

# Career Influences of Agricultural Extension Agents

Shannon Arnold, Assistant Professor

*Montana State University*

Nick Place, Associate Dean and Associate Director

*University of Maryland Cooperative Extension*

*This qualitative study sought to explore the influences that shaped Florida agricultural agents' employment decisions at different career stages. A purposive sample was used to select 12 agents who were classified into one of the three stages of the career stages model (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002). In-depth interviews were utilized to investigate positive and negative influences on the decision-making process regarding an Extension career. Grounded theory was the primary data analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Positive influences on entry level agents' career decisions were personal traits, motivators, and support systems. Negative influences were lack of direction, personal work management issues, job pressures, and mandated work requirements. Positive influences on colleague level agents' career decisions were motivators, career growth opportunities, career management strategies, and collaboration with key people. Negative influences were job performance measures, salary disparity, and personal work management issues. Positive influences on counselor/advisor level agents' career decisions were motivators, career growth opportunities, and career management strategies. Negative influences were career overload and job dissatisfiers. A grounded theory was developed to explain the most significant factors and influences. Findings should be addressed by the organization to improve the overall career satisfaction of agents and maintain its high-quality employees.*

## Introduction

The quality of personnel determines the abilities, skills, and competence of the Extension organization (ECOP, 2002). Two of the top internal challenges currently facing the Cooperative Extension System are recruitment and retention of agents (ECOP, 2005). These issues must be openly addressed in order for Extension to continue its diverse public services and programs. As competition from industry and other agricultural organizations increases, Extension administrators must identify strategies on how to identify and fulfill staff needs for long-term employment. Improvement in recruitment and retention can advance the quality of Extension services, improve the reliability of the organization, strengthen the connection to the public, and reduce organizational expenses (Enslie, 2005).

Organizational initiatives must be directed at understanding employees. This will require administrators to become more knowledgeable about personal and professional influences on

agents' careers. Having an understanding of factors that affect critical career decisions is invaluable. Results can be used to help attract new agents, improve recruitment strategies, provide direction for future professional development and career assistance, and reduce attrition. The ability to recruit and retain long-term, high quality professionals must be a high priority for Extension to remain a viable and successful educational outreach system (Conklin, Hook, Kielbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). The future will ultimately be determined on how well the organization approaches these critical areas to accomplish its goals and mission (ECOP, 2002).

Skilled and knowledgeable agents reflect the integrity and reputation of Extension. Extension must ensure that its faculty is provided with necessary career assistance in order to perform their jobs effectively. Administrators and directors must constantly be engaged and responsive to agents' ever-changing work related needs (Conklin, et al., 2002). Each state Extension organization must understand the

specific career issues affecting its staff and develop a plan on how to best address them. Knowing agents' needs at various stages is essential to determine positive and negative influences, appropriate professional development opportunities, and correct organizational strategies (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, et al., 2002). Each of these activities has a direct impact on the recruitment and retention of staff, career satisfaction, job motivation, and the reputation of Extension.

### Conceptual Framework

A variety of career development models have assisted in understanding the needs of professionals. Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977) created the original model for professional career stages which was adapted by Rennekamp and Nall (1994). Using Rennekamp and Nall's career stage model as a framework, Kutilek et al. (2002) later adapted the model to create a "systems approach" for career and organizational success. This subsequent model is divided into three separate stages that coincide with an employee's career growth and development: entry level, colleague level, and counselor/advisor level. In addition, it outlines motivators and organizational strategies that are beneficial at each stage (Kutilek, et al., 2002).

The career stages model outlines appropriate motivators for employees based upon the stage and recommends organizational professional development strategies to best address career needs (Kutilek, et al., 2002). The motivators provide the drive for selecting and participating in various professional development opportunities. The organizational strategies focus on relevant professional development opportunities for employees within each career stage (Rennekamp & Nall, 1993). Each stage has different motivators and as a result, separate career development programs must be tailored for every level.

#### Entry Stage

Newly-hired employees comprise the entry level stage. Motivators at this stage include: understanding the organization, structure, and culture; obtaining essential skills to perform the job; establishing linkages with internal partners; exercising creativity and initiative; and moving from dependence to independence. Beginning

Extension agents commonly feel overwhelmed with the diverse multitude of job responsibilities; therefore, specific attention must be given to ensure each new agent successfully transitions into the organization. The first years can significantly impact agents' attitudes, behaviors, and practices for the future, so job-related skills must be developed quickly for career success (Bailey, 2005). To address professional development needs, organizational strategies include a peer mentoring program, identification of professional support teams, leadership coaching, and orientation/job training programs (Kutilek, et al., 2002).

#### Colleague Stage

The colleague stage focuses on an agent's career growth and development in the areas of continuing education, problem-solving, independence, and expertise (Kutilek, et al., 2002). Motivators for this stage include: developing an area of expertise, professional development funding, becoming an independent contributor in problem resolution, gaining membership and identity in professional community, expanding creativity and innovation, and moving from independence to interdependence (Kutilek, et al., 2002; Rennekamp & Nall, 1993;). The length an agent remains in this stage varies and can be highly dependent upon work responsibilities. Independent learning and maturity are common characteristics of individuals in this stage; however, structured learning opportunities must also be available. Organizational strategies that can be implemented include in-service education, professional development, and formal education opportunities (Kutilek, et al., 2002).

#### Counselor and Advisor Stage

The final stage is reached when agents become mentors, contribute to organizational decision-making, participate in job enrichment, and take on leadership positions (Kutilek, et al., 2002). Continuing education is also important at this stage, but may be in more diverse areas of expertise. Motivators associated with this stage include: acquiring a broad-based expertise, attaining leadership positions, engaging in organizational problem-solving, counseling/coaching other professionals, facilitating self renewal, achieving a position of influence, and stimulating thought in others.

The organization can address employees' developmental needs in this stage through life and career renewal retreats, mentoring and trainer agent roles, leadership assessment centers, and organizational sounding boards (Kutilek, et al., 2002).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the influences on career decisions of Florida agricultural Extension agents. Agricultural agents were selected due to the importance of agriculture in Florida and the perceived increasing rates of agent turnover prevalent in the Florida Cooperative Extension System. The key objectives of this study included: (a) To discover the influences that shape career decisions of Florida agricultural Extension agents at different career stages, and (b) To develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues affecting the career decisions of Florida agricultural Extension agents.

### **Methods**

#### *Participant Selection*

A comprehensive list of commercial agricultural agents in Florida generated through the Dean of Extension was used to identify the population. One-hundred and eight agricultural agents were identified as eligible participants for the study. To be eligible, agents must have been currently employed with at least an 80% appointment in agriculture. A panel of experts, including the researcher, an Extension education professor, the Associate Dean of Extension, and the Associate Dean of Agricultural Programs, was consulted to help narrow the sample further to 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 were then classified into one of the three stages of the career stages model: entry, colleague, and counselor/advisor (Kutilek et al., 2002).

A purposive sample, conducted by two primary researchers using the panel's knowledge, was then used to select final participants. Twelve dependable and

respectable agricultural agents with consistent work performance were chosen. Purposive sampling advocates the selection of information-rich cases for study to provide thorough understanding and insight of the research objectives (Patton, 2002). To assist in transferability, dependability and credibility of findings, the selected participants represented different educational levels, ethnicities, 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 the study population in these particular areas.

#### *Data Collection*

The interview guide was pilot-tested with two agents from the broader population to ensure credibility. The final participants were contacted to explain the purpose and importance of the study, the value of their participation, and the data collection procedure. One week prior to the interview, the researcher sent a pre-interview questionnaire and the interview questions to each participant to encourage reflection prior to the interview process.

During the interview, the researcher spent sufficient time with the agents to learn about the county, clientele, and Extension programs, and to 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. 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, a 60 to 90 minute interview was conducted and audio-recorded. An informed consent form was signed by each participant prior to the interview to comply with IRB protocol. Researcher field notes and memos were recorded during and immediately after the interview which included key points, impressions, and important observations. To protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were used and specific identifiers were deleted throughout the analysis process.

### *Data Analysis*

Grounded theory was the primary data analysis procedure used due to its focus on how meaning making advances the understanding of personal perspectives and insight (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, an emergent grounded theory design was employed that focuses on the generation of new theory using ideas and concepts that emerge from the process, rather than prior knowledge and preconceptions, as its foundation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Strategies for this design include concurrent data analysis and collection, a specific data coding process, constant comparisons, refinement of emerging ideas, and integration of data into theory (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed. 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 and interpreted. This review process is commonly termed the member checking process (Hatch, 2002).

The researcher separated, sorted, and synthesized the data using open, axial, and selective qualitative coding procedures. Coding offers 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, 2002). 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 selective codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Findings**

The selective categories defined the primary influences on career decisions of entry, colleague, and counselor/advisor level agents. Findings from each category are detailed below.

#### *Entry Level*

Positive influences were classified into three categories: personal traits, motivators, and support systems. Personal skills focused on agents' ability to apply their individual talents, such as critical and creative thinking, problem-

solving, relationship building, public speaking, and people skills. Participants enjoyed "helping farmers with their problems," "providing objective advice," and "answering questions in a non-biased way." Matt entered into Extension because he realized that he "...was really more talented working with people and thinking outside the box in problem-solving." In addition, having knowledge in the areas of Extension, evaluation, program development, community development, change, and production agriculture were beneficial. According to Tammy, this content knowledge allowed agents to "immediately address clientele problems and build relationships upon entering the system." Motivators created positive reinforcement for agents to gauge their success and provided direction for the future. Freedom, job variety and flexibility, goal setting, and reputation establishment were all positive influences. Feedback received from clientele, peers, and supervisors provided informal guidance as agents become established in the county. Samantha stated, "The most satisfying is your clientele. When you help them with a problem or solution... and then they tell you, we couldn't have done it without you and we appreciate it." Additional motivators included client behavior changes, program participation, teamwork efforts, recognition, peer encouragement, awards, scholarships, and grants. Success accomplished through teamwork was described as an important experience that helps agents to establish their reputation. The ability to see client behavior changes was noted as a principal motivating factor. Benjamin explained his primary motivation, "I really want to see change happen and I want to be a part of that change." Support was categorized into people and informational systems. Dependence on others was important for survival as a new agent and having a network of people at all levels assisted in career understanding and establishment. Matt was very appreciative of guidance from his supervisor when he began, "It makes a lot of difference when you start and you have a boss who's willing to take the time to tell you what's expected and some things that you need to do right away." Informational support was valuable to build knowledge, answer client questions, and develop a community reputation. All 12 participants agreed on the importance of

university specialists as a valuable resource. Eric appreciated “having the full resources of the university at your disposal” and that “you don’t have to know everything and do it alone.”

Negative influences were divided into four areas: lack of direction, personal work management issues, job pressures, and mandated work requirements. Lack of direction was the primary negative influence cited. Unclear guidance from supervisors and the absence of clear, stated job expectations caused agents to be uncertain of duties, responsibilities, and programming efforts. Brenda reflected on her first day and how she felt, “I sat at this desk, didn’t have a phone, didn’t have a computer, and I thought okay what does an Extension agent do?” Matt commented on the vague job expectations that confront new agents:

That’s the biggest thing I’ve heard is that people starting out...don’t understand the expectations...There is no job description that tells you what to do. You’re just supposed to relate and do problem-solving and do educational programs for these folks, whatever group of folks you were hired to work with and nobody says, this is what you ought to do.

Initial mandated requirements and job pressures including excessive meetings, reporting and accountability confusion, the tenure and promotion process, completion of a Master’s degree, and diverse programming efforts were overwhelming to entry level agents. A commonality found among all agents was the negative experiences with the reporting system. Participants discussed the stress of having to complete an annual report without proper training and supervision upon entering their positions. Personal work management issues referred to the agents’ inability to organize and manage time in accordance with work responsibilities. Several mentioned initial troubles with scheduling, long work hours, planning, and work efficiency.

#### *Colleague Level*

Positive influences were classified into four categories: motivators, career growth opportunities, career management strategies, and collaboration with key people. Motivators that positively influenced agents included

completion of tenure and promotion, long-term visible results, client behavior changes, feedback, peer and community recognition, and an established reputation. Brenda described her internal motivation as client-focused, “I’m very driven and I get a lot of personal satisfaction from what I do. Whether other people consider it successful or not, I think I have been successful...to make a difference and to be able to affect change for the better.” Other motivators mentioned were awards, promotions, financial incentives, program success, community acceptance, increased salary, work expansion, and clientele improvements. Participants discussed supportive career growth opportunities such as professional development trainings, conferences, a Master’s degree, and leadership positions. Samantha was an officer in local and state associations and found that “working together with those groups has probably helped me develop in leadership and with just working together with people so you’ve got somebody you can call.” Career management strategies improved agents’ ability to manage time, establish personal limits, and balance personal and professional responsibilities. Sean improved his time management skills and said, “I think you learn it. You learn how to manage your time more efficiently. If you’re working on something, you learn how to get it done efficiently while still turning out a quality product.” Collaboration with key community leaders, professionals, and colleagues provided positive experiences to solidify relationships. Matt gave credit to a multi-county agent group for his early successes, while Samantha also relied upon her colleagues for support, “Working with a group of agents was beneficial. I think it’s good to have some collaborative effort with other agents because if you’re out here by yourself, you can sink or swim pretty quick.”

Negative influences were divided into three categories: work performance measures, salary disparity, and personal work management issues. Inconsistencies in the employee reporting system, the performance evaluation process, promotion requirements, and evaluation guidelines were specific experiences linked to dissatisfaction. Disproportionate salary adjustments were a primary concern. Patricia was discouraged because “people starting out are gonna get as much as you are with no

experience because they only adjusted the new hire salaries.” Personal work management issues referred to agents’ ongoing struggles in balancing increased work demands and available time. Gabby reflected on the increasing demands from both clientele and the university that contributed to burnout at this point in her career, “You finally have gotten one promotion and now you’re looking at a second ...and they really start wanting more and more. By then, people know you and they start calling you more and your time gets spread thinner and thinner.”

#### *Counselor/Advisor Level*

Positive influences were classified into three categories: motivators, career growth opportunities, and management strategies. Motivators focused on personal satisfaction achieved through positive feedback, client loyalty, and community respect. Harry has remained in Extension for over 20 years because “I feel like this is what I was born to do.” Patricia also described her work satisfaction, “I really enjoy what I do and that has been the driving factor keeping me in Extension, I do enjoy what I do, I feel like I am making a difference and that’s important.” Mike had a similar opinion on what motivates agents, “Everybody talks about money, but it’s not about money...the reason you do all that extra stuff is because you have pride in your job and you have that drive to do your best, but you also genuinely want to help people.” Other motivators centered on community impacts and client success resulting from work accomplishments. Matt was proud to be recognized as a member of the community and the dignity associated with his job, “It’s nice to be recognized in the community as a kind of a community leader...you’re not just somebody who’s working an eight to five job and you go home and you’re a nobody.” Career growth opportunities were motivating for agents to influence others and grow professionally through mentoring and leadership programs. Gabby has served as a mentor to several new agents and discussed the mutual benefits of the relationship, “Well, getting to know them, but in helping them learn more about their job, it actually gives me a different perspective on what I’m doing and some new ideas and some interactions where we can work together and collaborate to do bigger and better things.”

Career management strategies improved agents’ ability to prioritize time and achieve career goals. Strategies included self-promotion, focused clientele guidance, limiting non-productive activities, aggressively seeking clientele, prioritization, separation of work and family, and setting personal goals.

Negative influences were divided into two categories: career overload and job dissatisfiers. Career overload was described as a time period characterized by increased responsibilities, promotional stress, and excessive assignments commonly associated with having an established professional identity. Gabby reflected on the added demands at this point in her career, “You start getting put on more committees, getting more asked of you from the university and the counties, and it just seems to be all of a sudden almost more than you can handle.” Job dissatisfiers that led to burnout were self-induced stress, lack of support, unequal recognition, insufficient pay raises, reporting difficulties, and excessive committees. Discontent with the pay raise system was a primary concern as Matt expressed, “We pay the same...basically the same raise goes to the sorriest people as to the best people.” Participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the complexity and difficulty of the reporting and accountability system.

### **Conclusions/Grounded Theory**

#### *Entry Level*

Personal characteristics, skills, and knowledge bases were described by participants as essential to perform the job, encourage creativity, and develop initiative. Personal and informational support systems assist agents in understanding the organization, structure, and culture, as well as establish linkages. Support systems displayed the importance of dependence on others for survival, and supported the model’s progress of agents from dependence to independence. Finally, mentors, teams, new agent orientation, and in-service training were helpful to all participants and directly align with the organizational strategies of the career stages model (Kutilek, et al., 2002). The influences cited by participants, but not specifically mentioned in the career stages model were the motivators and ability to affect societal change. Participants regarded motivators and the process

of change as positive reinforcement necessary to gauge their professional success.

The negative influences support the previous literature on reasons for leaving Extension. Personal work management issues, job pressures, and mandated work requirements fit into the organizational, individual, work, and non-work related factors described by Rousan and Henderson (1996). Lack of direction and supervisory support confirm findings from Kutilek (2000) and isolation mentioned by Ewert and Rice (1994). The unique negative influences found in this study were the difficulties in the employee reporting and accountability system that created additional stress, confusion, and job pressures on agents.

#### *Colleague level*

Positive influences were directly supported by the career stages model motivators, organizational strategies, and correlate to the literature on job satisfaction (Dalton, et al. 1977; Kutilek, et al., 2002; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994). Riggs and Beus (1993) reported six factors of job satisfaction including the authority to run programs, the job, supervisors, salary, fringe benefits, and opportunity for growth which were all positive influences on participants in this study. Job satisfaction factors noted by Ensle (2005) such as flexible work schedule, personal satisfaction from educating clientele, and personal enjoyment were also significant (Buford, Bedeian, & Lindner, 1995). Participants discussed career management strategies that identified with the literature on coping strategies, but offered more specific examples that could be useful for direct application (Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Place & Jacob, 2001). The influence not mentioned in the literature, but found to be critical was the importance of observing changes in clientele and community behaviors as a result of Extension assistance.

Negative influences defined by participants support previous literature on factors related to job dissatisfaction, including high stress levels, overload, and burnout (Buford, et al., 1995; Ewert & Rice, 1994; Place & Jacob, 1991; Riggs & Beus, 1993; Rousan & Henderson, 1996 ;). Salary disparity was referenced in the literature, however participants' concerns were specifically on unequal salary compression and insignificant pay raises. Inconsistencies in performance

evaluations, the promotion process, and reporting systems were also discouraging.

#### *Counselor/Advisor Level*

Positive influences were directly supported by job satisfaction literature and the career stages model (Buford, et al., 1995; Dalton, et al. 1977; Kutilek, et al., 2002; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994;). The motivators in the career stages model, including expertise, leadership, and influence, directly connected to the findings. Additionally, the motivators outlined in Herzberg's Theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959) including achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement for personal growth were common themes identified. Participants sought career growth opportunities and considered mentoring a mutually beneficial experience. Client loyalty, community impact, and behavior change were positive influences not highlighted in the literature, but critical to the personal satisfaction of the participants in this study.

Negative influences supported earlier literature on the factors of job dissatisfaction and reasons for leaving Extension (Kutilek, 2000). Participants discussed career overload as a time period of increased responsibilities, stress of promotion requirements, salary concerns, and excessive assignments that led to questioning career impacts and consideration of other jobs. These factors mirror the reasons for leaving Extension found by Rousan and Henderson (1996), and the stress and turnover issues among Extension directors reported by Clark (1992). Factors that produced job dissatisfaction including burnout, lack of professional support, numerous leadership positions, stress, unequal career recognition, time limitations, and excessive committees were similar to findings from Ewert and Rice (1994), Rousan and Henderson (1996), Kutilek (2000), and Buford, et al.(1995). The distinctive factors of job dissatisfaction emphasized by participants, but not reported in early literature were reporting system limitations, an inefficient evaluation system, and emphasis on service quantity rather than quality.

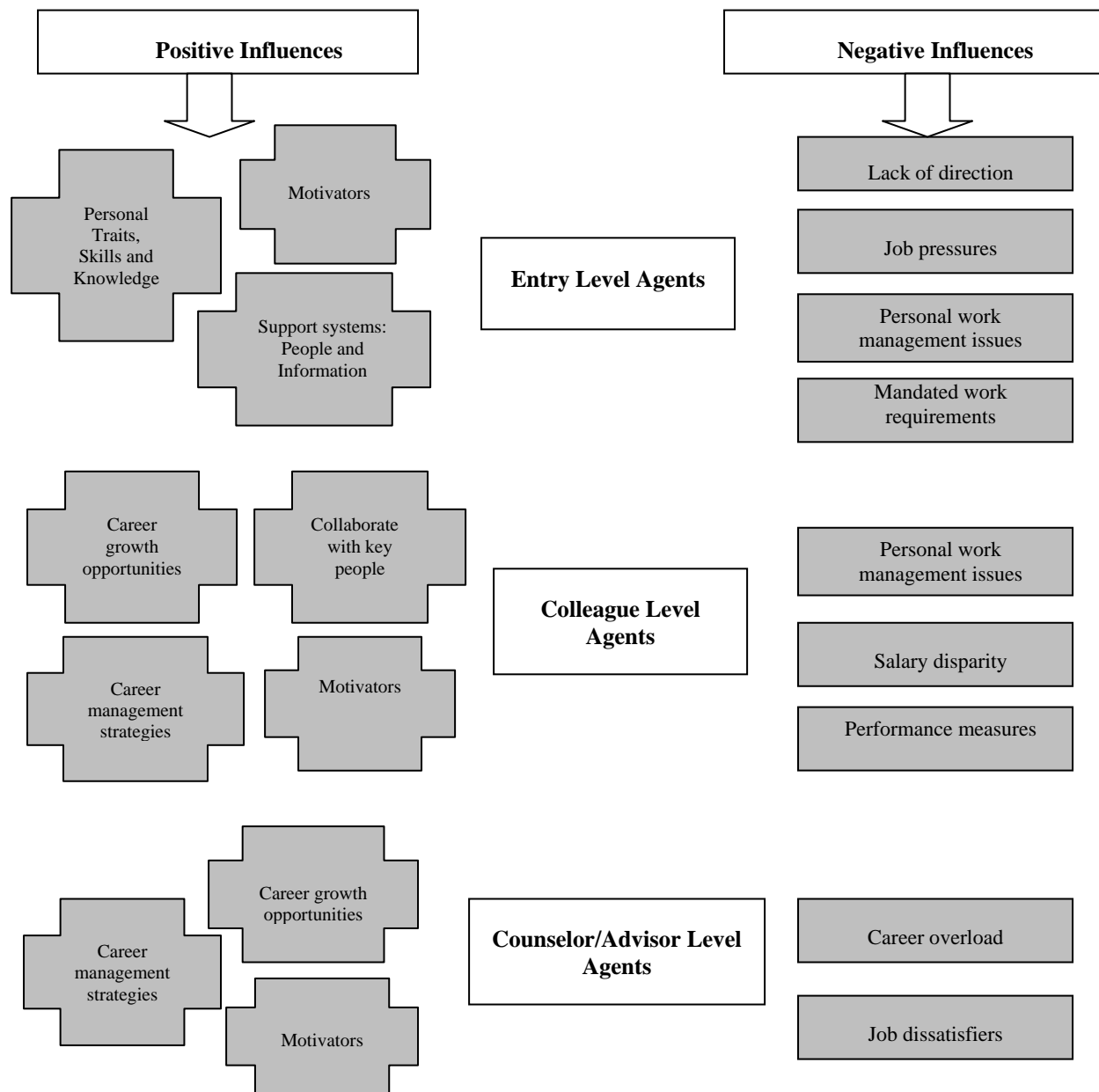


Figure 1. Grounded theory of the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents at different career stages.

### Recommendations

Previous qualitative research in the area of Extension agents' career decisions is limited. Findings from this study revealed specific positive and negative influences that can be used to understand and support Florida agricultural agents' professional growth. Research in the

area of career development must continually be conducted to identify variables of importance, motivators, organizational strategies, and educational opportunities that add to job satisfaction. Research can also reveal negative influences that inhibit professional growth.

This study should be expanded to explore career influences on agricultural Extension



agents in Florida, other states, and internationally to discover similarities and differences. It should also be expanded to agents in all Extension program areas. There is a need for continued exploration of how changes in society, clientele, technology, and agriculture affect agents' career needs, and how attitudes change over the course of one's career. This data will assist in documenting the need for continuous professional development.

Supportive relationships were a positive influence on all participants' career decisions at every stage. Connections with agents and specialists, peers, mentors, clientele, administrators, and advisors were critical to career satisfaction and longevity. These networks played a decisive role in motivating agents and provided necessary physical, emotional, and mental support that assisted in career success. Opportunities for agents to build and maintain working relationships were critical for career growth and management. Research on the impacts of teamwork, agent groups, collaborative programming, and social networks should be investigated. Having an understanding of the effects of social relationships can ultimately assist in organizational recruitment, retention strategies, and career development programs.

### **Discussion/Implications**

Filling vacancies with unqualified agents whose talents, characteristics, knowledge, 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 effective long-term employment. Once employed, the organization must work to meet the needs of its agents and provide the necessary career support. Administrators must continue to provide supplemental resources, rewards and recognition, continuing education, financial incentives, merit-based salary increases, and professional development for all agents. University specialists must be assigned to design appropriate career development opportunities, maintain relationships with agents beyond

orientation, and collaborate with agents in the field to improve career satisfaction.

Extension administrators and directors should become more knowledgeable about career development models to raise awareness of what agents are experiencing at different career stages. Having an understanding of the negative influences currently being experienced by agents offers an appropriate starting point for future career development. Lack of direction and support was the most common barrier for entry level agents. In order to improve guidance, it is important for the organization to provide clear, stated job expectations and a formal mentor to support new agents. Yet, an employee must also be self-directed and motivated to make the most of this career. This job may not be a good fit for those who are incapable of handling this type of responsibility. Salary compression and insignificant pay raises were the major negative influences on colleague level agents. It was understood that salaries must remain competitive with other agricultural professions to attract new agents. However, in order to retain agents, salaries must be adjusted to ensure more experienced agents are not making less than new agents. Agents must be compensated for work excellence with merit pay increases and higher raises based on evaluation scores. Counselor/advisor level agents discussed career overload as the most negative influence on their satisfaction. The overwhelming responsibilities encountered by agents with years of experience must be studied. The organization must work on balancing leadership and committee assignments placed upon senior agents to reduce burnout. Difficulties with the use of and inconsistencies with the reporting and accountability system were referenced as a negative experience by all stages of agents. The need to streamline reporting and make the system more "user-friendly" was recommended. These unique factors, experiences, and influences reported by participants had a significant effect on their careers. Findings must be acknowledged and addressed by the organization to improve the overall career satisfaction of agents, provide direction and support for new agents, and maintain high-quality agents that represent Extension.

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SHANNON ARNOLD is an Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural Education at Montana State University, 106 Linfield Hall, Bozeman, Montana 59717, [shannon.arnold@montana.edu](mailto:shannon.arnold@montana.edu).

NICK PLACE is an Associate Dean and Associate Director of Extension at University of Maryland Extension, 1202 Symons Hall, College Park, MD 20742, [nplace@umd.edu](mailto:nplace@umd.edu).