

Balancing Work and Family: Professional Development Needs of Extension Faculty

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Abstract

This study was designed to identify workplace and individual factors that cause stress in the lives of Extension professionals and to determine baseline needs assessment data for professional development in the area of balancing work and family. A census-survey questionnaire (74 percent response rate) was utilized to explore balancing work and personal life issues among the population of University of Florida Extension faculty. It was found that some faculty have stress under control while others are experiencing high levels of stress; county faculty perceived slightly higher stress than state faculty but this difference was not significant. Respondents reporting greater use of formal planning, planning for meetings, and 'to do' lists tended to have lower stress scores. Faculty who revealed higher levels of work addiction tended to report higher stress levels as well.

Most stress inducing situations disclosed in this study can be improved upon through proactive professional development. Training programs and inservices focusing on workday planning are needed to help faculty cope with the stress and pressure of an Extension career. For Extension faculty, spending more time with family served as a coping mechanism for minimizing stress also. Greater organizational effectiveness can be achieved through employees who are able to manage stress and work pressure via positive workplace skills.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Job stress, time management and balancing work and family are issues that educators in the field of Cooperative Extension constantly struggle with. An Extension career can be very rewarding personally and professionally, as well as very demanding. Extension educators are able to bring about tremendous positive impact among individuals and communities through locally provided education and information. Yet for many, an Extension career is known for long hours, travel, frequent night and weekend work, and working with the problems, issues and needs of others.

This is not a new problem for Extension. The demands and stress of Extension and its effect on people have been studied for several years (Fetsch and Pergola, 1991; Riggs and Beus, 1993; and Fetsch and Kennington, 1997). Each of these papers has served to document and reinforce the difficulties that Extension professionals have had with stress, burnout, depression, time management, and balancing personal/professional responsibilities.

The dilemma was recognized nationally by USDA-CSREES as early as 1981. As part of a national position paper regarding Cooperative Extension's role with strengthening American families, a national ECOP (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy) task force was

also charged with examining the impact of stress and personal and professional balance within the Extension organization. The group determined that this was a critical issue, and as such, recommended that Extension's administrators needed to "critically examine their policies and practices and the resultant effects upon the family life of Extension employees" (ECOP Task Force, 1981, p.3).

Fetsch and Kennington (1997) have summarized a number of studies that had specifically addressed these concerns within Extension. They found that stress and burnout existed within Extension organizations in all of the states studied; some studies noted a direct relationship of Extension stress with family problems. The problem existed across all program areas with various levels of significance. They concluded that Extension professionals can attain overall improvement through the use of stress and time management strategies. Furthermore, they concluded that organizational policies and practices that lead to higher levels of stress must be modified and programs must be implemented for increasing coping skills and productivity of Extension professionals. These conclusions closely parallel recommendations made for other business areas (Abernathy, 1999; Hitchin, 1999; and Vincola, 1998).

Stress has been associated with mental tension and/or strain and is generally viewed as a nonspecific response of the body to a stimulus (Krannich et al., 1988). The subjective feeling of stress is derived from a stimulus (stressor) and from environmental demands (Krannich et al., 1988). Individuals have unique reactions to stressors due to differing modes of coping, mediation, and other adaptive capabilities.

Stress can manifest itself in physical outcomes. For example, stress has been shown to affect the immune, endocrine, digestive, and cardiovascular systems (Pearlin, 1989). Similarly, evidence suggests it also negatively impacts mental health (NMHA, 1988). Alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, neurosis, and depression are frequently cited as some of the more common psychological impacts of stressors (Pearlin, 1989).

Although there are many causes of stress, within the workplace there are three primary sources: the employee's personal life characteristics, the work conditions and environment, and situations occurring within the job itself (Kirkpatrick, 1996). Within the context of the organization, Kirkpatrick has identified seven categories that may be stress-inducing: competition for resources; task interdependence; jurisdictional ambiguity; status problems; communication barriers; individual traits; and miscellaneous factors such as role conflicts, volume of work, work schedules, insufficient authority, deadlines, organizational pettiness, and inadequate training.

Time management and work habits have been at the core of job stress and balancing personal and professional lives for quite some time. Studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s documented that people's work efficiency declines after eight hours of work (Mackenzie, 1972). Unfortunately, many people get into a habit of "there is always tonight" for taking work home or staying late to get things done thereby stretching work beyond the normal workday. Other early studies have also shown that people who overemphasize their work at the expense of their family and marriage will eventually attain lower job performance (Mackenzie, 1972).

A more recent study conducted by the Franklin Covey Company denotes similar workplace problems. It was reported that 83 percent of Americans want to be more organized, 50 percent feel guilty about taking time off from work, and 62 percent often eat lunch while they continue work (Abernathy, 1999). People are trying to get more done (with work and family) in

less time, which frequently leads to burnout and extreme frustration (Abernathy, 1999; Meikins, 1998; and Perlow, 1999). Meikins (1998) has found that some people feel extremely rushed and pressured at home, and as a result they may spend more time in the workplace, for escape and personal gratification, which only exacerbates the situation.

Coping and mediation are mechanisms that can serve to mediate the negative effects of stress. Coping is an individual action, but is learned from one's reference group (Pearlin, 1989). Mediators are essentially social supports that help alleviate or lessen stress (Pearlin, 1989). Most of the research on coping and mediation has been psychological in nature, with a clear emphasis on the individual. This body of research has shown that locus of control beliefs are critical to coping. If one believes that they have control of good and bad outcomes in their life (high locus of control), stress can be effectively reduced. Krause (1987) found that locus of control beliefs buffer stress to a limited extent, and that efforts at enhancing locus of control (empowerment) by individuals actually eroded such beliefs. Similarly, Mirowsky and Ross (1990) found that genuine control reduces stress, and most other coping methods are not as effective. Time management is generally seen as a means whereby individuals can control stress.

The issues of job stress, time management, and balancing one's personal and professional life is a significant dilemma in today's society and for Extension. These issues cause tremendous costs to organizations via employee medical problems, down time, sick days, job apathy, and lost productivity. For individuals this results in lowered wages, lessened job enthusiasm, depression, and familial difficulties. Extension must address these issues to attract and retain leading professionals for it to continue as a principal provider of nonformal educational programs.

Purposes/Objectives

The goal of this study was to identify workplace and individual factors that cause stress in the lives of Extension professionals. The study was designed for determining baseline needs assessment data for professional development in the area of balancing work and family. By identifying sources and personal characteristics that are associated with stress, professional development efforts can be directly targeted to address high priority issues in this area. To meet this goal, the study had two objectives: (a) to develop indices of stress and workplace habits, and (b) to develop a hierarchical block model that establishes the relative strength of work place skills, perspectives of work, and individual and family demographics in perceived stress levels.

Methods/Procedures

A census-survey questionnaire was developed to explore balancing work and personal life issues among the population of University of Florida Extension faculty. A panel of experts consisting of University of Florida faculty with Extension knowledge and/or experience was utilized for evaluation of content and face validity, and pilot testing. Suggested changes, clarifications, and improvements were subsequently incorporated into the instrument prior to its actual use.

In February of 2000, the questionnaire was mailed to 422 county and state Extension faculty. Following the total design method (Dillman, 1978), a postcard follow-up and a second mailing of the instrument was conducted in March. A third mailing was not initiated since the

response rate was deemed adequate by the researchers at the completion of the second wave. There were 314 completed and usable questionnaires, for a 74 percent response rate. Subsequent data analysis showed no significant differences among early and late respondents.

Multiple linear regression with ordinary least squares (OLS) was employed for this analysis. OLS regression enables the modeling of the dependent variable as a function of the independent variables. Two models were utilized to determine the combined effect of each set of variables (work place skills, and individual and household demographics) on the dependent variable (stress). In the following analyses, the work place skills variables (workday planning, time pressure, and managing others) were entered in model one. In model two, seven individual and household demographic items were entered (age, income, gender, house work, time spent with family, working partner, and, state or county appointment).

Finally, the full model containing all of the defined independent variables was examined. This modeling strategy establishes the main effects of the variables in the blocks in relation to stress, while also controlling for all factors in the final model. Through the relative changes in adjusted R^2 the strength of these effects can be seen. Furthermore, changes in the beta coefficients and their associated statistical significance within blocks provide an informal check of the effects of multicollinearity. This is information that is difficult to determine from the full model presented later.

Results/Findings

Table One denotes selected demographic variables of the study respondents. An even number of males and females responded to the study, and this is parallel with the current makeup of University of Florida Extension faculty. The majority were married (78.4%), and most (82.0%) of their spouses/partners also worked. Total household income was well distributed, and averaged between \$60,000 to \$70,000 per household. Most of the respondents consisted of county faculty (71.8%) as compared to state faculty (24.8%). Average faculty age was 46 years. On average, respondents felt that they spent about 30 hours per week with their family.

The dependent variable for this study was an overall stress index score derived from a summation of eight items as measured via a five point Likert-type scale. The eight items included:

- 1) My life is filled with stress.
- 2) At the end of most days, I feel frustrated because I did not accomplish all that I planned to do.
- 3) I find myself trying to be everything to everybody.
- 4) My physical health is affected by stress in my life.
- 5) My life is a series of crises.
- 6) I have difficulty setting aside time for desired activities with my family or partner.
- 7) I feel overwhelmed by the amount of work that is expected of me.
- 8) I am hardly ever satisfied with my achievements.

Table 1. Selected Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	157	50.0
Female	<u>157</u>	<u>50.0</u>
	314	100.0
Marital Status		
Married	246	78.4
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	29	9.1
Single	<u>39</u>	<u>12.5</u>
	314	100.0
If married, does your spouse/partner work?		
Yes	257	82.0
No	<u>57</u>	<u>18.0</u>
	314	100.0
Level of Household Income		
Less than \$30,000	20	6.3
\$30,000 to \$44,999	55	17.4
\$45,000 to \$59,999	49	15.7
\$60,000 to \$74,999	71	22.6
Over \$75,000	<u>119</u>	<u>38.0</u>
	314	100.0
Area of Appointment		
State	225	24.8
County	78	71.8
Other	<u>11</u>	<u>3.4</u>
	314	100.0
Satisfaction with amount of housework done at home		
Very satisfied	39	12.3
Satisfied	109	34.6
Dissatisfied	120	38.4
Very dissatisfied	<u>46</u>	<u>14.7</u>
	314	100.0
Number of Children under 18 years of age		
Mean = 2.13 SD = 0.9		
Average time (hours) spent with family per week		
Mean = 30.8 SD = 19.9		
Age of Respondents		
Mean = 46 SD = 10		

Factor analysis of the dependent variable produced a single overall stress factor with an Eigenvalue of 3.58, which explained 47 percent of the variation within the model. Alpha reliability for this index was .83. Each respondent's individual perceived stress index score was

figured as the mean of the responses to the eight questions. Subsequently, the mean of all the respondents' perceived stress index scores was taken. The mean of all the respondents' scores for the dependent variable was 3.02 with a standard deviation of .70.

Based upon this mean score, it was determined that faculty on average were neutral in regards to their overall levels of stress. Mean variation documents that some faculty have stress under control while others are under high levels of stress. Mean differences denoted that county faculty perceived slightly higher stress than state faculty, but this was not statistically significant.

A number of independent variables were analyzed in this study, and these are noted in Table Two along with the factor analysis results. These variables were blocked into two logical categories to help explain probable causes of stress. The table denotes each of the blocks utilized in the factor analysis including the individual measurement items.

Table Three denotes the results of the multivariate analysis for this study, and the full model is presented with all variables placed in the model¹. The first variable, workday planning, was statistically significant. As respondents reported greater use of things like "to do" lists, formal planning, and planning for meetings, stress scores tended to be less. A similar pattern was observed for the variable managing others, but this relationship was not statistically significant. Time pressure was the most important variable in the model. This indicated that if respondents agreed more with the variables of being over-committed, continuous multi-tasking, working late, and feeling like they were always racing against the clock; their stress scores tended to be much higher.

Seven items related to household and individual demographics were asked. One demographic item was statistically significant, time spent with family. Faculty who spent more time with their family tended to report less stress. The explained variation in this model was 40 percent.

¹Multiple correlation linear regression with a small sample size can present severe multicollinearity problems. Careful use of informal diagnostics such as the zero-order correlations and scatter plots of the standardized residuals revealed little impact of the effects of multicollinearity. Further, a formal diagnostic statistic, the variance inflation factor (VIF), was utilized. This statistic indicates how the inclusion of a dependent variable in the model inflates the standard error of the other independent variables. VIFs greater than 10 are generally thought to have undue influence in the Ordinary Least Squares estimation (Lunneborg, 1994). In no case were the VIFs in the following analyses equal to 10 or greater.

Table 2. Blocks of independent variables utilized in the factor analysis.

Blocks, items measured and results of Factor Analysis by block.

Work Place Skills

A. Work Day Planning / Preparation

- 1) I do formal planning for complex tasks.
- 2) I prepare to get the most out of meetings.
- 3) I work effectively while traveling.
- 4) I procrastinate.
- 5) I have a prioritized to-do list.
- 6) I schedule important work for the time of day when I am most effective.
- 7) I plan my work, and work my plan.

* Factor analysis yielded an Eigenvalue of 3.54, which explained 47 percent of the model variation. Alpha index reliability = 0.77. Mean Work Day Planning score = 3.52, SD = 0.58 of 5-point Likert-type scale: 1) Never, 2) Seldom, 3) Half of the time, 4) Often, 5) Always.

B. Time Pressure

- 1) I seem to be in a hurry and racing against the clock.
- 2) I find myself doing two or three things at one time, such as eating lunch and writing a memo, while talking on the phone.
- 3) I over-commit myself by biting off more than I can chew.
- 4) I find myself continuing to work after my coworkers have called it quits.

* Factor analysis yielded an Eigenvalue of 3.27, which explained 43 percent of the model variation. Alpha index reliability = 0.65. Mean Time Management score = 3.73, SD = 0.75 of 5-point Likert-type scale: 1) Strongly Disagree, 2) Disagree, 3) Neutral, 4) Agree, 5) Strongly Agree.

C. Managing Others

- 1) I handle casual visitors effectively.
- 2) I control distractions.
- 3) I delegate effectively.

* Factor analysis yielded an Eigenvalue of 3.31, which explained 57 percent of the model variation. Alpha index reliability = 0.57. Mean Managing Others score = 3.31, SD = 0.59 of 5-point Likert-type scale: 1) Never, 2) Seldom, 3) Half of the time, 4) Often, 5) Always.

Table 2. (continued).

Perspectives on Work

A. Work Addiction

- 1) I prefer to do most things myself rather than ask for help.
- 2) I feel guilty when I am not working on something.
- 3) It is hard for me to relax when I'm not working.

* Factor analysis yielded an Eigenvalue of 3.04, which explained 40 percent of the model variation. Alpha index reliability = 0.58. Mean Work Addition score = 3.04, SD = 0.84 of 5-point Likert-type scale: 1) Strongly Disagree, 2) Disagree, 3) Neutral, 4) Agree, 5) Strongly Agree.

B. Job Satisfaction

- 1) I feel that my working conditions are good.
- 2) Considering my job responsibilities there is no way I could do my job properly.
- 3) My work brings me satisfaction.

* Factor analysis yielded an Eigenvalue of 2.93, which explained 39 percent of the model variation. Alpha index reliability = 0.55. Mean Work Addition score = 3.53, SD = 0.49 of 5-point Likert-type scale: 1) Strongly Disagree, 2) Disagree, 3) Neutral, 4) Agree, 5) Strongly Agree.

Table Three. Results of Multivariate analysis categorized by block.

	Full Model			Reduced Model		
	<i>b</i>	B	SE <i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	B	SE <i>b</i>
Work Place Skills						
Work day planning	-.249*	-.201	.077	-.293*	-.241	.061
Time Pressure	.481*	.508	.055	.483*	.515	.047
Managing Others	-.009	-.079	.082			
Demographics						
Age	.001	.090	.005			
Income	.003	.050	.045			
Gender	-.008	-.057	.09			
House work	-.004	-.061	.048			
Time spent w/family	-.005*	-.133	.002	-.005*	-.144	.002
Partner works	.003	.018	.109			
State or County appointment	-.163	-.102	.100			
Constant	2.351*			2.375*		
Adj. R ²	.40			.37		

* $p < .05$

The reduced model contains only those variables that were statistically significant in the full model. Only three variables in this model explain 37 percent of the variation. The items related to workday planning and time pressure remain statistically significant and relatively important in the model (as observed in the standardized Betas). Time pressure is by far the strongest explanatory variable in the model, followed by workday planning, and time spent with family.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The results of this study document that stress exists among Extension faculty, and this substantiates the findings of other authors who have wrote about stress and balancing work and family for Extension professionals (Fetsch and Pergola, 1991; Riggs and Beus, 1993; Fetsch and Kennington, 1997). Because of the nature of Extension, there is always going to be a certain level of stress from dealing with wide varieties of constituencies and program requirements. This study has served to delineate a number of factors that are directly correlated to stress for Extension faculty and staff.

Workday planning is of great significance, and this was found to be an important item in regards to overall stress for Extension educators. The results showed that the factors related to time pressure were the strongest. The more one was over-committed, worked late, constantly multi-tasked, and felt like they were always racing, the greater their stress scores. On the other hand, those faculty who were able to manage their day and minimize time pressure experienced lower stress. Similar direct correlations were noted with managing others, scheduling and planning. Those who had not mastered planning, scheduling (to-do lists), delegating, and controlling distractions had significantly higher stress scores versus those who were adept with these traits and skills.

In one respect, these results are actually very encouraging in that most of these skills can be improved upon through professional development. Training programs and inservices focusing on workday planning can be implemented, which are frequently effective in regards to changing knowledge and behaviors (Abernathy, 1999; Douglas and Douglass, 1980; Mackenzie, 1972). Improvement in the areas of workday planning by Extension professionals would constitute a tripartite benefit.

The Extension organization would realize a significant benefit from improved employee productivity and efficiency in addition to improved morale leading to greater work satisfaction and less employee attrition. Secondly, Extension professionals would have a direct benefit from feeling less stress and pressure to bring about greater personal satisfaction and less burdensome attitudes (Kirkpatrick et al., 1996). They would feel much better about themselves and their career. Lastly, Extension professionals would experience an indirect benefit of more personal time. This time could be invested for developing and nurturing family relationships and personal interests, bringing about greater individual and family appreciation and gratification.

The block of household and individual variables provides some very interesting insight into how Extension faculty cope with stress. Faculty who reported more time with family exhibited less stress as compared to cohorts. It was theorized that faculty who spent time with their family tended to emphasize the importance of time with their family. Time spent with family served as a coping mechanism for minimizing stress for these Extension faculty (Pearlin, 1989).

Educational Implications

Stress, time management, and balancing work and family continue to be issues for Extension and its people. The demands are great for Extension professionals to meet clientele needs and document widespread impact and change. Extension as an organization must address these issues for the long-term best interest of the organization. Greater organizational effectiveness can be achieved through employees who are able to manage stress and work pressure via positive workplace skills. Proactive professional development in these areas would be very beneficial, and as such, is highly recommended.

This study has clearly documented the significance of time and work management on workplace stress. Proactive workday planning, scheduling and management were highly correlated with less individual stress. Through professional development efforts, positive changes are possible for individuals among these competencies. The ascribed need for training on these topics among Extension professionals is critical.

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Balancing Work and Family: Professional Development Needs of Extension Faculty

A Critique

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Job stress has long been an issue of concern among professionals. Extension professionals are not immune from the pressures of stress. The authors focus on Extension professionals in Florida, although, based on the previous papers on Extension issues, we don't know if their concerns apply elsewhere. However, over the years, there have been a large number of studies on stress. Apparently the authors thought another study was needed. While the paper puts emphasis on stress factors, the title seems to imply a research emphasis or focus on balancing work and family. Most papers take their titles from the purpose and objectives.

The authors present a thorough literature review and establish the fact that stress is a critical area needing attention in professional development. Given this thorough review of the literature, the authors do not provide a clear rationale for this particular study at this particular time.

Additionally, the methods and procedures for this study appear to be explained very briefly. It would have been helpful to have a fuller explanation of the procedures used and a more complete description and justification for the analysis used in the study. The large footnote used for the explanation of multiple correlation linear regression should have been a part of the explanation of the procedures in the study. Information like this properly placed in the paper enhances organization and presentation of the major items needed for clarity of content and contribute to the rationale for using these procedures.

While the study was interesting and results revealing, there are a number of questions that require attention:

1. Could the data have been presented in a clearer and more understandable format? Some tables used a number (1 & 2) in the label and some used the word (three). Traditionally, tables should be able to stand alone. Could the labels be more descriptive?
2. The conclusions basically restate the findings. What major conclusions, given the findings, can we draw from the study?
3. There appears to be one recommendation and it doesn't appear to be very strong nor is it based on the findings of the study. It is based on various authors views located in textbooks. What recommendations come from the data in this particular study?
4. The meaning of paragraph 4 under the conclusions/recommendations is not clear. Are these statements justification for inservice education?

The last paragraph of the paper boldly declares that the study "clearly documented significance" of various stress factors. This statement is clearly debatable.

There are concerns about this study but the authors are encouraged to continue their investigations regarding professional development issues.