

Influences on Florida Agricultural Extension Agents' Decisions to Enter into the Extension Organization

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Abstract

This qualitative study conducted in 2007 sought to explore and describe the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents. Interviews were used to investigate the positive and negative factors that affected agents' decisions to enter into the extension organization. A purposive sample was used to select twelve agents who worked in commercial agriculture. They were identified by a panel of experts as having a dependable and respectable work reputation, and then classified into the career stages model (Kutilek, et al., 2002). Agents participated in an in-depth interview to share their thoughts on influences that shaped their decision to pursue an extension career.

Grounded theory was used as the primary data analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From the transcribed data, the systematic process of coding was used to separate, sort, and analyze the data. Open, axial, and selective coding procedures were applied to extract meaning from the data. The constant comparison technique was also employed to identify similarities and differences of patterns found. The selective codes comprised the final categories relative to the research objectives and were used to create a grounded theory.

Six selective categories emerged as the most influential factors and experiences that affected participants' decisions to enter into an extension career. The categories were agent background, career contacts, service to agricultural community, nature of extension work, position fit, and university supported education. A concept map was created to delineate the relationships between the codes and a grounded theory was developed to explain the most significant issues and influences.

Key words: career decisions, extension agents, recruitment, qualitative research, influences

Introduction

The foundation of educational organizations is in its human and intellectual capital. Recruitment is one of the top internal challenges currently facing the Cooperative Extension System (ECOP, 2005). Extension must proactively address this issue in order to successfully continue its public programs and maintain its reputation. Developing hiring, compensation, and recruitment strategies that attract employees for engagement in a global society is a key component for the future survival of all extension systems (ECOP, 2002).

The quality of personnel hired determines the future abilities, skills, and competence of the organization (ECOP, 2002). As programs shift and public needs change, extension is facing decisions on how to continue its services and programs with suitable staff. New and diverse agents that can work with changing 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 experts in the field needed to provide relevant services and attract them to the organization (Ensle, 2005). This will require administrators to become more knowledgeable about the reasons why agents enter into an extension career. Knowing this information will be beneficial to the organization in many ways. Results can be used to help attract new agents, improve recruitment strategies, and provide direction for hiring procedures. The ability to recruit and retain long-term, high quality professionals is a direct reflection of a successful organization; therefore, these issues must be a high priority for extension to remain a viable educational outreach system (Conklin, et al., 2002). The future will ultimately be determined on how the organization approaches these critical areas to accomplish its goals and mission (ECOP, 2002).

Agent recruitment is one of the primary issues currently facing the Florida Cooperative Extension System. To address this concern, the organization must understand the factors that influence agents to 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 help to recruit agents in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents. Agricultural agents were selected due to the importance of agriculture in the state and the increasing struggles with recruitment of qualified agents prevalent in the University of Florida / IFAS Cooperative Extension System. The interview process was used to investigate factors that influenced agents' decision to pursue a career in extension. From the data collected, a grounded theory was developed to explain the most significant issues. The key objectives of this study included: (1) To understand the factors and experiences that influence Florida agricultural extension agents to enter into 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

Participant Selection

A comprehensive list of University of Florida / IFAS Cooperative Extension agents was used to establish the population of commercial agricultural agents. As determined by the researcher, the following program areas were defined as commercial agriculture: agronomy,

horticulture, livestock, agriculture and natural resources, pest management, agronomic crops, citrus, dairy, vegetables, small farms, fruit crops, agricultural development, agricultural safety, farm management, and rural agribusiness development. One-hundred and eight agricultural agents were identified as eligible participants for the study. The researcher then requested further data on the percentage appointment specifically in agricultural programs, county, gender, contact information, and years of employment in extension.

The researcher used the information and a panel of experts to determine the sample. First, all participants must have been currently employed extension agents that had at least an 80% appointment in commercial agriculture as designated in their job responsibilities. A panel of experts was consulted to narrow the sample further. These experts were chosen because of their familiarity and regular interaction with the agents. In a scheduled group meeting, the researcher requested their assistance in selecting dependable and respectable agents. This status was determined through personal interactions, positive performance evaluations, career achievements, and professional reputations. Thirty agents were identified by consensus from the panel and constituted the sample.

The panel of experts classified the 30 agents into one of the three categories from the career stages model- entry, colleague, and counselor/advisor- according to a list of defining characteristics compiled from three career stage models (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002; Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994). The 30 agents were then further divided by the researcher and an extension professor to select the final interview participants. A purposive sample based on aforementioned researcher-imposed criteria was used to select a total of twelve agents, four in each category of the career stages model, as the final participants. To assist in transferability, dependability and credibility of findings, the participants represented different educational levels, ethnicities, commercial agricultural areas, ages, and years of employment. Additionally, male and female participants represented twelve separate counties and all five district regions throughout the state. This process helped to ensure the interview participants were as equally distributed as possible among to the study population in these particular areas.

Data Collection

The selected interview participants were initially contacted via email to explain the purpose and importance of the study, the value of their participation, and the data collection procedure. Upon agreement to participate, the researcher arranged interview times and dates on the telephone with each agent. The researcher sent a pre-interview questionnaire to participants one week prior to the scheduled interview date in order to gain demographic and background information beforehand, facilitate the interview process, and build rapport with participants. The interview questions were also included in the e-mail to encourage participants to reflect upon prior to the interview.

The researcher collected data in 2007 from participants in twelve different counties representing all five districts within the state of Florida. The researcher traveled over 2000 miles to conduct face-to-face interviews. Prior to each interview, the researcher spent time with the agents to learn about the county, clientele, and extension programs, and gain an understanding of their personal and professional backgrounds. Having an understanding of work interests and duties was critical for the researcher to build a relationship and rapport with participants, and it conditioned the environment for open and honest dialogue during the interview.

A semi-structured interview format was used to organize the process which allowed for more freedom and exploration during the interview sessions (Hatch, 2002). At each agent's office, sixty to ninety minute interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. An informed consent form was signed by each participant prior to the interview process. During and after each interview, researcher field notes and memos were recorded which included key points, impressions, and observations from the interview. The researcher also ensured that the participant understood that future contact and discussion would be needed for clarification purposes and informed them of the member-checking process (Hatch, 2002).

Data Analysis

Grounded theory by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was the primary data analysis procedure used due to its focus of how meaning making advances the understanding of personal perspectives and insight. This method allows for the establishment of a close connection between the data collection, analysis, and resulting theory, and encourages the researcher to create a conceptual understanding of concrete realities that were expressed during the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory strategies including concurrent data analysis and collection, a specific data coding process, constant comparisons, refinement of emerging ideas, and integration of theory were implemented and applied to form the foundation of the analysis (Charmaz, 2003).

To protect the confidentiality of participants in this sensitive subject matter, all demographic, background, or other descriptive information was omitted. Pseudonyms were used and specific identifiers were deleted throughout the analysis process. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed. Approximately 90% of the interviews consisted of the participants' responses generated through expansive questioning and probing from the researcher. Re-reading the interviews and listening to the tapes several times provided additional steps to identify possible misinterpretations, cross-check statements, and increase credibility and trustworthiness. Field notes were clarified and final comments were added to the transcription. To address credibility, trustworthiness, and confirmability, the researcher asked each participant to review the transcript of their interview to ensure that the responses were accurately recorded. This review process is commonly termed the member checking process (Hatch, 2002).

To study the data, the researcher separated, sorted, and synthesized the data using open, axial, and selective qualitative coding procedures. Coding offered structure for the researcher to link data with information, topics, concepts, and themes. This process assists in focusing, organizing, and conceptualizing the data to develop categories and ideas (Morse & Richards, 2000). Open and axial coding was initially performed to identify general themes within and between the participants' responses. Once the links between axial codes established clear concepts, selective codes were created to contextualize the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The synthesized selective codes were used as a basis for the grounded theory. To explain the findings, interpretations of participants' responses were supported with direct quotes and utilized to construct a grounded theory representative of the emergent selective codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results

The selective categories relevant to agents' decisions to enter into the organization were: agent background, career contacts, service to agricultural community, nature of extension work, position fit, and university-supported education. All of these categories emerged as influential

factors and experiences that affected participants' decisions to enter into the extension organization. Findings from each category are detailed below.

Agent Background

Agent background was comprised of two axial codes: academic and work experiences and knowledge of extension. The 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 industry experience, graduate research in extension, and having an agricultural degree. Four participants specifically indicated that they were raised on a family farm, while seven had previously worked in the agricultural industry. Industry experience was considered beneficial for Samantha to "have the experience and the background to jump into a position like this." Tammy found her knowledge base provided "hands-on experience to be able to provide advice" when working with clientele. Graduate research experiences provided participants with a better understanding of the opportunities and careers in extension. Research experiences ranged from working with extension specialists to various types of livestock, plant, crop, and vegetable production-based research. Although each participant held an agricultural college degree, 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 and in college, as Jessica stated, "I had no clue as to what extension was." Matt had 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

Career contacts were comprised of two axial codes: encouragement by others and influential relationships. Each of these factors played a significant role in the participants' pursuit of an extension career. However, each described their personal contacts and influential networks differently.

The most influential relationships were those with extension agents, advisors, and specialists. Brenda had not even considered a position in extension until her graduate advisor, who was also an extension specialist, told her, "You really want to work in extension and I said, I do? And she said yeah, that's what you want to do." She discussed how her confidence was built as her advisor said that she could "see that spark in me... and that I would be good at that job." Jessica's graduate advisor also encouraged her to pursue extension when she told her, "With your personality, you'd probably enjoy being an extension agent" and sent her Internet links with available jobs.

Positive encouragement from peers, clientele, administrators, friends, and advisors to apply for jobs in extension was motivating. Benjamin and Adam were both encouraged by people from the University of Florida to seek out available positions. This gave participants confidence in their abilities to seek out and learn more about available careers. Additionally, half of the participants had previously applied to extension before obtaining their current position as a result of encouragement by others. Samantha did not enter into extension earlier because "at that

time, the extension pay scale was very low,” but was continually recruited by stakeholders, clientele, and her county director.

Interaction and exposure to extension agents played an important role in participants’ decision to enter into the organization. The local agent was commonly described as a role model that participants admired and respected. The desire to pursue a career in extension grew as Harry went to college and worked closely with research specialists. He explained the influence that these relationships had on his career decisions, “That whole series of events of seeing the respect that our local county agent had and being able to live it as a student going through school with very good mentors and very good people... I was fortunate enough to work with just super people and knew that’s what I wanted to do.”

Service to the Agricultural Community

Service to agricultural community was comprised of one axial code: ability to work with farmers. A common theme that occurred throughout all the interviews was participants’ interest in helping agricultural producers to solve problems using research-based educational advice. Tammy was particularly interested in working with the clientele, “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 aspect as one of the main reasons that they entered into the organization. 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.” Harry reflected on his reason for entering extension and his mission as an agent:

I knew that my mission was going to be to serve farmers and beyond that, I don’t know that I had a real clear picture...but I did know that my mission was going to be to help serve farmers, help them sustain what they were doing, change things, and make a better life for them on their farms. And regardless of what the crops were, or what the technologies, or whatever the practices were is sort of immaterial as long as you have in your mind that my job is to help this clientele group, and for me that was commercial farmers and that was pretty clear cut.

The opportunities to work with agricultural producers and provide service to the community concurrently were explicit factors that influenced participants’ decision to enter into the extension organization.

Nature of Extension Work

Nature of extension work was comprised of one axial code: job expectations. Participants’ job expectations centered on the organizational mission and goals of extension: helping people, practical work, challenging situations, solving problems, and providing advice. Although participants had different expectations of what was involved in their work, each commented on their experiences and the need for more detailed information about the responsibilities of being an extension agent.

The ability to apply individual talents, educate clientele, and utilize personal professional knowledge were attractive features of extension work. Matt left the agricultural industry because he realized that he “...was really more talented working with people and with thinking outside the box, maybe a little more creatively with problem solving.” He also 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.” Tammy expressed her expectations and desire to “educate producers about best management practices and educate youth about career choices.” Brenda chose extension “to be an educator and I felt like I could make a difference and I feel like I am making a difference.”

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.” Several participants commented on the importance of clear expectations in guiding new agents’ career efforts.

Position Fit

Position fit was comprised of one axial code: position descriptors. These descriptors included the details of position announcement, such as salary, location, and duties. The fit of the position to participants’ lifestyle and background was ultimately determined by the advertised position description. The details and its alignment with career interests made a positive impact on participants’ decisions to apply for the job. 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.” The description of the work expectations and fringe benefits were also cited as the most important details. Tammy commented, “...the benefits are what makes it worthwhile...that is a major additive to the position to have really good benefits,” and Eric agreed, “...the benefits are tremendous...a lot of people don’t realize how important benefits are. I mean how to translate that into their real work.”

University-supported Education

University-supported education was comprised of two axial codes: non-formal structure and University affiliation. Each of these codes related to the unique partnership of the system and the non-formal work structure commonly associated with extension education.

The flexibility and variety of work, creative freedom, ability to take risks, and challenging environment compelled participants to seek agent positions. The nonformal structure that appealed to participants included the flexible organization and environment of 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.” Matt discussed the flexible scheduling that extension offers to agents, “Well, there are not many jobs that I am aware of where you set your own schedule and your own calendar...there are some mandated scheduling, but it’s pretty minimal.” Benjamin values the creative freedom to plan programs and exercise innovation to meet the needs of his clientele.

Participants agreed that the connection of the extension system with the University provides personnel and informational resources needed to support agents in their work. Several remarked on the benefits of having the resources available to find answers to client questions. 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 job in extension was also cited by nine participants as a factor that played a primary role in their career decisions. Eric discussed his experiences as a farm manager and the frequent buyouts that were occurring as producers went out of business. He decided to enter extension because it "was a little bit less risky than some of those production jobs."

Conclusions

The influential factors and experiences that encouraged participants' decisions to enter into the extension organization are represented in Figure 1. Agricultural academic and work experiences, as well as the lack of extension knowledge, comprised the influential agent background factors. Position fit of the extension position to participants' lifestyle and career interests was an encouraging aspect. Participants' career contacts of influential relationships and positive encouragement from peers, colleagues, administrators, and clientele played an important role. The university affiliation and nonformal work structure of extension were additional factors. Service to the agricultural community was participants' desire to help agricultural producers solve problems. Participants' job expectations related to the nature of extension work, including helping people, practical work, challenging situations, and providing advice. All of these categories emerged as influential factors and experiences that affected participants' decisions to pursue a career in extension.

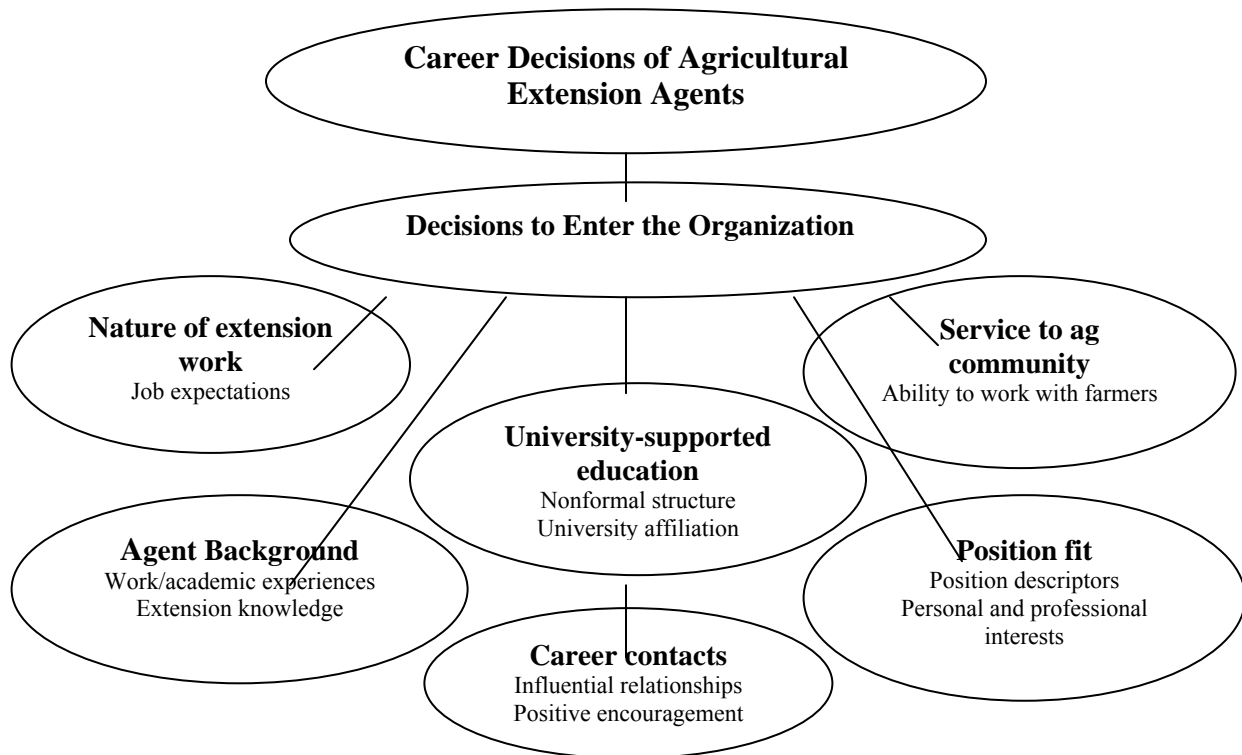


Figure 1. Grounded theory of Florida agricultural extension agents' decisions to enter into extension.

Educational Importance, Implications, and Application

Educational Importance

Previous qualitative research in the area of career decisions of extension agents is limited. This study identified specific factors that were most influential on participants' decision to enter into extension and can be utilized to improve organizational recruitment. Future research must be conducted on career influences, so the organization can take a proactive approach to recruit highly qualified agents. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative research can offer mutually supportive information, so each must be utilized to verify and expand findings.

While this study provided worthwhile information about reasons for entering into the organization from the twelve participants in the study, this research must be expanded to include all agricultural extension agents. It is important to explore the career decisions of the entire population of agricultural extension agents in Florida and throughout the United States to discover similarities and differences. It would also be beneficial to conduct research with international extension agents, particularly those with similar agricultural clientele and work responsibilities. This study could be expanded to include agents from other program areas, such as community development, 4-H, and family and consumer sciences, to discover the factors and experiences that have influenced their career decisions.

Findings from this study identified various key competencies and skills needed by participants to succeed in extension and requires more in-depth research. This directly correlates to the National Research Agenda in Agricultural Education and Communication 2007-2010. For the Research Priority Area entitled, "Agricultural Education in Domestic and International Settings: Extension and Outreach," the second objective is to identify the needs and competencies of stakeholders and professional practitioners in nonformal agricultural extension education. Continual investigation of the needs and competencies of extension agents, including required knowledge bases, skills, and professional competencies, must be conducted. This research might also explore the use of recruitment strategies, such as the person-job fit paradigm, and test its applicability to the extension hiring and selection process.

Findings from this study revealed that the lack of knowledge about extension displayed by participants did not discourage them from applying for extension positions; however, more research is needed to discover how to promote extension as a viable career opportunity. This research could assist in the promotion and marketing of extension programs and services, as well as provide information that could supplement recruitment efforts. It is important to understand how people discover extension, why they choose to attend extension programs, what they know about extension, how they use extension services, and what they know about extension careers. Results could then be applied to develop organizational promotion campaigns that lead to improved recruitment.

Finally, the importance of social relationships emerged as the primary factor that affected participants' decisions to enter into extension. Connections with extension agents and specialists, peers, mentors, clientele, administrators, and advisors were critical to career choices, placement, satisfaction, and longevity. Personal contact with these individuals encouraged participants to initially pursue a career in extension. These networks played an important role in motivating agents to not only apply for extension positions, but provided necessary physical, emotional, and mental encouragement. This area of research should become a priority to identify personal connections that agents have made before entering extension. Emphasis should be placed on discovering the types of personal connections that are most significant and why to aid in

understanding the roles of relationships on career decisions. Having an understanding of the effects of social relationships can ultimately assist in organizational recruitment, recruitment strategies, and career placement programs.

Implications and Application

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 the extension website at places such as career resource centers and professional agricultural websites to reach larger audiences. Agents and extension educators must seek out opportunities to promote careers to youth, college students, and the agricultural industry. Members of 4-H and FFA 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.

Though having a degree in extension education had a positive impact on confidence in participants’ career choices, an extension education degree was not required to be successful. Therefore, the organization must not only emphasize recruitment of extension education graduates, but also seek out college students with technical agriculture degrees, graduate students, and those in agricultural careers. Agents should also make it a priority to promote careers within college classrooms and offer job shadowing opportunities. The majority of participants entered into extension with industry experience, prior relations with extension, or an agricultural degree. Therefore, promotion of extension careers could target agricultural industry personnel and events, extension research and educational programs, and students within the College of Agriculture.

Extension must also utilize its current source of agents around the state for recruiting purposes. Agents must be asked for referrals of applicants that might fit available positions, and each should make it a part of their job to promote extension careers. Agents cooperate with various agricultural agencies on a daily basis and need to take advantage of these networks. Relationships and encouragement by others were two of the most influential recruitment methods described by study participants. Personal, face-to-face contact has been proven to be a successful recruiting strategy and should be utilized more often by agents. The organization might also consider providing financial incentives to support programming or travel budgets for agents who recruit applicants that are eventually hired. This may improve the desire for current agents to engage in recruitment, improve the applicant pool with qualified agents, and provide additional opportunities for incentives. Implementing innovative recruiting strategies will improve the overall quality of agents, educational services, and programs offered by extension.

Given the current problems with the availability of qualified applicants for agricultural agent positions mentioned by study participants, quality is sometimes overlooked in order to fill the vacant position. However, as Matt mentioned, “Sometimes it might be best to start over.” 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 seek out using strategic recruitment methods. If extension can use these frameworks in the hiring process, it may prove beneficial to selecting more suitable applicants that fit in extension careers.

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