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What Influences Agents to Pursue a Career in Extension?

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Abstract: The qualitative study reported here explored why agricultural agents pursue an Extension career. A purposive sample was used to select twelve Florida agricultural agents. Interviews investigated positive and negative influences that affected agents' employment decisions. Grounded theory was used as the primary data analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The selective categories most influential on agents' decisions to enter into Extension were: agent background, career contacts, service to agricultural community, nature of Extension work, position fit, and university-supported education. A grounded theory was developed to explain the findings. Results are useful for Extension to practice proactive agent recruitment.

Introduction

According to the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (2002), recruitment is one of the top internal challenges currently facing the Cooperative Extension System. The ability to recruit long-term, high-quality professionals is a direct reflection of a successful organization. Therefore, this issue must be a high priority that Extension must address to remain a viable educational outreach system. The development of innovative recruitment, hiring, and compensation strategies that attract employees are critical to organizational growth (ECOP, 2002).

As public needs change and programs shift, agents who are able to work with diverse clientele must be hired to address emerging needs and concerns. However, finding specialized agents is becoming more difficult as career opportunities expand. Extension must seek to identify the experts needed to provide relevant services and attract them to the organization (Ensle, 2005). This will require all Extension personnel, specifically administrators, to become more knowledgeable about why agents choose a career in Extension. Exploring agents' experiences can identify positive and negative factors that affect initial career decisions. Proactive attention by the organization to these factors can lead to attracting highly qualified prospective agents in an increasingly competitive marketplace, improve recruitment strategies, and provide direction for hiring procedures.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study reported here was to explore and describe the influences on Florida agricultural agents' decision to enter an Extension career. The key objectives were:

1. To understand the factors and experiences that influence Florida agricultural Extension agents to enter the organization, and
2. To develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect Florida agricultural Extension agents' decisions to pursue an Extension career.

Methodology

A comprehensive list of Florida agents with at least an 80% appointment in agriculture was used to establish the population of 108 participants. A panel of experts consisting of Extension professors and administrators was consulted to determine the sample. Evaluation was based on personal interactions, positive performance evaluations, career achievements, and professional reputations. Thirty agents were classified into career stages according to a list of defining characteristics compiled from three career development models (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002; Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994). A purposive sample of 12 agents was selected as the final participants.

The researcher collected data from participants in 12 different counties representing all five Extension districts within the state. A semi-structured interview format was used, with open-ended questions that allowed further probing of personal thoughts, ideas, and emotions (Hatch, 2002). Interviews were audio-recorded, and an informed consent form was signed by each participant prior to the interview process.

Grounded theory by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was the primary data analysis procedure. This type of analysis allows for a theoretical understanding of an experience and permits the researcher to explore, direct, manage, and streamline data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Strategies including simultaneous data analysis and collection, a specific data coding process, constant comparisons, refinement of codes, and theory integration were applied to form the foundation of the analysis (Charmaz, 2003). Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The researcher separated, sorted, and synthesized the data using open, axial, and selective qualitative coding procedures. Interpretations of participants' responses were supported with direct quotes and utilized to construct a grounded theory representative of the selective codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results

The following selective categories emerged as the most influential factors on agents' decisions to enter into the organization.

Agent Background

Academic and work experiences influenced agents' decision to seek Extension positions. Participants revealed similarities in their academic and work experiences within agriculture; however, there were differences found in the amount of knowledge that each held about Extension work prior to employment. Primary background influences were prior agricultural industry experience, research in Extension, and having an agricultural degree. Tammy found her knowledge base provided "hands-on experience to be able

to provide advice" when working with clientele.

However, not all had prior knowledge of a career in Extension. Seven participants lacked Extension education training before becoming an agent and therefore did not really know what to expect. Others stated that they lacked exposure to Extension as a youth. Matt heard about Extension when he was in college, but "just didn't really know much about it" because he was not involved in 4-H or FFA and "didn't have a lot of exposure to Extension agents other than the youth fair and livestock judging contests."

Career Contacts

Encouragement by others and influential relationships played a significant role in the pursuit of an Extension career. The most influential relationships were those with Extension agents, specialists, and college advisors. Agents were motivated to apply for jobs by positive encouragement from peers, clientele, administrators, friends, and advisors. These factors gave participants confidence in their abilities to search out and learn more about available careers.

Previous interaction and exposure to county agents played an important role in job expectations. The local agent was commonly described by participants as an admired and respected role model. As Harry explained, "Seeing the respect that our local county agent had and being able to live it as a student with very good mentors . . . I was fortunate enough to work with just super people and knew that's what I wanted to do."

Service to the Agricultural Community

The opportunities to work with agricultural producers and provide service to the community were job factors that motivated agents to pursue Extension. Interest in helping producers to solve problems using research-based educational advice was a common theme of the interviews. Tammy said, "I could work with cattlemen and be in agriculture, and go to different functions . . . work with the people and with what I love to do." Sean saw Extension as a way to "help producers with objective advice . . . as an agricultural consultant, not a salesman." Participants regarded the service work aspect as one of the primary reasons for entering Extension. Adam was pleased the university "is addressing the issue of helping people to increase their knowledge . . . and to be able to better understand what they are doing."

Nature of Extension Work

The nature of Extension work centered on participants' understanding of job expectations, which included helping people, practical work, challenging situations, solving problems, and providing advice. The ability to apply individual talents, educate clientele, and utilize practical knowledge were attractive features of working in Extension. Matt felt that his personal and professional background was a good match for an agent position, "I had some expertise and I had some talents that fit more with people skills and communication skills, but I also had a practical background that fit with the job."

However, participants commented on the need for more detailed information about the responsibilities of being an agent. The lack of clear, stated job expectations was "frustrating" to entry-level agents. Participants shared Patricia's opinion on this issue, "Honestly, I didn't know what agents did when I applied for the job." Brenda discussed the need to solve this problem, "I think the applicants need a realistic view of what Extension involves and that it is a special kind of job. It's not a nine to five job . . . they need some realistic expectations prior to going into the job."

Position Fit

The position details and its alignment with career interests made a positive impact on decisions. The fit of the position to participants' lifestyle and background was ultimately determined by the advertised position description. Details of the announcement, such as salary, location, benefits, clientele, and duties, were identified as critical pieces of information. Harry stated, "Just the general description was a big factor . . . the notion that I could have more freedom, more on farm, more guaranteed contact to develop my own programs and be under my own control . . . that was certainly a factor."

University-Supported Education

The unique partnership with the university and the non-formal work structure associated with Extension were positive attributes. The flexibility and variety of work, creative freedom, ability to take risks, and challenging environment compelled participants to seek Extension. Adam particularly enjoys the different work environments in his job, "I like the combination of being at my office but also being able to drive away and meet different people, talk to different people, and see different clientele." Brenda liked the fact that "I would be an educator, it would be non-traditional education, and I wouldn't be teaching in a classroom."

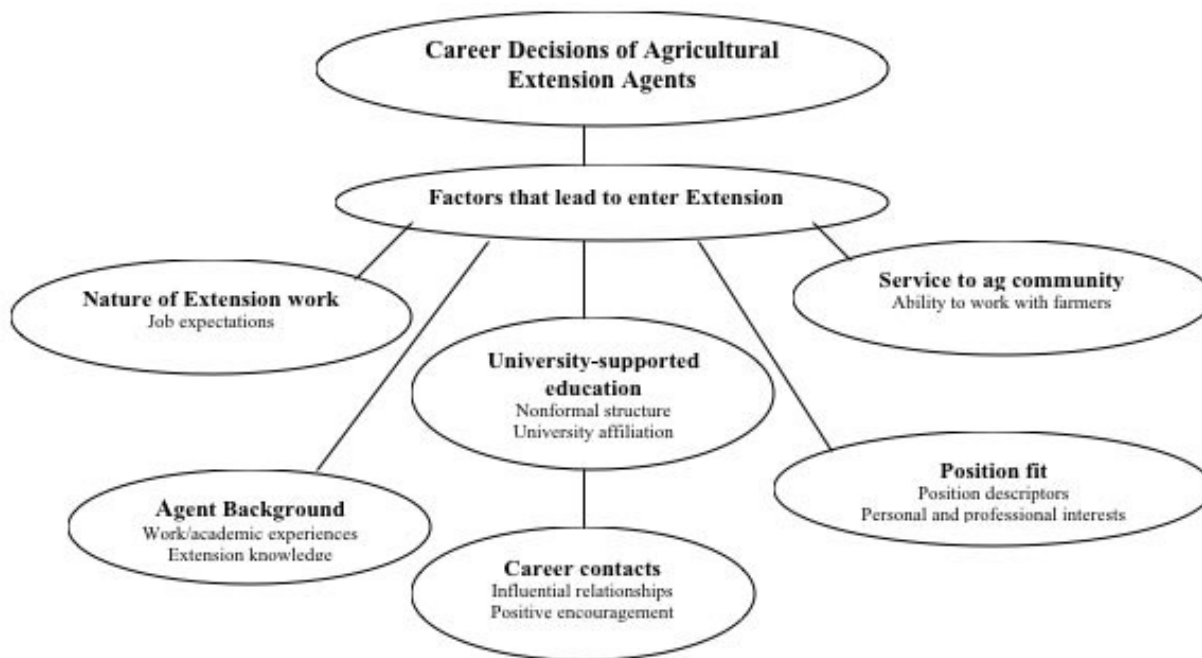
Participants agreed that the connection of the Extension system with the university provides informational resources needed to support work responsibilities. As Eric expressed, he does not have to be an expert on everything, but rather know where to find assistance, "having the full resources of the university at your disposal . . . that you don't have to know everything and do it alone, but you do have those resources to help you get your job done." The stability of a career in Extension also played a primary role in participants' decisions.

Summary

The most influential factors on agents' decisions to enter into an Extension career are represented in Figure 1. Agricultural academic and work experiences, as well as the foundation of Extension knowledge, comprised the agent background factors. Fit of the position to personal and professional interests provided the motivation to apply for an Extension job. Personal contacts including influential relationships and positive encouragement from peers, colleagues, administrators, and clientele played an important role in making career decisions. The university affiliation and non-formal work structure of Extension were valuable characteristics that distinguished Extension from other educational careers. Service to the agricultural community focused on the desire to help agricultural producers solve problems. Job expectations, including helping people, practical work, challenging situations, and providing advice, emphasized the typical service nature of Extension work.

Figure 1.

Grounded Theory of Florida Agricultural Extension Agents' Decisions to Enter into Extension



Implications

Participants explained that Extension continues to be the "best kept secret" and lacks recognition among students and potential applicants. In order to increase awareness, clearly detailed position announcements must be publicized beyond state Extension Web sites at places such as career resource centers and professional agricultural organizations to reach larger audiences. Agents and Extension educators must seek out opportunities to promote careers to youth, college students, and the agricultural industry. Youth must be made aware of potential careers in Extension as they plan their academic programs with advisors and counselors. Agent presence at career fairs, agricultural events, and industry functions can also increase organizational visibility. Extension should also make it a priority to promote careers within college classrooms and offer job-shadowing opportunities.

Given the current problems with the availability of qualified applicants for agent positions as cited by ECOP (2002) and study participants, quality is sometimes overlooked in order to fill the vacant position. Filling vacancies with unqualified agents whose talents and skills do not match community needs can be detrimental to the employee and the organization. Positions must be filled with competent agents who are committed to long-term employment. In order to identify these agents, the organization should consider using strategic recruitment methods to select more suitable applicants who fit in permanent Extension careers.

Extension should use its current personnel for recruiting purposes. Agents should refer potential applicants who might fit available positions. Agents cooperate with various agricultural agencies on a daily basis, and these networks can provide numerous opportunities for recruiting. The organization might also consider providing financial incentives to support programming or travel budgets for agents who recruit applicants who are eventually hired. Implementing innovative recruiting strategies can improve the overall quality of agents, educational services, and programs offered by Extension.

Conclusion

The qualitative study reported here uncovered the most significant issues that affected Florida agricultural Extension agents' decisions to pursue an Extension career. Although many of the findings were supported by previous literature, there were unique factors, experiences, and influences reported that had a significant effect on participants' career decisions. Findings must be acknowledged, and similar studies should be conducted in each state to improve recruitment and retention of high-quality agents to represent Extension.

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