

EFFECTS OF RESTRUCTURING ON THE JOB PERFORMANCE OF EXTENSION EDUCATORS: IMPLICATIONS FOR IN-SERVICE TRAINING

K.S. U. Jayaratne, Graduate Student
Iowa State University

Julia Gamon, Professor
Iowa State University

Abstract

As states restructure their extension organizations, they need to consider how the changes affect job performance of their reappointed staff out in the field. When Illinois restructured in 1991, reappointed staff faced four changes: changes in subject matter, geographic service area, primary contact group, and targeted clientele. This study generally found negative correlations among job performance and changes in primary contact group and targeted clientele. After direct effects of the four changes were separated out, there were indirect effects of the "anxiety level just after the reappointment" on job performance. Recommendations from this study can be useful for planning counseling and/or in-service training programs for staff when restructuring is considered.

A number of organizations have restructured in the last decade and more are likely to do so. Factors that force restructuring include funding crises, societal change, changes in client groups, and technological innovations. Restructuring brings change to an organization. Dalziel and Schoonover (1988) defined this change as "a planned or unplanned response of an organization to pressures" (pp. 10- 12) and stated that it is often a prerequisite for organizational survival. "Restructuring can be conceptualized as change along one or more of three dimensions: assets, capital structure, or management" (Bowman & Singh, 1990, p. 9). This last change is the common restructuring that can take place in a non-profit, service organization such as the Cooperative Extension Service (CES). Management restructuring is designed to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the personnel resources through significant changes in organizational structure. Muller (1990) defined organizational restructuring as a planned change due to external or internal pressures. As the world rapidly changes, organizations also change to respond to their environments and to assure their continuity.

If restructuring is a planned change, we should know how to direct these changes to achieve desired results, such as raising the organization's efficiency, productivity, and quality of service. Generally, results are closely related to the performance levels of the members in an organization. Therefore, a better understanding of employees' work, attitudes, and behavior during an organizational change is imperative to help extension specialists plan educational programs that will alleviate possible negative effects of organizational changes on job performance. The literature indicates that few studies have attempted to identify this kind of special training need (Radhakrishna & Xu, 1997). In particular, little attention has been paid to employee attitudes and behavior during restructuring of service organizations such as the Cooperative Extension Service. The studies that do exist have focused on job satisfaction and turnover (Rousan & Henderson, 1996). It is important to analyze the relationship between the effects of structural changes and job performance and to suggest special training needs for extension educators.

Due to budget slashes and changes in societal

needs, the Illinois CES reorganized itself by downsizing and redeploying the staff (CES 2000, 1990). As a result of this structural change, the county extension advisor positions were abolished, and most people who were in these positions were re-employed by the CES for the newly created extension educator positions and the unit leader positions. The subject matter of the county extension advisor was broad and general, and his/her service area was normally limited to one county. In contrast, extension educators were supposed to work in a very specialized subject area while serving the needs of people in a larger geographic area. The general public was the primary contact group of the county extension advisor, but the unit staff (the staff attached to the smallest, most localized administrative and programming office of the CES) was the primary contact group of the extension educator; thus, restructuring changed the primary contact group. Further, this restructuring expanded the population that the CES serves by refocusing the mission.

The structural change demanded that extension educators change the dimensions of their subject area (i.e., narrow the breadth and increase the depth of knowledge in their focused subject area). The change also required them to expand their geographic area, change the primary contact group, and redefine their target clients.

Due to structural changes, an organization's existing job positions may change (Nadler, 1983). Moreover, Fox (1979) found that uncertainty associated with structural change can affect employees' anxiety levels. When current employees are assigned to new positions, their job performance can be affected by the changes inherent in a new position (direct effect) and the changes in the employees' anxiety levels over the new position (indirect effect). Because these effects were not known, it was necessary to undertake the study.

Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this study was to ascertain how direct and indirect effects of structural change related to the job performance of reappointed extension educators in restructured positions. The specific objective of this study was to answer the following research questions:

Direct effects: What was the relationship between extension educators' job performance and (a) change of subject matter area, (b) expansion of geographic service area, (c) change in primary contact group, and (d) redefinition of target clients?

Indirect effects: What was the relationship between extension educators' job performance and their levels of anxiety just before and after reappointment?

Methodology

This was a correlational research study with six independent variables, one dependent variable, and four moderator variables. Four of the independent variables were direct effects (role changes) and two were indirect effects (anxiety levels). Extension educators' self-reported job performance was the dependent variable in this study. The study investigated how structural change affected the job performance of reassigned employees. It focused specifically on the early part of the transition when reassigned employees had not yet adequately interacted with their supervisors or fellow workers. Supervisors, peers, and clientele were not asked to measure performance levels in this study because, according to Rothstein (1990), to obtain a reliable measure, the rater should know the ratee for at least twelve months prior to the rating.

Several resources (McEvoy & Cascio, 1989; Howard, 1986; Schmidt, Outerbridge & Hunter, 1986; Baird, 1976) found that age, level of education, years of experience, and level of job

satisfaction could have some moderating effects on the level of job performance. Therefore, these factors were taken into account as the moderator variables in this study.

The survey instrument was pretested with 3% of the study sample to establish validity and reliability. The study used a self-reported format, a questionnaire that was mailed to all 117 reappointed extension educators of the restructured Illinois CES. After one follow-up, 107 persons (91%) responded. Because of the high response rate and the use of a population rather than a sample, no additional follow-up was attempted. The total number of usable responses was 95, which was 81% of the sample.

Instrumentation

The existing literature (Lane & Herriot, 1990) indicates that self-ratings are relevant because an individual's self-perceptions are important determinants of his/her behavior, and also because the self-rater probably has more information about his/her own behavior than anyone else.

Therefore, in this study, extension educators' self-reported level of job performance - the dependent variable - was measured using different functions of their jobs. The instrument used contained 12 job activities, such as initiating extension programs and evaluating extension programs, that extension educators are supposed to perform in their current position. The instrument obtained the self-reported levels of performance in 12 job activities on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 for "very dissatisfied" to 5 for "very satisfied." The reliability coefficient of this scale was 0.83.

The first four independent variables referred to the direct effects of the four major areas of structural change: subject matter, geographic area, primary contact group, and target clientele. These four independent variables were measured using four separate instruments. Each of these

instruments consisted of three statements on the possible change effects experienced in relation to each of the four areas of change. The respondents were asked how frequently they had experienced each of these possible situations on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 "never experienced" to 5 for "experienced it all the time." Thus, higher scores on these measurements represented higher levels of change effects. Reliability coefficient values of these four scales ranged from 0.53 to 0.83.

The last two independent variables referred to the anxiety levels of the extension educators at two different stages. These anxiety levels were measured using the Six-Item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory developed by Marteau and Bekker (1992), who reported reliability coefficients ranging from .82 to .91. Responses to each item of this inventory ranged from "not at all" (1) to "very much so" (4). Scores could range from 6 to 24, with higher scores reflecting more anxiety.

Moderator variables - age and experience - were directly recorded in years. Educational qualification was coded as 1 for basic degree, 2 for master's degree, and 3 for doctoral degree. The level of job satisfaction was obtained on a five-point scale that ranged from 1 for "very dissatisfied" to 5 for "very satisfied."

Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to ascertain the relationship between the structural change effects and the perceived levels of job performance. Multiple regression analysis partialled out the effects of moderator variables to obtain the real effects of the six independent variables on the job performance of extension educators.

Findings

A majority of the respondents (67%) were

between 33 and 46 years of age. The gender distribution of this population was slightly skewed toward females, 55% of the population. About 82% of the respondents had a master's degree and 3% had a doctoral degree. Before the respondents were reappointed in their newly created extension educator positions, 85% had worked as either an extension adviser (Agriculture), extension adviser (Home Economics), or extension adviser (Youth & 4H). The majority (80%) of the respondents had served in extension for over 11 years. Restructuring of the Illinois CES took place in Fall 1991; 98% of the respondents reported they had over seven months of experience in the newly created extension educator positions by the time this study was undertaken. Mean levels of job satisfaction were relatively high (4.1 on a 5-point scale).

Table 1 shows the means of the independent

Table 1. Summary of Scores for Direct Effects and Indirect Effects and Self-Perceived Levels of Job Performance (n = 95)

Variable	Possible range	Mean	SD
<u>Direct effects</u> ^a			
Change of subject area	3 - 15	6.96	3.36
Expansion of the service area	3 - 15	9.82	2.80
Change of primary contact group	3 - 15	8.58	2.59
Redefinition of the target clients	3 - 15	8.56	2.97
<u>Indirect effects</u> ^a			
Level of anxiety just before reappointment	6 - 24	17.03	4.69
Level of anxiety just after reappointment	6 - 24	13.40	4.28
<u>Dependent variable</u> ^b			
Job performance	12 - 60	41.82	7.49

Note. ^a Higher the value, higher the effects, ^b Higher the value, higher the job performance

Partial Correlation Coefficients

Table 2 shows the partial correlation coefficients between each of the independent variables and the job performance, after partialing

and dependent variables. Each individual scale that measures the direct effects consisted of three items with a score ranging from 3 to 15. The highest mean value was reported for the effects of the expansion of the geographic service area. The lowest mean value was reported for the effects of the change of subject area. All of these mean values were slightly above the midpoint of the scale. This implies that there were considerably high perceived effects of structural changes on reappointed employees.

The means of extension educators' anxiety before and after reappointment were skewed toward the upper values of the six-item scale. The mean value of the extension educators' job performance was 41.82; it was slightly above the mid-point of the scale (Table 1).

out the effects of moderator variables.

The partial correlations between job performance and "effects of redefining the target clients" and "effects of the change of primary

contact group” were relatively strong, negative, and highly significant. This indicated that these two independent variables had considerable negative effects on the job performance. The

correlation between job performance and “effects of the expansion of the geographic service area,” and “effects of the change of subject area” were not significant.

Table 2. Partial Correlation Coefficients for Independent Variables and Job Performance (Controlled for the Moderator Variables) (n = 95)

Independent variable	Job performance
<u>Direct effects</u>	
Effects of the change of subject area	-0.20
Effects of the expansion of the Service area	-0.18
Effects of the change of primary contact group	-0.27**
Effects of redefinition of the target clients	-0.28***
Anxiety just before reappointment	-0.00
Anxiety just after reappointment	-0.25**

*p < .05., **p < .01

The correlation between “anxiety just after reappointment in the new position” and job performance was negative, and significant. The anxiety just before reappointment of the extension educators was very high. But, the correlation between “the level of extension educators’ anxiety just before reappointment” and their job performance was non-existent. It indicates that extension educators’ anxiety just before reappointment had no effect on their subsequent job performance.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the partial correlation analysis, it can be inferred that the job performance of extension educators was negatively affected by two direct effects: namely, the effects of the change of the primary contact group and the effects of redefining the target clients. These two effects were mainly associated with changes in the social environment and with social interactions of the extension educators. Therefore, it can be concluded that change in employees’ social

environment can greatly impact job performance.

The extension educators’ anxiety just after reappointment in the new job showed a negative impact on the job performance. Other studies in the available literature (Srivastava & Krishna, 1980; Meglino, 1977) agreed that employees’ high degree of job-related anxiety had a detrimental effect on their performance of job activities. Therefore, it can be concluded that the extension educators’ anxiety just after reappointment in the new job can negatively affect job performance.

Implications for In-service Training Programs

It is important to mention that these findings can be applied primarily to the extension educators of the Illinois CES. Because this study sample was unique, the generalizability of its findings may be limited by this fact. The findings of this study, however, may be cautiously applied to similar situations in other CESs.

The findings showed that there were structural

change effects on reappointed extension educators and these effects had a negative impact on their job performance. Therefore, it is very important to help extension educators ease the negative effects of structural change to bring their job performance to a higher level. The provision of an appropriate in-service training or counseling program could be a solution. Effective in-service training programs have been developed based on research (Garton & Chung, 1997; Birkenholz & Harbstreit, 1987).

The negative impacts of direct change effects as well as indirect effects on the job performance of reappointed extension educators should be addressed for a successful transition during an organizational restructuring. Moreover, identification of in-service training components should be equally weighted for the direct effects of the areas of structural change and for the indirect effects enacted through the change of anxiety levels just after reappointment in the new job. Huerta and Smith (1997) reported that county extension agents' attitudes toward agent specialization were moderately positive in Ohio. Although attitudes can be positive, reappointed extension educators will have to handle new responsibilities that they were not used to handling before the change. This condition can place these employees in a stressful situation (Korn, 1988). Uncertainty is only one stressing condition related to organizational changes. Through training and experience, employees develop the skills and competency required to manage their organizational responsibilities (Schein, 1980). The ability to manage organizational responsibilities makes employees feel competent throughout the context of their jobs (Tagiuri, 1979). The available literature indicates that when an employee is reappointed for a restructured position, he/she may experience stress due to the unfamiliarity of new job responsibilities. Some individuals cope with a new situation by taking a proactive stand and trying to take control over the new situation whereas others cope more reactively, attempting to escape or avoid stress

(Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997). Personality types within an organization can be diverse (Earnest & McCaslin, 1994). Therefore, it is important to have an individually focused in-service training or counseling program to address the effects of anxiety just after reappointment in the new job.

The changes that disturbed the social environment of the extension educators in Illinois contributed to the largest effects on job performance. These reappointed employees were probably too distracted during the early parts of their new job by the need to build interpersonal relationships and learn new technical requirements to react positively to those tasks entailing high initial challenges (Katz, 1978). Therefore, the factors contributing to changes in the social environment should be reviewed closely in assessing training or counseling needs to improve the job performance of reappointed extension educators.

The direct and the indirect effects of organizational change on reappointed employees' job performance should be further examined with a large, diverse sample to form more generalizable conclusions. These conclusions could then be utilized in a broad array of organizational settings toward developing counseling and in-service training programs for reappointed employees during restructuring.

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