 = No influence, 2 = Little influence, 3 = Good influence, 4 = Significant influence

Table 3: Perceptions of Employees Regarding Their Contribution to Organizational Success or Decline

Item	f				M	SD	N
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**			
Program implementation	30	72	181	120	2.97	0.88	403
Marketing programs	23	90	186	105	2.92	0.84	404
Marketing the organization	15	96	198	96	2.92	0.78	405
Network development	26	100	183	91	2.84	0.84	400
Participating in professional development	22	95	218	71	2.83	0.77	406
Partnership development	36	83	198	87	2.83	0.86	404
Program development	45	80	191	86	2.79	0.90	402
Sharing program impacts	37	108	196	59	2.69	0.83	400
Evaluating programming	38	117	190	61	2.67	0.84	406
Using program delivery innovations	32	114	190	53	2.67	0.81	389
Conducting program needs assessments	46	116	185	58	2.62	0.86	405
Using program content innovations	37	126	182	46	2.60	0.81	391
Obtaining contracts, grants, fees, gifts	61	122	148	75	2.58	0.95	406
Personnel recruitment	78	151	126	47	2.35	0.92	402

Note. 1 = None, 2 = Little, 3 = Good, 4 = Significant

the most influential on Extension and Outreach programming followed by external funding sources. They perceived university administrators other than Vice President of Extension and Outreach to be the least influential entities in programming (Table 2).

Objective 3: **Identify the Perceptions of Employees regarding Their Contribution to Organizational Success or Decline**

Employees perceived themselves contributing positively to program implementation followed by marketing programs and the organization. On the contrary, employees felt they contributed the least towards personnel recruitment and in obtaining contracts, grants, fees and gifts for the organization (Table 3).

Statistically significant differences existed between early and late respondents for the variables 'County Extension Councils,' 'Regional Extension Education Directors' and 'Vice President of Extension and Outreach' under the entities influencing programming, and "using program content innovations' under self-contribution to organizational success or decline at 0.05 level of significance. Late respondents recorded higher mean perception scores than the early respondents on these four variables. The findings were not generalized to the total population on these four variables.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Three conclusions were drawn based on the findings from each of the three objectives of this study. First, the employees feel autonomy and control over their programming but when it comes to influencing budget and organizational strategies, they do not feel empowered. Administration should consider engaging employees more in these organizational matters.

Secondly, employees feel program directors and external funding sources to be the major entities influencing Extension and Outreach programming. Further, employees do not yet understand the role of the 20 regional directors (REEDs) in the newly restructured organization. The REED's position has been evolving and changing the past two years, as the members of the organization come to define their roles and responsibilities, including elected county extension council members and county-paid staff. The REEDs continue to define their role and job descriptions. REEDs should communicate with constituents and colleagues about what they do to ensure they are meeting the organizational and client needs.

Third, employees were contributing more to program implementation and marketing compared to other extension educational

processes. They were not contributing on the same level to processes such as evaluating programs and conducting needs assessments which are critical for continued programs implementation and continuation. Reasons for this need to be explored and addressed.

Overall, the findings revealed that employees don't feel equally empowered and contribute the same to all aspects related to Extension operations and programming. Extension administrators should consider these factors while making strategic decisions, and design programs accordingly. The findings may also have implications for designing professional development programs for employees. Many public Extension systems worldwide are facing competition from private Extension providers (Bennett, 1996) and reduced public funding (Bennett, 1996; Evans-Brown, 2012; Schindler, 2011; South Dakota State University Extension, 2011). The results from this study and the regional model may have implications for such countries. The results are equally applicable to any organizational setting outside of Extension.

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