

Challenges of Early Career Extension Agents in Florida



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Abstract

Extension agents serve a critical role in the land-grant mission as they disseminate research to local clientele in the form of educational programs. However, Extension agents face a myriad of challenges, such as the changing scope of clientele and programming, nature of the job, and burnout. Much research focuses specifically on new agent challenges within the first year, however, few studies have focused on early career Extension agents after the initial onboarding process is complete. We used a phenomenological approach to explore the challenges of early career Extension agents, which yielded eleven major themes, such as a lack of understanding Extension, the nature of the job and understanding their role, and personal pressure. Another major theme was the lack of Extension knowledge of early career Extension agents which could stem from the lack of formalized Extension education programs and professional development programs targeted to early career agents. Social capital theory could be used to better understand the social networks of early career Extension agents, how these networks form over time, and what type of impact social networks have on new Extension agents.

Keywords

onboarding, professional development, burnout

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Cooperative Extension is an agency of change, providing non-formal education programs targeted toward community citizens. Since its inception in 1914, Extension has served both rural and urban dwellers alike, helping to transform communities through education and empowering citizens to make behavior changes that positively affect themselves, their families, communities, agriculture, and the environment (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). Florida Extension has 367 Extension agents who take the research conducted at a land-grant university and create educational programs in focus areas such as 4-H youth development, agriculture, horticulture, natural resources, families, and communities (UF/IFAS Extension, n.d.).

Extension agents serve a critical role within their local communities, but are faced with many challenges such as burnout, stress, and many weeknight and weekend activities (Kutilek, 2000), which often lead to employee turnover (Martin, 2011). Extension agent turnover leads to gaps in educational programming, community relationships, volunteers, knowledge, and experience (Arnold, 2008; Bradley et al., 2012; Enslie, 2005; Strong & Harder, 2009), which presents greater challenges at the state level due these programmatic and monetary losses (Borr & Young, 2010; Enslie, 2005; Kutilek, 2000). Martin (2011) suggested the first two to three years on the job is the most critical time for Extension agents to be onboarded and where the organization can decrease employee intent to leave the organization. Though there is much literature focused on Extension agents within their first year, and Extension agents overall, the literature does not focus on challenges of early career Extension agents (ECAs) beyond the first year and is essential to providing quality support to help curb employee retention.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The challenges Extension agents face have changed over time due to a myriad of reasons. In its prime, Cooperative Extension's outreach focused largely on agriculture and home economics (Gonzalez, 1982; Rasmussen; 1989). Beginning in the late 1940s and to this day, changes in technology, reduced farm size and rural populations, and Extension's clientele base all contribute to an ever-changing landscape of Extension agent challenges and the need for evolving professional development beyond on-board training (Warner & Christenson, 1984). With declining budgets and inadequate networks and partnerships (Borich, 2001), as well as a shift to serve increasing urban and suburban audiences (Harder et al., 2019; Henning et al., 2014), both Extension agents and the Extension system are feeling pressure to continuously adapt to meet changing needs, programming, and methodology.

There are many common challenges Extension agents and administrators are faced with, such as understanding agent roles and responsibilities (Enslie, 2005; Myers, 2011), reaching low-income audiences (Benavente et al., 2009), and reaching parity and working across different cultures (Moncloa et al., 2019). Other challenges faced by Extension professionals include, time management, balancing work, and family, working with volunteers, insufficient staff, lack of

training, and program evaluation and reporting (Diaz et al., 2019; Ensle, 2005; Myers, 2011). Harder et al. (2015) identified transactional factors increase the burnout of agents more than transformational factors. Challenges such as these affect the turnover rate of Extension professionals, which is approximately 7-9% annually (Benge & Harder, 2017; Kutilek, 2000), making it difficult for state Extension systems and program and staff development professionals to keep up with the demand of hiring and training new employees.

Among land-grant universities across the nation, a total of only 18 universities offers an undergraduate or graduate academic program for Extension agents (Harder et al., 2018). This lack of formal Extension education programs provided by land-grant universities contributes pressure to state Extension systems to train and develop new hires as they are not competent-ready when first hired. Harder et al. (2010) identified nineteen competencies entry-level Extension professionals should possess. However, many Extension agents lack the entry-level competencies deemed necessary by Harder et al. (2010). Thus, Cooperative Extension is hiring new educators without the complete skillset required to be successful.

The Motivation-Hygiene Theory (Herzberg, 1968) provides a lens for identifying challenges that can influence an employee's feelings of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction, which can ultimately affect their willingness to leave the organization. Herzberg (1987) theorized that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are distinct from each other, and that certain internal factors would lead to an increase in motivation and job satisfaction, whereas external factors would lead to negative feelings and job dissatisfaction. Herzberg (1987) stated, "The opposite of job satisfaction is not job dissatisfaction but, rather, no job satisfaction; and similarly, the opposite of job dissatisfaction is not job satisfaction, but no job dissatisfaction" (p. 4). Motivation factors relate to job satisfaction and include achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility, advancement, and growth (Smerek & Peterson, 2007). Conversely, maintenance factors, also known as hygiene factors, relate to an employee's job dissatisfaction and include company policy and administration, supervision, relationship with supervisor, work conditions, salary, relationships with peers, personal life, relationships with subordinates, status, and security (Smerek & Peterson, 2007).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore challenges of ECAs in Florida, and it was part of a larger investigation of the Florida Extension new agent onboarding process. The research question guiding the study was: What are the challenges of ECAs in Florida?

Methods

We used a qualitative methodology design through a phenomenological lens, where challenges of Florida ECAs were the phenomenon being addressed. Phenomenology was the appropriate approach for this study as we sought to capture the "meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). We acknowledged our

bias (Merriam, 1988) by searching for a convergence of information among multiple data sources to form themes (Golafshani, 2003). We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Florida IRB Office prior to contacting potential participants.

At the time the data was collected for this study, the total population of Florida Extension faculty was 367, of which 62 were County Extension Directors (CEDs), according to the Florida Extension Business Services office (T. Obreza, personal communication, March 15, 2019). The target population for the study consisted of: (a) 89 Extension agents who have been on the job for 1-3 years and (b) 48 CEDs who currently have an Extension agent in their office with 1-3 years of experience. A sample of 15 participants (eight CEDs and seven ECAs) were purposively selected to participate in the study based on their district, program areas, and county type (i.e., rural, urban, mixed).

We created two semi-structured interview guides, one for ECA participants and another for CED participants. A six-member expert panel reviewed both interview guides for face and content validity. The expert panel consisted of one Extension agent, one County Extension Director, two program and staff development professionals, and two state Extension faculty. Five of the six-member panel either currently work or have worked for Extension as an Extension agent or CED. Both interview guides consisted of 20 questions, with the difference being that we asked ECA participants about their own experience and we asked CED participants about their perceptions of their ECA(s) experiences in their office. This study pertains to the following three questions from the 20-question interview guide: (a) describe your experience so far as being an Extension agent; (b) describe any challenges you have encountered while working in Extension; and (c) what has been most difficult?

We conducted interviews over two months, ranging from 28 to 63 minutes in length, with the average interview length being 40 minutes. We audio recorded and transcribed interviews verbatim, and we utilized NVivo 12 qualitative software to organize, code, and analyze the data collected. Data was reduced using the *phenomenological reduction* method by Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen as modified by Moustakas (1994). We used five strategies to maintain credibility of study, as Eisner (1991) stated that establishing credibility within qualitative research “allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (p. 110). These strategies include investigator triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, thick and rich descriptions, and clarifying researcher bias.

Findings

The interviews yielded 11 themes of challenges: (a) building relationships; (b) official mentor; (c) lack of knowledge and understanding of Extension; (d) the nature of the job and understanding their role; (e) CED turnover; (f) leadership and supervision; (g) personal pressure; (h) plans of work and reporting; (i) competence; (j) volunteer management; and (k) following the previous agent.

Building Relationships

An ECA shared challenges she experienced with navigating political relationships during her first three years on the job (Abigail). Abigail expressed her experience with feeling misplaced among colleagues given her job title: “I got a sense from some of my colleagues that they thought I didn’t really belong where I was. And there was this sense that is inaccurate, but it still exists, that RSAs are somehow better or higher or above county agents.” Carl, a CED, urged his early career agent to build relationships with a few people in the county because of their visibility of being an opinion leader within the county:

I don’t know these 10 people very well, but I get the feeling that they have a huge influence on this group’. You need to get to know those people and decide if that’s true or not. If it’s not, we need to find out who does and figure out how to build those relationships. Build their trust, and overall, you’ll have a bigger impact with that group.

Official Mentors

Both the ECAs and the CEDs explained there were inconsistencies regarding assigned peer mentors, such as not having an assigned mentor, having a mentor who doesn’t keep consistent contact, and number of mentors (both official and unofficial). Early career agent Anna expressed, “it’s been, kind of, very short-lipped” when sharing experiences with her assigned mentor. Additionally, Abigail indicated, “I actually have two [mentors], because they weren’t sure who to assign me, based on me being an RSA and [program].” The CEDs wished their agents’ assigned mentors would have been more present or provided more guidance during the agents’ first years on the job, and they have witnessed a variation in mentor and mentee relationships in terms of time invested and experiences. Camile, a CED, expressed, “I feel like [agent] has these other kind of more informal networks that he uses more than maybe [mentor].”

Lack of Knowledge and Understanding of Extension

The ECAs did not discuss their lack of knowledge of Extension as much as the CEDs discussed the Extensions agents’ lack of knowledge of Extension being a difficulty. There was only one ECA, Abigail, who expressed her lack of knowledge of Extension and stated: “I didn’t really know what Extension was...I was in UF/IFAS for 6 years doing my graduate work, and I didn’t really know about land grants.” The CEDs expressed having to invest more time with agents who lack knowledge of Extension when coming into the job as compared to agents with previous knowledge of Extension when starting the job. Carol explained, “[Agent]... came in as an agent but did not have an Extension background. So, she has been undoubtedly the agent that I’ve done the most handholding with, ever, in my CED time.” Caleb explained that a lack of Extension knowledge coming into the job causes agents to “have a hard time figuring about what they’re supposed to do regarding programming.”

Nature of the Job and Understanding their Role

Many of the ECAs shared their high level of uncertainty of what they were supposed to be accomplishing when they started their job (Anna, Alexis, Adam, Alyssa, Amy). Anna stated, “there have been parts of it that have been frustrating, not knowing the exact direction to take.” Amy explained the amount of time to learn the job was a challenge, and she

communicated, “the thing that you kind of hear a lot is ‘oh, it takes you 6 or more years to really understand your job,’ ... It shouldn’t take me 6 years to understand my job!” Adam also discussed:

[Finding] your role within the county and how you fit... a lot of times they [the county] are already doing a lot of the same programs, so they have departments doing some of the programs, and you have to find a place to fit that makes sense. This is a challenge to make everyone happy and creating the right programs that people want.

The discussion with the CEDs was very similar to the discussion with the ECAs regarding agents being uncertain what exactly they should be accomplishing in the first years on the job (Camile, Cade, Caleb, Cameron, and Carol). Carol shared, “I think that she [agent] really had trouble understanding what she was supposed to be doing, for almost the first year, and it took her months just to start teaching.” Cameron discussed, “as an agent, you have to come up with your own programming, what you think is important, and being a new agent... that can be a challenge, you know? What do I do, when do I do it, what’s enough, what’s not enough?” Caleb stated, “Knowing what to do. Having a clear job description: ‘this is what I need to do’. Too many times [new agents] are left in the office and we say ‘okay, go out into the world and figure it out’. They need a clearer direction.”

Turnover of County Extension Directors

Two ECAs from two different counties shared their experiences with having multiple CEDs in their first three years on the job (Adam and Amy). The multiple turnovers in leadership left the agents confused, as each CED came with different expectations. Adam shared, “we’ve had multiple CEDs, three in three years. They’ve all had a different way of doing things, which can be tough trying to navigate.” Adam expanded his experience:

You didn’t know what was expected. With our CED now, we know what to expect which is definitely different than before. She seems to have more of a balanced plan. I feel now more micromanaged now than I did before, which is something I have to get used to.

Amy shared, “she’s been our interim CED, I want to say for about six months now, so I’m still trying to learn her... leadership style.” Amy further explained:

Each person has their own unique leadership style, and so trying to conform or understand those different leadership styles can... not that it was hard, but it is a little, you know, it can be a little challenging, especially when, you know some of them are interim.

CED Leadership and Supervision

ECAs expressed frustrations relating to the level of guidance they received from their CEDs (Abigail, Anna, Adam, Alyssa, and Amy). Anna indicated a lack of coaching received from her CED by stating:

I’m not sure I’ve had what I would call ‘coaching’. I mean, I’ve had reviews of my packet... But I don’t think I’ve had... I’m not sure what you would call ‘coaching’ But as

far as coaching specific things, I mean, I don't think that has, you know, that hasn't really happened.

Alyssa shared her lack of confidence in her CED to coach her and stated, "some of the things that I'm working on, I know that she may not be able to necessarily give me good direction on, so that's why I've kind of moved to other parts of our Extension community to find some of those answers." Abigail discussed frustrations with CEDs from other counties:

They just assumed that I needed any guidance they had to give me, and without trying to meet me at my level, you know? I'm sure that CED would have had plenty of great things to tell me as someone who's only been in Extension 3 years, but I don't really need someone to tell me how to network at this point.

ECAs expressed their enjoyment with CEDs who have experience in their program area or have experience being an agent prior to becoming a CED (Adam and Anna). Adam stated, "I always like the CEDs that are veteran agents. Those CEDs with that longer experience that worked their way through the system, they tend to have a really good perspective." Anna, a RSA, struggled with CEDs from different program areas, stating "with the counties that their CED is an [agriculture] agent, again, it's kind of easy because they know what I'm doing, and they know what I'm involved in and what's going on."

Personal Pressure

A challenge many ECAs discussed was personal pressure they, often times, put on themselves (Abigail, Alexis, Adam, Amelia, Alyssa, and Amy). One of these pressures was time management, often related to not being able to say *no* or overcommitting to too many tasks (Abigail, Alexis, Adam, and Amelia). Abigail shared, "the obvious challenge of time management and figuring out your limits... you have enough freedom to get yourself in trouble with your time." Abigail continued to share her experience with personal pressure, stating:

I don't really like the term 'time management' because it's more overcommitting, because I'm extremely efficient. I don't waste time at work – I just work a lot. So, I find it really hard to say 'no' because I think in my head, something's not going to take me that long because I do work efficiently, but of course, there's always things that you don't plan for. So just learning my limits, I guess, has been the most difficult. And sticking to those [limits].

Much like the ECAs reported, the CEDs noticed the ECAs' lack of ability to manage their time causing stress for the agents and their lack of ability to say 'no' (Candice, Cade, and Carol). Cade shared an experience with an agent, stating:

[Agent] also gets dragged into things too. He got a call asking to help pull weeds at a community garden. I said, '[Agent], you're not a weed puller. You're a horticultural agent and you're responsible for programming. You can't use valuable time and resources to drive across town and help someone pull weeds. That is not going to work.' Helping them, sometimes, as these things can be difficult because they are afraid to say no. Help them figure out how to draw that line and say 'no, I can't do that'. That can be difficult for all new agents, even seasoned agents sometimes.

Plans of Work and Reporting

Reporting and developing records of accomplishment (ROAs) and plans of work (POWs) have shown to be a challenge for ECAs (Anna, Adam, Amelia, and Amy). Anna explained that because of the nature of her programs, she struggled with how to report impact, stating “I can’t say because of this program, 10 less cattle were lame on this farm, because there’s a million things that go into that, and there’s no way to measure the instance, the direct impact of that.” Amelia shared her challenges with ROAs by explaining, “I have to admit, the one area I struggle with is figuring out the percentages in the ROA, how much behavior change you are making.”

The CEDs shared that understanding plans of work and annual reporting is time consuming and especially difficult for early career agents who are not familiar with the system (Cade, Caleb, Cameron, and Carly). For example, Cameron shared:

As an agent, I think it’s always good to have a lot of guidance for putting together your [annual report]. It’s a very stressful thing because you never know if enough is enough. You never know if you’ve got enough programs, or trainings, or what have you, and there’s no formula to tell you that there’s enough, which I’ve always found very difficult to swallow.

The CEDs also recognized the importance of their role in helping ECAs understand the reporting processes and what is expected of them (Caleb, Cameron, and Carly). Carly explained:

I didn’t do the greatest service to her in the very beginning about reporting. And reporting can make or break an agent. I know it’s just a little bit in the onboarding sessions, and it kind of depends on when they start, whether it’s spring or fall, but I just think we are doing them a disservice if we don’t do more in that arena. Learn how to write that success story. Learn how to write that objective. Maybe it’s a workshop so they can develop their first set of objectives.

Competence

ECAs expressed they received a number of professional development trainings but do not feel as competent in all areas they should be. The ECAs reported desire to receive more in-depth training related to social science research (Abigail), evaluation and evaluation methods (Abigail and Alyssa), development of logic models (Alyssa), and strategies for marketing (Amy). Abigail shared her challenging experiences with evaluation:

I definitely played a lot of catch-up in terms of my reporting and getting a good start on evaluation... a lot of people just sort of jump in head-first and focus on developing presentation materials, and the evaluation is sort of an afterthought, and that was mostly because I didn’t really understand the sort of short, medium, long-term impacts.

The CEDs and the ECAs only indicated one competence area in common as a common challenge among ECAs: evaluation. Additionally, CEDs expressed different competence areas the ECAs could use supplemental professional development, such as social media (Camile), communication and dealing with conflict (Camile and Carol), program development and teaching (Caleb, Carly, and Carol), and developing relationships with clientele (Carol and Carl).

Volunteer Management

Both ECAs and CEDs expressed challenges with volunteer management, though CEDs perceived volunteer management as a bigger challenge than the ECAs did. Alexis explained, “I really hadn’t put a lot of emphasis on the volunteer recruitment and retention. And I feel like that’s the hardest, most challenging thing – is something to do with, you know, some kind of training on volunteers.” Most of the experiences shared by the CEDs were with agents who had responsibilities with the Master Gardeners (MGs) and 4-H programs (Cade, Caleb, Cameron, and Carol). The challenges witnessed by the CEDs regarding the agents’ volunteer management had to do with volunteer conflicts. Carol explained her ECA dealt with backlash from volunteers through the enforcement of rules. Additionally, Cade expressed that running a volunteer program can be challenge for an early career agent:

It’s a big challenge, especially here because we have a lot of them, over 100 MGs, that come on a regular basis. One of the key things with those volunteers is they come from a job where they were director, they were in charge, and now they are part of a program where they are asked to pull weeds or do something that they might not necessarily want to do.

Following the Previous Agent

CEDs discussed following the previous agent as a challenge for ECAs. Candice discussed how the previous agent’s lack of following policies and procedures caused hardship for the current agent in their beginning years on the job:

Some of the challenges she’s been having, and it’s getting all these MGs that have existed with all these loopy-goosy rules back in the fold into the new rules. For them to understand she is doing it for a reason. There was quite a bit of folks, the MGs that have been here for a long time really like her, they love her teaching style, they don’t like the rules so much, but they are getting to understand why.

Different than the previous example, Caleb witnessed his ECA having to follow an agent who was well-respected. Caleb mentioned the ECA was adjusting to the job, but following a well-respected agent is difficult, stating “I don’t care what Master Gardener agent comes in, it’s always hard following someone who did well. So you have a year for the agent to get used to the volunteers and vice versa.”

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

ECAs indicated a myriad of challenges, though the majority of those challenges are maintenance factors in which Herzberg (1968) suggested an organization must focus its attention in order to decrease employee turnover. Nine of the 11 challenges identified in this study fall under the ‘maintenance factor umbrella’, which include: (a) building relationships; (b) official mentor; (c) the nature of the job and understanding their role; (d) CED turnover; (e) leadership and supervision; (f) personal pressure; (g) plans of work and reporting; (h) volunteer management; and (i) following the previous agent.

Both ECAs and CEDs alluded to difficulties having strong relationships regarding clientele, volunteers, mentors, and their CEDs. Some ECAs who had been on the job for three years did not yet have a mentor, and other ECAs noted very poor relationships with their respective CEDs due to leadership styles or CED turnover. Many of the challenges the ECAs and the CEDs identified have existed for at least a decade or more as Diaz et al. (2019), Ensle (2005), and Myers (2011) all indicated similar conclusions. It is an interesting finding that many ECAs struggle to develop relationships because Extension is a relational organization that utilizes its social capital to onboard and train employees (Seevers & Graham, 2012). In addition, the amount of CED turnover for ECAs is a major cause for concern as CEDs play an integral part in the onboarding and development of Extension agents (citation omitted). We recommend UF/IFAS Extension conduct an in-depth assessment to understand why CEDs are turning over, as well as the impact of CED turnover on ECAs in those counties.

The Extension agents and CEDs in this study attested that defining the roles and responsibilities of the Extension agent were difficult. Ensle (2005) and Myers (2011) reached similar conclusions in their respective studies. The Extension job and understanding their role is a not a new challenge for Extension agents and is rooted within the changing Extension landscape and the lack of formalized academic Extension education programs (Harder et al., 2018; Henning et al., 2014). However, what is concerning is that agents in their third year are still challenged with understanding their job. ECAs should understand what Extension is when hired, and UF/IFAS should evaluate and/or revamp their new agent training program.

It was evident that the Extension agents included or discussed in this study require professional development programs focused on their evolving needs which is supported by the thoughts of Warner and Christenson (1984). Plans of work and reporting are common challenges among all Extension agents (Benge et al., 2020; Diaz et al., 2019; Lamm, 2011); Extension administrators and evaluation specialists need to increase the training and resources available to creating plans of work and evaluation capacity among its workforce. As Extension agent job responsibilities increase so does the demand for competence and skillsets to fulfill these responsibilities. Florida Extension agents may not be receiving enough professional development in these areas of need.

Though this study results are not generalizable beyond Florida, other Extension systems should ensure their onboarding processes are producing the desired results and limiting the amount of job dissatisfaction (i.e., maintenance factors) that can lead to employee turnover. The costs associated with onboarding and developing a new employee can be high (Borr & Young, 2010); however, if an agent is not performing at a sufficient level two to three years on the job, Extension administrators might consider either creating professional improvement plans or parting ways with those employees, as the costs of employing an insufficient employee may be higher than hiring and training a new employee. Extension researchers could use social capital theory to better understand the social networks of early career Extension agents, how these networks form over time, and what type of impact social networks have on new Extension agents.

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