

CAREER DECISIONS OF FLORIDA AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION AGENTS

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To my husband, David Arnold

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LIST OF TERMS

Analytic tools	Devices and techniques used by analysts to facilitate the coding process.
Axial coding	A set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories.
Coding	The analytic processes through which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory.
Extension educators	Professional employees of the state Extension service of the land-grant institutions and the Extension Service-USDA. Those include county faculty (agents, program assistant, EFNEP educators), district staff (agents, directors, program specialists), and state staff (administrators, program specialists).
Extension education process	The composite of actions where an extension educator conducts a situation analysis of individual and community needs, establishes specific learner objectives, implements a plan of work and evaluates the outcomes of the instruction to determine behavioral changes have occurred.
Extension partnership	The tripartite organization structure of the Cooperative Extension System. Includes the federal partner (CSREES, USDA), state partners (Extension services of the state land-grant university), and local partners (county or parish legislative units).
Extension work	A collective phrase for describing the various methods by which extension educators accomplish the education mission of the organization and the program areas that are central to its instruction.
Grounded theory	Theory derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through

the research process where data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship with one another and the theory emerges from the data.

Memos	The researcher's record of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection.
Methodology	A way of thinking about and studying social reality.
Methods	A set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analyzing data.
Microanalysis	The detailed line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories and to suggest relationships among categories; a combination of open and axial coding.
Open coding	The process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data.
New extension faculty	Faculty/agents who have less than two years of experience within the UF/IFAS Extension System.
New faculty orientation and training	The process utilized to educate new extension faculty on the mission, objectives, and the structure of the organization. This includes program development, evaluation and accountability, teaching and learning principles, organizational policies, procedures, and career roles and responsibilities.
Professional development	A process characterized by intentional efforts to create positive changes, ongoing learning opportunities, and a timely, systematic procedure.
Selective coding	The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to

other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development.

Theory	A set of well developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomenon.
Theoretical saturation	The point in category development at which no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge during analysis.
Turnover	The voluntary termination of participation in employment for an organization, excluding retirement or pressured voluntary withdrawal, but an individual who received monetary compensation from the organization.

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My qualitative study sought to explore and describe the career decisions of agricultural extension agents. Interviews were used to investigate the factors and experiences that affect agricultural extension agents' decisions to enter and remain in extension, and discover positive and negative influences related to decisions of agents at different career stages. From the data collected, two grounded theories were developed that explain significant issues that affect agents' career decisions.

A purposive sample was used to select twelve extension agents who worked primarily in commercial agriculture, were identified by a panel of experts as consistent work performers, and were classified into one of the three stages of the career stages model. All agents participated in interviews to share their thoughts on influences that shaped their decision to enter into the organization, remain in the organization, and shaped their decisions at different career stages. Grounded theory was used as the primary data analysis method.

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. The selective categories relevant to agents' decisions to remain in the organization were internal satisfaction, community leadership, external

motivators, career benefits, change agents, network of support, and extension work environment. The categories relevant to the positive and negative influences that shaped career decisions of agents at the different career stages of entry, colleague, and counselor/advisor levels are detailed below.

Positive influences on entry level agents' career decisions can be classified into three categories: personal traits, motivators, and support systems. The negative influences of entry level agents can be divided into four areas: lack of direction, personal work management issues, job pressures, and mandated work requirements. Positive influences on colleague level agents' career decisions can be classified into four categories: motivators, career growth opportunities, career management strategies, and collaboration with key people. Negative influences on colleague level agents' career decisions can be divided into three categories: performance evaluations, salary disparity, and personal work management issues. Positive influences on counselor/advisor level agents' career decisions can be classified into three categories: motivators, career growth opportunities, and career management strategies. Negative influences on counselor/advisor level agents' career decisions can be divided into two categories: career overload and job dissatisfiers.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Background and Setting

The Cooperative Extension System (CES) is a nationwide educational network of federal, state, and local governments linked to land-grant universities (Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997). Its mission is to disseminate research-based information to the public in the areas of agriculture, family and consumer sciences, youth development, and community development. The system provides nonformal, public education that links research-based information to adult and youth audiences, supports life skills and problem solving behaviors, and assists communities in developing a better way of life (Seevers, et. al., 1997). Extension agents transfer information generated by the university through educational programs specifically designed to address community needs. Educators utilize various methods of program delivery to reach the maximum amount of people with the minimum amount of resources and costs. There is no other organization that offers these specialized educational services to the public (Seevers, et. al., 1997).

The goals of extension focus on reaching out to those “in-need” of reliable, practical information necessary for empowerment and human growth. Extension serves to make people more productive members of society and assists them with free educational services. The focus of public good is the desired outcome (Seevers, et. al., 1997). Extension agents aim to provide quick and accurate answers to solve existing public problems and encourage lifelong learning. They work in conjunction with universities to transfer research-based education that aims to improve society.

The Florida Cooperative Extension System (FCES) is a state outreach division comprised of national, state, and county educators, administrators, and professionals linked to the land-grant

university. Its goals reflect the national mission to extend knowledge and assist people in solving personal and professional problems. The relevance of FCES programs is unmatched by any other state organization because of its needs, research-based curriculum, and combination of resources available for assistance (Seevers, et. al., 1997). Extension plays an important role in identifying public needs and responding with educational programs. Specifically, extension agents are the key to providing services that allow for continuing education of communities and aim to improve the overall quality of life. Reliance on qualified personnel to perform these functions is integral to organizational success and community development (Seevers, et. al., 1997).

The agricultural industry plays a significant role in Florida's public and economic welfare. The economic impacts of agriculture in Florida can be seen in its services, enterprises, commodities, revenue, business taxes, and employment connected to the diverse industry sectors (University of Florida IFAS Extension, 2002). According to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (2006), Florida ranks ninth nationally in the value of farm products. Over 42,500 farms produce 280 commodities for a total production value of \$6.4 million. In 2005, agricultural impact on the total economy accounted for nearly \$87.6 billion and supported 756,993 jobs throughout the state. Florida also ranks 16th nationally in the export of agricultural products at \$1.3 million (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2006). Local, export, and import markets represent the impact of Florida agriculture. The agriculture industries offer significant contributions to Florida, the nation, and the world. Producers need to be informed of changes in agricultural technologies, production practices, alternative markets, and consumer demand. Educational programs can address these issues and transfer relevant information to raise agricultural awareness.

However, the extension organization must ensure that its faculty is provided with necessary career assistance in order to perform their jobs effectively (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). Competent, knowledgeable extension agents not only reflect the integrity of FCES, but the entire organizational reputation. The organization must constantly be engaged and responsive to agents' work related needs in order to achieve this overall success (Conklin, et. al., 2002). Administrators and directors must work to address professional career issues. With approximately 360 extension agents employed with FCES, employee needs are extensive and must be addressed for job satisfaction and continued career success (Extension County Operations, personal communication, December 5, 2006). Professional development, organizational support, and career enhancement activities are commonly employed to address areas of employee satisfaction and enrichment (Guskey, 2000).

Extension professionals face numerous issues and challenges in the workplace. These complex problems require agents to maintain high levels of expertise to carry out extension programs (CES Professional Development Task Force, 1998). Therefore, new and current extension faculty must be actively involved in valuable, pertinent professional development focused on career growth. To achieve this, the organization must be prepared to deliver professional development to all extension agents in order to retain its specialized faculty (A Comprehensive Approach for Professional Development for UF/IFAS Extension, 2001).

Faculty recruitment and retention are two major issues currently facing FCES (L. Arrington, personal communication, November 21, 2006). Career decisions of current and potential faculty determine the future abilities, skills, and competence of extension (ECOP, 2002). As programs shift and public needs change, extension is facing decisions on how to continue its services and programs with suitable personnel. New and diverse people to work

with changing clientele must be hired to address emerging needs and concerns (L. Arrington, personal communication, November 21, 2006). However, finding highly qualified 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. Once employed, the organization must strive to keep these agents which will help to improve the quality of services, reliability of the organization, connection to the public, and reduce organizational expenses (Ensle, 2005).

Organizational efforts must be directed at understanding current recruitment and retention issues (ECOP, 2005). This will require administrators to become more knowledgeable about the reasons agents enter and remain in an extension career. Having an understanding of factors that affect critical career decisions is invaluable and must be sought to advance organizational efforts. An exploration of factors that shape extension agents' career decisions will assist the organization in identifying the following: career influences on extension agents; positive and negative experiences that affect agents' career decisions; personal and professional issues common to agents; and, new and current agents' concerns that affect future career decisions.

Knowing this information will be beneficial to the organization in many ways. Results can be used to help attract new agents, improve recruitment strategies, provide direction for future professional development and career assistance, and reduce attrition rates. The ability to retain long-term, high quality professionals is a direct reflection of a successful organization and must be a high priority for extension to remain a viable educational outreach system (Conklin, et. al., 2002). However, administrators must increase their understanding of employee needs in order to address them appropriately. The future of extension will ultimately be determined on

how the organization approaches these critical areas to accomplish its goals and mission (ECOP, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Career Stages Model

The rapid changes occurring in the areas of technology, education, economics, demographics, politics, and cultural diversity affect both the organization and the people within them. As extension positions itself to address these emerging issues, faculty must engage in lifelong learning in order to maintain professional expertise in relevant areas (Martin, 1991). Therefore, professional development must become a priority for future survival. The term professional development can broadly be defined as a variety of learning experiences that build professional capacities, enhance work performance, and assist in achieving long-term career goals (CES Professional Development Task Force, 1998).

Continuous growth is vital for agents to be educated on the rapidly changing industry, improve work and life management skills, and perform effectively in their positions. New agents specifically need to be educated to successfully transition into the organization in order to remain long-term employees (Bailey, 2005). However, determining career needs is difficult in extension which encompasses a variety of job responsibilities, including conducting programs, developing educational materials, providing community support, and serving as a subject matter resource (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002).

A variety of career development models has assisted in understanding the needs of professionals. Using Rennekamp and Nall's career stage model as a framework, Kutilek, Gunderson, and Conklin (2002) adapted the model to create a "systems approach to maximize individual career potential and organizational success." This more recent career development model consists of three stages in a person's career- the entry stage, colleague stage, and the

counselor/advisor stage. In addition, it outlines motivators and organizational strategies that are beneficial to career growth within each stage (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

In the career stages model, the entry level stage focuses on new agents understanding the organizational culture and structure, gaining essential job skills, establishing internal linkages, developing initiative, and moving from dependence to independence. Agents then move into the colleague stage which centers on development of expertise, problem resolution, gaining community acceptance and membership, expanding creativity, and moving to interdependence. The final stage is the combined counselor and advisor stage, in contrast to Rennekamp and Nall's model that listed each stage separately. The more recent model combined these two stages due to the similarities found in motivators and organizational strategies at this point within an individual's professional career. In this counselor and advisor stage, agents acquire a foundation in expertise, attain leadership and influential positions, engage in organizational problem solving, become a counselor for other professionals, and facilitate self-renewal (Kutilek, et. al., 2002). Utilization of this model and its career stages provides a theoretical framework for this study of career decisions of agricultural extension agents.

Statement of the Problem

The foundation of educational organizations is in its human and intellectual capital. Recruitment and retention are two of the top internal challenges currently facing the Cooperative Extension System (ECOP, 2005). These issues must be openly addressed in order for the Cooperative Extension System to continue its public services and programs. Florida Cooperative Extension System is currently facing the growing problem of faculty turnover and burnout of new agents (L. Arrington, personal communication, November 21, 2006). Current attrition rates of extension agents are not readily available from the FCES, but the CES Professional

Development Task Force (1998) found the rate of turnover in extension positions was relatively high, with an average of 25-30 new county faculty hired annually.

Much of the current research regarding reasons for turnover and attrition rates needs to be revisited and updated (Kutilek, 2000; Clark, 1992; Rousan, 1995; Riggs & Beus, 1993; Whaples, 1983; Manton & van Es, 1985). Currently, there is a lack of accessible, statistical information concerning the turnover of agricultural agents in Florida (Extension County Operations, personal communication, December 5, 2006). However, data from the Florida Cooperative Extension System New Agent Orientation show that there is an increasing number of agents leaving the system, particularly in the last seven years.

For extension to survive in this increasingly competitive world, it must prepare its faculty to grow, adapt, and thrive in a changing environment. Long-term personnel commitments are the single most important factor inhibiting the “agility and flexibility” of an extension organization (ECOP, 2002). According to ECOP (2005), low salaries, staff cuts, downsizing, and aging faculty are causing agents to leave extension. Extension administrators must critically examine and employ competent staff for long-term survival. Competencies of agents frequently change to reflect their roles and must be re-examined regularly. Organizational accountability depends upon agents to become leaders engaged at the local level that conduct desirable outreach programs. This active engagement demonstrates the public value and commitment of extension services to community decision makers (ECOP, 2002). Developing hiring, compensation, and professional development strategies that attract and retain qualified employees for engagement in a global society is a key component for the future of extension. Organizational resources must be allocated to assure employees are skilled and engaged in professional development activities that enhance competencies for critical issues (ECOP, 2002).

Recruitment and retention of agents is becoming increasingly problematic in many extension systems. High quality agents are leaving the extension system due to organizational factors, non-work related factors, and individual related factors (Kutilek, et. al., 2002). The national extension organization must consider these factors and how to best address them. Exploring extension agents' career decisions and experiences can assist in understanding influences, factors, issues, and concerns of all levels of agents. The beginning years within extension can shape the agents' attitudes, behaviors, and practices important for the future. Yet, it is important that agents are not forgotten once employed. Faced with numerous career related issues, agents' needs can be met through professional development, in-service training, and targeted programs. Continual career assistance on professional needs must be available to maximize agents' career potential. Knowing the needs of agents at various stages within their careers is essential to determining accurate proactive assistance, motivators, and organizational strategies (Kutilek, et. al., 2002). Appropriate professional development opportunities can then be created to help reduce attrition rates and retain quality professionals.

To address these problems, the reasons agents enter into their careers and their expectations must be openly explored. Then, the organization must understand the factors and influences that affect agents during their careers. Proactive attention that addresses these concerns will help to recruit and retain agents in an increasingly competitive marketplace. These issues indicate a prominent need to further examine factors that affect extension agents' career decisions.

Statement of the Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the career decisions of 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 FCES. The interview

process was used to investigate the factors that affected agricultural extension agents' decisions to enter and remain in extension, discover positive and negative experiences related to career decisions, and identify significant influences on agents' careers at different career stages. From the data collected, a grounded theory was developed that explains the significant issues that affect agricultural extension agents' career decisions. The key objectives of this study included:

- Objective 1: To understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to enter into the organization
- Objective 2: To understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to remain in the organization
- Objective 3: To discover the influences that shape career decisions of agricultural extension agents at different career stages
- Objective 4: To develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents

Limitations of Design

This study sought to explain the unique experiences and decisions of each individual, so the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population. The participants were selected from the state of Florida and may not be representative of all agricultural extension agents. It was also assumed that participants provided honest and accurate answers during the interview process. Finally, in qualitative studies, researcher bias can influence the methodology and interpretation of data. In order to eliminate this bias, the researcher took a subjective approach to the interview process, followed the interview guide for each participant, and provided a subjectivity statement to state predetermined assumptions and alleviate any misconceptions.

Summary

This chapter explained the background and supports the need for an in-depth study of extension agents' career decisions. The problems associated with extension recruitment and retention were explained and the organizational importance of long-term faculty was established.

The role of professional development in accomplishing this goal was mentioned as an integral component to career growth. The career stages model offered a conceptual framework to examine the influences and factors affecting extension agents' career decisions at all phases of employment. The purpose, objectives, and limitations of the study were outlined to provide a foundation for the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature that provided the background for this research. Specific areas of literature include: roles of extension agents, employee recruitment and retention, professional development, career development models, and human motivation. The section on county extension agents outlined work responsibilities and duties. Employee retention and recruitment were discussed to provide an overview of the challenges and issues facing organizations. Professional development highlighted the need for continuing education and career growth of employees. Factors of motivation and career theories were outlined to provide an overview of factors that influence employees' career and life decisions. The career stages model was described as it provided structure to the study in regards to career development for extension agents.

Roles of Cooperative Extension System County Agents

The U. S. Cooperative Extension System relies upon local county agents to carry out its educational services and functions. County agents transfer information generated by the university through extension programs specifically designed to address community needs. According to the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Office of Human Resources (2006), the duties, functions, and responsibilities of all county extension agents are:

- Provide leadership for development, implementation, delivery and evaluation of a comprehensive extension program in cooperation with local and county/state extension colleagues.
- Establish and maintain an effective system for accountability and public information to all relevant individuals, groups, organizations and agencies. Maintain an effective program advisory committee, with appropriate community representation.

- Target programs to achieve program balance reflective of the county's population diversity and to address the unique educational needs of the county's residents.
- Develop and sustain partnerships with commodity groups, governmental and community agencies and organizations sharing common goals.
- Develop, sustain and monitor the effectiveness of a volunteer system to staff the program, including recruitment, volunteer staff development and evaluation/recognition.
- Seek and obtain financial resources to support extension programming.
- Provide leadership for management of all program components including program policies, records, communications and educational materials.
- Assume other assignments and responsibilities in support of the total extension program.
- Proactive 4-H program involvement is essential.
- Follow all University and county policies and procedures.

Extension agents are personal connection of the organization to communities. County agents transfer practical and relevant information to the public through nonformal educational programs, and provide quick and accurate answers to solve existing problems. This service is critical to empower clientele, build technical skills, and improve the well-being of communities (Seevers, et. al., 1997). Agents utilize various methods of program delivery to reach the maximum number of people with the minimum amount of resources and costs. There are few organizations that offer these specialized, public funded educational services. The goals of extension focus on reaching out to those “in-need” of reliable, practical information necessary for empowerment and human growth (Seevers, et. al., 1997). The county agent is necessary for the organization to meet its goals and accomplish its mission.

Employee Recruitment

One of the most important challenges facing the CES today is recruiting high caliber individuals who are prepared to function in a rapidly changing society. The recruitment of adaptable, diverse extension employees is critical to address the problems faced by clientele.

Extension professionals face numerous issues and challenges in the workplace. These complex problems require agents to have high levels of expertise to carry out educational programs (Seevers, et. al., 1997). The failure of CES to recruit suitable long-term employees can cost the organization (Clark, 1992; Ensle, 2005). Additionally, finding highly qualified agents is becoming more difficult as career opportunities expand. Extension must seek to identify experts in the field and attract them to the organization. Finding qualified employees can become challenging, but utilizing a variety of methods can support recruitment efforts.

Methods

All organizations are faced with the critical challenge to recruit and retain qualified employees (Langan, 2000). Piotrowski and Armstrong (2006) conducted a survey study on recruitment and pre-employment selection methods used by 151 human resources departments in 1000 major U.S. companies. The findings indicated that the majority of companies rely on traditional recruitment and personnel selection techniques over the use of online communication. The most common recruitment and selection techniques ranked in descending order were: resume, applications, reference checks, newspaper/magazine ads, company websites, online job board, skills and personality testing, online pre-employment tests, job fairs, referrals from current employees, and job service centers (Piotrowski & Armstrong, 2006).

Psychological tests focused on prospective employees' personalities have received increased attention to recruit suitable personnel. Additionally, to enhance the chances for successful recruitment for employers, research has endorsed the "person job-fit" paradigm (Anderson, et al., 2004; Chan, 2005; Hollenbeck, et al., 2002). This emerging paradigm states that there must be a match between the person's knowledge, skills, and abilities, and the requirement of a specific job. Also, there must be a congruence of an individual's personality,

beliefs, and values with the culture, norms, and values of an organization. Finally, there must be a match between an employee's needs and what the organization supplies, such as pay, benefits, and work (Anderson, et al., 2004; Chan, 2005; Hollenbeck, et al., 2002). Utilizing this framework can assist in the selection of employees that are compatible with the organization.

With the widespread reach of technology, potential recruitment using online methods might be used to reach new populations. Kraut, et. al. (2004) identified several benefits of using the Internet for recruitment including low costs, the ability to attract a large and diverse sample, and improved visibility to undergraduates and graduate students. In essence, the Internet has expanded the base for recruitment procedures. Another study focused on the impact of the Internet on recruitment stated that 1.5 million potential employees were reached over a four year span (Kraut, et. al., 2004). Clearly, the Internet provides a wider breath over a shorter period of time than traditional recruitment methods.

Organizational Diversity

Extension must continue to seek out specialized agents to address the diverse audiences in today's changing population. Traditional agricultural audiences are decreasing and opportunities to reach new clientele are growing. Recruitment of diverse staff can present challenges and therefore, common recruitment methods may not be applicable. Grogan and Eshelman (1998) studied the most effective recruitment strategies for recruiting personnel for a more diverse workforce. Strategies used most often were personal contacts with suitable applicants; inclusion of specific universities with a pool of diverse students; active recruitment by staff and board members; and providing incentives for currently employed diverse staff to assist in recruiting.

Ewert and Rice (1994) researched the management and implications of diversity within extension. Findings suggested that more culturally diverse organizations are better able to recruit

and retain culturally diverse staff, and expand their "reach" and increase their ability to attract new clientele. It was recommended that extension set specific organizational goals for the recruitment of culturally diverse staff. To attract diverse staff, more aggressive recruiting and a rigorous assessment of the recruitment procedure is needed. An assessment of position descriptions, job announcements, and the selection process will assist in the recruitment of diverse agents.

Recruitment procedures must also be re-examined to ensure that cultural barriers are not placed on potential employees. To overcome barriers, extension must facilitate the recruitment process with established connections to culturally diverse groups in the community. Building relationships with potential employees and educating diverse audiences about the career potential extension offers can assist in recruitment strategies and increase the applicant pool. Cultural minorities must specifically be empowered to feel valued and included in the organization's vision in order to improve recruitment efforts (Ewert & Rice, 1994).

Employee Retention

Organizational Effects of Turnover

The foundation of any educational system is its human capital. Retention of employees is necessary for the CES to continue its organizational services and programs. When addressing retention issues, it is imperative to assess employee turnover. Turnover refers to the voluntary termination of participation in employment for an organization, excluding retirement or pressured voluntary withdrawal, but an individual who received monetary compensation from the organization (Rossano, 1985). Turnover rates negatively affect the extension organization in many different ways. According to the Florida CES Professional Development Task Force (1998), the rate of turnover in extension positions was relatively high, with an average of 25-30 new county faculty hired annually. According to UF/IFAS Extension County Operations Office,

this rate continues today (Extension County Operations Office, personal communication, December 5, 2006). This information must be continually updated in order to monitor improvements and changes in organizational retention.

Employee departures cause financial and time strains on the organization (Kutelik, 2000). These pressures include the disruption of clientele services, interruption of extension programming, additional time and money to recruit and train new agents, and extra workload on the remaining staff (Clark, 1992). Departing employees create stress on other staff as they serve in interim positions and can cost up to 150 percent of the departing employee's salary in replacement costs (Clark, 1992; Ensle, 2005). An Ohio State University Extension study reported that net costs for annual staff departures cost \$80,000 in replacement and salary expenses (Rousan, 1995). Reduction in organizational effectiveness, increased administrative efforts to replace agents, reduced availability in overall funds, and scarcity of resources to hire and train new extension agents are common issues faced when dealing with staff turnover (Rousan & Henderson, 1996). All of these reasons signify to the need to review why employees leave the extension system. However, understanding these factors will offer valuable insight for improved retention of agents as well.

Reasons for Leaving Extension

Discovering the reasons agents leave extension must first be identified before targeted assistance can be provided to retain them. The Ohio State University Extension System conducted a study to identify the reasons why county extension faculty voluntarily left the organization between 1990 and 1994. Rousan and Henderson (1996) found that the majority of staff left the organization for the following reasons:

- Organizational factors, including low pay, excessive work responsibilities, demanding requirements for advancement, and a lack of career recognition.

- Individual non-work-related factors, including other job offers, family obligations, higher salaries elsewhere, personal life conflicts, and lack of time for personal relationships.
- Individual work-related factors, including other life priorities, excessive late night meetings, and conflict with values.

Findings also indicated that those agents who left were more likely to be: (1) Caucasian females in their early thirties holding a master's degree who are married with no children, and (2) in a non-tenure track position as a 4-H agent in a single county.

Kutelik (2000) also investigated the factors that affected why employees left the extension organization. Agents identified job stress, low pay, and lack of supervisory support as the top reasons contributing to their departure. Balfour and Neff (1993) indicated that overtime hours were one of the key variables contributing to departures, while Gavin (1990) cited low pay and decreased benefits as leading contributors to personnel loss. Clark (1992) studied stress and turnover among extension directors and found that higher levels of burnout were associated with low feelings of personal accomplishment, and higher stress and strain levels mainly due to responsibility overload. Ewert and Rice (1994) found that culturally diverse staff left extension for reasons such as isolation, marginalization, perceived lack of power, hierarchical management styles, inadequate financial compensation, and disagreements over program priorities. The need for additional research in all areas related to employee loss will help extension retain a more qualified, diverse, and satisfied staff.

Balancing Work and Family Life

Other studies have linked job satisfaction and retention to an agent's ability to balance work and family life (Ensle, 2005; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Riggs & Beus, 1993; Place & Jacob, 2001). Maintaining a correct life balance is essential in reducing stress and the potential for employee burnout. The Illinois Extension Service conducted a study to review why agents left extension positions (Ensle, 2005). The three primary reasons were:

- Changes in the family situation (marriage, divorce, spouse changed job, etc.)
- Family moving (outside of travel distance to work area)
- Too much time away from family

This study also revealed that agents in general were not happy with the effectiveness and organization of the extension system. As a result, reduced employee morale affected job performance and produced higher stress levels. To reduce this stress, leader trainings were conducted and new job descriptions were written that more closely tied to the work they actually performed. Supervisors also ensured that work expectations were carefully reviewed with new employees. However, Illinois never addressed the "too much time away from family" issue, or clearly defined their "compensatory time" program. Both of these issues greatly affect agents' ability to balance work and family (Ensle, 2005).

Fetsch and Kennington (1997) examined the balancing work and family struggle for extension faculty and made the following organizational recommendations:

- Invest significant resources into conducting research into determining the most effective Balancing Work and Family Programs
- Choose empirically-based educational programs that are linked to known problems and solutions to balancing work and family issues

Personnel recommendations from this study were:

- Communicate openly with supervisors about Balancing Work and Family problems and solutions to set goals and priorities for work activities and performance
- Incorporate time and stress management strategies into daily routines

Riggs and Beus (1993) explored job satisfaction in extension, and findings indicated that reframing and passive appraisal were most often used to cope with stressful situations.

Additionally, agents with the highest satisfaction levels reported contentment with the six components of job satisfaction: (1) the job itself, (2) salary, (3), fringe benefits, (4) authority to

run programs, (5) supervisors, and (6) opportunity for growth. Additional focus on these factors and their solutions was important to assist employees in developing a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives.

Place and Jacob (2001) conducted a study to identify factors that cause stress in extension faculty to determine professional development needs. Research was focused on the exploration of balancing work and personal life issues among Florida Extension professionals. Findings indicated that:

- Some faculty have stress under control while other are experiencing high levels of stress
- County faculty perceived slightly higher stress than state faculty
- Greater use of formal planning, planning for meetings, and structured “to do” lists lower stress levels
- Spending time with family served as a coping mechanism to minimize stress
- Stressful situations can be improved upon through proactive professional development
- Professional development focused on workday planning may help faculty cope with stress

Overall, the study found that greater organizational effectiveness can be achieved through employees that are prepared and manage stress and work pressures through positive workplace skills.

Job Satisfaction

There is less research available on why extension agents remain in the organization, but a commonality among studies is job satisfaction. Factors that influence job satisfaction are important to acknowledge and address when considering employee retention. Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension made efforts to improve retention rates and implemented an in-service training program to address personal and professional issues. The educational sessions received high evaluations and employees stated that the information was practical and useful (Ensle,

2005). Kansas Cooperative Extension created a series of eight organizational workshops aimed at increasing pride and addressing work and life responsibilities (Ensle, 2005). The most valued characteristics related to job satisfaction were:

- The staff enjoyed the teamwork atmosphere of extension
- They liked the feeling of belonging to a group who cares for others
- They liked the opportunity to be self-directed
- They enjoyed the variety in their jobs
- They valued administrators and supervisors

Extension agents identified lack of resources and the overall effectiveness of the organization as barriers to a healthy work environment (Ensle, 2005). Finally, Vermont Extension conducted a wellness initiative aimed at increasing morale and performance among its staff (Ensle, 2005). After implementation of the program, all employees received added fringe benefits, lifestyle enhancement workshops, stress management programs, seminars on balancing work and life, and relaxation training.

Job satisfaction has been proven to be directly related to continued employment within an organization. Satisfied employees become lifetime employees. Job satisfaction in extension is dependent upon many factors. Factors cited by agents related to career retention included that the job offers a flexible work schedule, personal satisfaction is derived from educating clientele, and agents enjoy the teaching and learning process (Ensle, 2005). Mallilo (1990) found that job satisfaction depended upon a number of factors, but the most negative factor was salary. Over 81% of employees did not feel they were adequately compensated for their work responsibilities. According to Ensle (2005), a Western region survey was conducted with county extension agents' job satisfaction levels and the factors most highly rated were:

- Satisfaction with jobs, colleagues, and job responsibilities

- Adequate salary and fringe benefits
- Authority to manage extension programs for client needs
- Positive relations with supervisors
- Opportunities for growth in the job and organization
- The CES organization
- Supportive colleagues

Additional findings indicated that as the agents' number of job responsibilities increased, the overall job satisfaction decreased; agents without children were more satisfied; and, agents used coping strategies to handle stressful job situations (Ensle, 2005). The question can be asked if these factors are more prevalent with certain agents or contexts more than others. Current research addressing these concerns is needed to determine if these factors apply to all extension agents.

Coping Strategies

The issues of job stress, time management, and balancing one's personal and professional life are prevalent problems in extension today (Place & Jacob, 2001). Kirkpatrick, Lewis, Daft, Dessler, and Garcia (1996) identified three primary sources of job stress: the employee's personal life characteristics, the work conditions and environment, and situations occurring within the job itself. Research indicates that extension agents can reduce work-related stress and improve their lives by practicing stress and time management strategies (Gentry, 1978, Suinn, 1978, 1980). To achieve a better work and life balance, coping strategies and mediation can be employed. According to Pearlin (1989), coping is an individual action learned from colleagues, and mediators are social supports that help alleviate stress. Additional research in coping strategies indicates that if people are empowered and feel they have control over life outcomes, then stress levels can be significantly reduced (Pearlin, 1989).

Two organizational methods for reducing employee stress are: (1) modifying organizational policies and practices that cause stress, and (2) implementing effective balancing work and family programs (ECOP, 2002). Both methods can lead to reduced stress and improved productivity among staff, but are not always employed due to various reasons. An Ohio State University extension study focused on employee burnout identified several successful coping strategies. These included goal setting, recognition of stress and burnout, asking for help, having a support system at home and work, maintaining an active social life, good health habits, taking time off, having professional involvement, and being positive (Ensle, 2005). Clark (1992) also found that extension directors employed coping strategies, including social support from friends and family, time away from the job, and immediate confrontation of problems, to handle stress. Fetsch and Kennington (1997) concluded that stress and time management strategies, as well as organizational policies and practices for improving coping skills and productivity, should be employed to cope with the pressures in the extension workplace. Reduced stress levels can lead to more committed and satisfied employees that remain in the organization for longer periods of time.

Career Development Models

Various career development models have been validated to assist in understanding the needs of professionals and are useful for planning programs that aim to improve recruitment and retention rates. Many theorists have developed career models to address differing personal and professional needs (Rennekamp & Nall, 1993; Conklin, et. al., 2002; Kohlberg, 1969; Flavell, 1971). The majority of models fall into two general categories: competency based and career stages. Competency based models enhance the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors of extension employees through career development and training (Cooper & Graham, 2001). Career stages models are designed to address the needs, motivators, and organizational strategies

that relate to multiple phases of career growth (Kutilek, et. al., 2002). These models provide a basis for the development and design of career development programs within extension.

There are several different strategies or methods to deliver career development. The career stages model by Kutilek, et. al. (2002) provides essential background information for extension administration. The changing attitudes, knowledge, aspirations, skills, and career needs of employees must be considered when studying recruitment and retention issues. The influence of these factors and their effects on career growth must be carefully analyzed to determine appropriate learning experiences. These will ultimately influence the career decisions of current and potential extension faculty and the future competence of the extension system.

Career Stages Model

Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977) created the original model for professional career stages which was later adapted by Roger Rennekamp and Martha Nall (1994). The model created by Rennekamp and Nall (1994) addressed four stages within a person's career including the entry stage, colleague stage, counselor stage, and advisor stage. Within each stage, motivators were outlined that can direct professional development efforts. This model is valuable because it recognizes the considerable variations in professional growth seen at the different phases within a person's career (Rennekamp & Nall, 1994).

Using Rennekamp and Nall's career stage model as a framework, Kutilek, et. al. (2002) adapted the model to create a "systems approach to maximize individual career potential and organizational success." This model is also divided into separate stages that coincide with an employee's career growth and development. This more recent career development model consists of three, instead of four, stages in a person's career- the entry stage, colleague stage, and the counselor/advisor stage. In addition, it outlines motivators and organizational strategies that

are beneficial to career growth within each stage. Assumptions of the model include the differing progression of individuals through the stages depending upon prior career experiences and the career track of the organization (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

The career stages model outlines appropriate motivators for employees based upon the stage and recommends organizational professional development strategies to address career needs (Kutilek, Gunderson & Conklin, 2002). The motivators provide the drive for participating in and the criteria for selecting among 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. This approach addresses both individual and organizational career development needs specific to employees within each stage. Utilizing the most effective career development methods can provide relevant career strategies that can facilitate employee growth. The following table (Table 2.3) outlines the stages, motivators and organizational strategies of this model.

Table 2-3. Career development model for the stages of extension agents

Career Stage	Motivators	Organizational Strategies
Entry Stage	Understanding the organization, structure, and culture Obtaining essential skills to perform job Establishing linkages with internal partners Exercising creativity and initiative Moving from dependence to independence	Peer mentoring program Professional support teams Leadership coaching Orientation/job training
Colleague Stage	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 Moving from independence to interdependence	In-service education Specialization funds Professional association involvement Formal educational training Service on committees or special assignments
Counselor and Advisor Stages	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	Life and career renewal retreats Mentoring and trainer agent roles Assessment center for leadership Organizational sounding boards

*Note: (Kutilek, Gunderson & Conklin, 2002)

The career stages model was developed to address the changing nature and attitudes common in today's workforce. Many employees have shifted their career directions from striving for leadership positions to searching for job enrichment and satisfaction (Kutilek, et. al., 2002). To maximize the career potential for each employee and overall organizational success, a

systems approach for career growth and development was needed. Using this approach, all parts of the system, including input, output, and feedback, must work together to achieve a desired goal (Kowalski, 1988). As a result, employees can enter and exit the model at the point most appropriate within their careers (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

The Entry Stage

The initial phases of employment into the job define the entry level stage. Motivators at this stage include: understanding the organization, structure, and culture; obtaining essential skills to perform job; establishing linkages with internal partners; exercising creativity and initiative; and moving from dependence to independence. New extension agents tend to feel overwhelmed and specifically need to be educated to successfully transition into the organization and work responsibilities. The first years within extension can shape the agents' attitudes, behaviors, and practices important for the future, so skills must be developed quickly for career success (Bailey, 2005). To address professional development needs, a peer mentoring program, identification of professional support teams, leadership coaching, and orientation/job training programs are implemented (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

The peer mentoring program involves a formal assignment of a carefully selected peer to each new agent. The selection of the mentor must be a person that could be defined as a trustworthy advisor, friend, or teacher and is not a person who will later evaluate this new faculty member. This relationship is designed to provide personal and professional support that is ultimately beneficial to both persons involved. Professional support teams are assigned to each new agent and consist of a district director, one or more specialists, and the county chair. The team is responsible for employee motivation, recognition of success, identifying areas for change and improvement, goal setting, training needs, and performance evaluation. Leadership

coaching is a retreat for faculty with one to three years of experience. The retreat focuses on the development of important leadership behaviors and skills that agents utilize in their work responsibilities. Following the retreat, each new agent is paired with peer coaches who provide support and follow-up on professional development plans and career growth. Orientation/job training is provided to new faculty during the first two years to assist them in developing knowledge and skills in core competency areas. Training programs provide information in several areas including organizational information, work roles and responsibilities, educational programming, teaching and learning, and technical subject matter (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

The Colleague Stage

The colleague stage focuses on an agent's career growth and development in the areas of professional knowledge, independence, and autonomy. 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 (Rennekamp & Nall, 1993; Kutelik, et. al., 2002). The length an agent remains in this stage varies tremendously and is highly dependent upon assigned roles and responsibilities. Self-directed learning and maturity are common career growth attributes associated with this stage, but there must also be structured learning opportunities available. Organizational strategies include in-service education, professional development funding, and formal education opportunities (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

In-service education is provided to meet the changing needs of agents in a variety of specialized areas. The training is designed to keep faculty current in their technical expertise and is important to meet the needs of the public that call on them for assistance. These highly

specialized programs are coordinated by professionals within the technical areas and must be relevant to current needs. Agents within this stage are more apt to search for resources that assist in career development needs. Professional development funds allow agents to pursue self-directed learning in various program areas. Importance is placed on building expertise and knowledge accompanied by improved self-efficacy and social learning for those that receive the funding. Formal education is an additional option to further professional development. This may include access to undergraduate or graduate programs and is supported by reduced costs and flexible scheduling from the organization (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

The Counselor and Advisor Stage

The final stage is reached when agents are ready to become counselors, contribute to organizational decision making, participate in job enrichment, and take on leadership positions. Continuing education is important at this stage, but may be in more diverse areas of expertise than previously sought. Motivators associated with this stage are: 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 addresses employees' developmental needs in this stage through life and career renewal retreats, mentoring and trainer agent roles, assessment center for leadership, and organizational sounding boards (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

Life and career renewal retreats encourage employees to engage in self-exploration, discovery, and personal reflection on work and life issues. The retreats center on providing tools for employees to develop action plans for personal and professional renewal. Group discussions,

individual thought, planning, and communication with others provide opportunities for employees to reflect and analyze career progress and satisfaction (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

As a mentor and trainer, the agent takes a supervisory role in assisting mentoring pairs within the district. The mentor agent maintains in regular contact with the pair and is called upon when problem situations arise. The relationship between the mentor agent and protégés is critical to guide and direct new faculty as they learn about the extension organization. Others in this stage may volunteer to participate in on-the-job training and internship programs to apply their experiences (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

The assessment center for leadership was developed to analyze the managerial abilities and future training needs of extension county chairs. Chairs demonstrate professional skills in various job-related dimensions and are evaluated by trained assessors. From this assessment, they learn about their capabilities, integrate results into current work responsibilities, and create a professional development plan for the future (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

Organizational sounding boards offer opportunities for employees to become more engaged in the organization, make decisions, and provide input for future directions. These boards are comprised of senior leaders within the organization to discuss processes and procedures that affect employees and determine communication strategies. This offers an opportunity for employees to apply their knowledge and experience to the overall extension organization and assists in job renewal and satisfaction (Kutelik, et. al., 2002).

There are many delivery methods and programs focused on career development of extension faculty. Each of these career stages has been developed to help faculty receive career information and training needed in the most appropriate manner. Throughout all stages in this model, professional development is integral to career growth and job satisfaction. The

organizational strategies employed are useful and beneficial to employees by increasing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and aspirations within personal and professional areas of life. This training is essential for growth within agents' field of expertise and to gain personal satisfaction. The organization will benefit by having educated and skilled employees to achieve the goals and objectives of the extension system (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

Motivation

The concept of motivation influences all aspects of human life. Motivation helps to explain human actions and behaviors to cope within a changing environment (Heckhauser, 1991). A general definition of the term motivation is an internal state or condition that activates goal-oriented behavior and gives it direction (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981). The concept of motivation is important as it drives individuals to accomplish personal and professional goals and guides the decision making process.

Motivation is a common theme that attempts to predict why humans behave in certain ways and can be considered developmental in each person (Nicholls, 1984; Deci & Ryan, 2002). Both cognitive and physical factors can contribute to the different forces of motivation that influence thoughts, behaviors, and actions; therefore, it is important to examine its influence on one's career responsibilities (Treasure, 2003). Research indicates that the sources of motivation can be external, including behavioral conditioning and social cognition, or internal, such as cognitive, affective, and biological, conative, or spiritual (Huitt, 2001).

The theories of motivation have taken many directions, but each offers a different perspective attempting to explain why behaviors occur. Motivational literature provides insight into areas that relate to current theories. Approaches that have led to the current understanding of motivation include Maslow's need-hierarchy theory, Herzberg's two- factor theory, Vroom's expectancy theory, Adams' equity theory, and Skinner's reinforcement theory. However, the

theories most closely related to career decisions are Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory. The following outlines these two theories and their contributions to the evolution of the concept of motivation.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow (1954) proposed a hierarchy of needs as a means of determining what motivates people to do certain things and to behave in certain ways. This humanistic theory is based on two groups of needs: deficiency needs and growth needs (Huitt, 2001). The five categories of needs that people are motivated to satisfy in sequential order are: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Physiological needs include air, food, water, and shelter; safety needs include security and freedom from fear; love/belonging includes friendship, family, and sexual intimacy; esteem includes self-esteem, confidence, achievement, and respect for and by others; self-actualization includes morality, creativity, problem solving, and lack of prejudice (Buford, Bedeian, & Lindner, 1995).

Key points of Maslow's hierarchy are: lower deficiency needs must be met first before moving to the next higher level of growth needs; the satisfaction of one need triggers dissatisfaction at the next higher level; and a person can go down as well as up the hierarchy (Huitt, 2001). Although there have been many variations and alterations by many theorists, this hierarchy of needs remains widely accepted in supporting how humans act, behave, and are motivated. An understanding of these needs and their influence on how humans make career decisions is a critical component that affects professional growth.

Herzberg's Two Factor Theory

Frederick Herzberg developed a theory that links the concepts of employee motivation and job satisfaction (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). Specific factors that produce job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction define the theoretical framework. However, it was found that

these job factors were not simply opposites, but instead entirely separate components. Within the theory, motivation is categorized into two factors: motivators and hygienes. Factors that produce job satisfaction are labeled motivators and factors that prevent job dissatisfaction are labeled hygienes as shown in Table 2.1 (Buford, et. al., 1995).

Table 2.1: Herzberg's Motivators and Hygienes

Motivators	Hygienes
Achievement	Policies and Administration
Recognition	Supervision
Work itself	Relations with supervisor
Responsibility	Relations with peers
Advancement and personal growth	Working conditions Pay

*Note: (Buford, et. al., 1995)

Thus, motivators produce job satisfaction, whereas hygienes prevent job dissatisfaction. Buford, et. al. (1995) summarizes the theory as: (a) the degree to which motivators are present in a job, motivation will occur; when absent, motivators do not lead to dissatisfaction, and (b) the degree to which hygienes are absent from a job, dissatisfaction will occur; when present, they prevent dissatisfaction but do not lead to satisfaction. Herzberg's theory has often been compared to Maslow's hierarchy of needs where the hygienes are equivalent to Maslow's three lowest needs and the motivators are equivalent to Maslow's two highest needs (Buford, et. al., 1995).

Professional Development

Definitions

Employees are the most valuable assets of the CES. They serve as an essential link between the public and university outreach education. Competency models outline necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes that effective extension agents should possess (Coppernoll & Stone, 2005). The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Competency Model offers seven core

competencies: knowledge of the organization, technical expertise, programming, professionalism, communications, human relations, and leadership. To maintain expertise in these competency areas, adjust to societal changes, meet the demands and expectations of the workplace, and improve the organization's public value, professional development must be offered to fill the educational gaps in work performance (Martin, 1991).

Multiple definitions for professional development exist, but all focus on the importance of continuous learning for career growth and development. It is essential that new and continuing extension faculty become actively involved in professional development as CES policy guidelines state:

The extension organization must foster within staff members, at all levels of the organization, the desire to continue their intellectual growth as a personal as well as an organizational responsibility and commitment. Extension staff members must recognize that lifelong learning is a prerequisite to effective performance and continuing job satisfaction. While the organization has the responsibility of setting the climate for professional improvement, the ultimate responsibility rests with the individual (USDA-CSREES, 1987).

According to the CES Professional Development Task Force (1998), the term professional development refers to a variety of individual and organizational efforts that build agents' professional capacities and skills, enhances their ability to respond to local needs, and assists in achieving long-term career goals. The integration of individual and organizational learning should support staff and become a part of the daily routine within the workplace (A Comprehensive Approach for Professional Development for UF/IFAS, 2001.). Extension faculty must actively seek professional development in order to balance work and life responsibilities. This self-initiated action will assist in job satisfaction and long-term career success. Professional development is important for all stages of extension employees to support career growth and success.

Guskey (2000) defines professional development as a process characterized by intentional efforts to create positive changes, ongoing learning opportunities, and a timely, systematic procedure. According to Guskey, effective extension professional development consists of four fundamental principles:

- There is an obvious focus on learning and the learners with clear goals based upon attainment of learner outcomes for measuring success.
- There is an emphasis on individual and organizational change, and this includes commitment across all levels of the organization that fosters learning, experimentation, cooperation and professional respect.
- There is a grand vision that guides all changes. With this grand vision, more positive and focused changes occur because of clear ownership across all organizational levels.
- Professional development must be an ongoing activity that is a recognizable component of every educator's professional life. When professional development is built into the extension system, it becomes a natural expectation thereby opening the door for further learning, continued sharing, and habitual enhancement of academic and technical skills.

Overall, these professional development principles focus on the need for continuing education integrated into work responsibilities and the importance of change. One of the greatest challenges for all organizations and individuals today is the need to cope with change. The extension organization must undergo some type of change in order to maintain relevant in its educational services. To successfully navigate through this process, employees must work together to consider the need for change, the degree of change needed, and the best approach to adopt change (Burke, 2002). Professional development can offer a practical, experimental approach for continuous learning and the application of change practices. Learning to lead and manage change are important skills for all extension faculty. Change is inevitable as the nature of today's society evolves and transforms on a daily basis. Professional development programs must address these principles for long-term career success of employees.

Employee Needs

Determining professional development needs can be especially difficult in any organization, particularly extension where the diversity of work responsibilities includes conducting educational programs, developing materials, providing public support, and serving as technical subject matter resource (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). Extension agents can feel overwhelmed with all the demands placed upon them by the organization, clientele, administrators, peers, and supervisors. Therefore, it is critically important that employees develop career management skills quickly so they can perform their work efficiently and effectively (Kutilek, et. al., 2002). Professional development assists new and continuing agents throughout their careers to balance work and life. With the ever-increasing demand for competent agents, growing expectations for accountability, diversification of clientele, and changing technologies, extension must regard professional development needs as an integral component to continually develop its employees (ECOP, 2002).

Barriers to staff participation in professional development opportunities must also be understood. In a study of in-service attendance and employee satisfaction levels in Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension program, Mincemoyer and Kelsey (1999) concluded the following reasons why county-based faculty did not attend in-service trainings: previous commitments, extended time away from the office, and scheduling conflicts with local programming. Conklin et al., (2002) found similar barriers, noting that time and scheduling conflicts both contributed to declining participation in professional development trainings.

Summary

This chapter focused on the areas of literature important to this study: employee recruitment and retention, professional development, roles of county extension agents, models of career development, and human motivation. Employee recruitment and retention are critical

areas to address as the extension organization competes with other employers for qualified staff. To meet future organizational challenges, highly qualified, diverse staff are needed to fill positions. Once employed, career development models, motivators, and organizational strategies must be implemented to retain agents. Professional development was also examined as it offered insight into career growth for extension employees. From the broad topic of human motivation, various models, theorists, and concepts were highlighted to signify their influence on employees' career decisions.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

The chapter explains the research design and methodology used to accomplish the stated objectives of the study. An overview of qualitative research and its foundations are described and its influence on the research design is justified. The researcher presents a subjectivity statement and offers evidence that provides a context for the study. Data collection and analysis procedures based on grounded theory techniques are outlined. Finally, the target population, instrumentation, research objectives, and measures of validity and reliability are described.

Research Design

This study was designed to explore and describe the how agricultural extension agents make career decisions. The complexity of these issues necessitated an open dialogue discussion to collect affective data and did not lend itself to quantitative methods (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, qualitative methodologies were chosen to achieve insight into agents' thoughts and perceptions about their employment status. The researcher acknowledges that there is prior research concerning why employees leave extension, but there is a lack of qualitative research on why employees chose to enter into extension and the reasons why they stay employed. It is also unknown whether the reasons why employees leave the organization are comparable to why they stay. This qualitative study offers exploratory and supportive information that can be used for future qualitative and quantitative research concerning career decisions of agricultural extension agents.

Through the use of in-depth interviews, the researcher engaged in the construction of a narrative to detail the participants' perspectives related to influences on career decisions (Hatch, 2002). A semi-structured interview guide was used to investigate factors that influenced

participants' decisions to enter into extension, career experiences related to retention, and influences at different career stages. Interview questions specifically focused on the factors that have positively and negatively affected participants' careers. As stated by Holstein and Gubrium (2003), this type of research approach relies exclusively upon words, behaviors, and actions, and open discourse was critical to gain a true understanding of participants and their realities. Therefore, all interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants' work office in order to gain subjective, realistic perspectives.

Grounded theory by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was the primary data analysis procedure selected due to its focus of how meaning making advances the understanding of personal perspectives and insight. In particular, grounded theory uses an inductive procedural process to generate theory about a phenomenon that is developed from the gathered data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory allows for a theoretical understanding of the studied experience and permits the researcher to explore, direct, manage, and streamline data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This analysis procedure was used to develop a grounded theory relative to the most significant issues that affect career decisions' of Florida agricultural extension agents.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research stems from constructivist, interpretivist, and subjectivist paradigms that involve detailed, integrated approaches to study people and things in their natural environments (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The researcher attempts to understand and interpret phenomenon or reality from the participant's perspective. Qualitative designs are valuable to gain insight into one's feelings, thought processes, and emotions concerning a phenomenon that are difficult to obtain using other methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach offers different methodologies for data collection and analysis according to the research purpose and questions. Methodologies are selected according to their ability to examine and interpret

phenomenon in detail using an emergent design, inductive approach, social interaction, and small samples (Hatch, 2002). Examples of qualitative methodologies include ethnography, naturalistic inquiry and observation, phenomenological research, grounded theory, document analysis, historical research, and action research. Data collection methods commonly used are observations, interviews, focus groups, archival data, case studies, and life histories.

While the use of qualitative research has been limited in the field of extension education, it has been used in a number of related social science fields to investigate issues to better understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 1989). Strengths of qualitative methodologies are in their ability to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of human social reality and phenomenon. Multiple methods can be used simultaneously, such as interviews, observations, and archives, to construct the fullest understanding of a phenomena and generate theory (DeMarrias, 1998). In particular, grounded theory methodologies use an inductive process to generate theory about a phenomenon that is developed from collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Ethnography, case studies, and naturalistic observation allow study in the participants' natural settings to gain an in-depth understanding of cultures and social reality (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). All qualitative methodologies take a subjective approach that aims to eliminate researcher bias as focus is placed on understanding and interpreting meaning from the participant's point of view (Crotty, 1998). The key research instrument is an adaptable researcher that is able to capture data in different environments and serve as a critical part of the process when studying human experiences and situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through social interaction, the skilled researcher must be able to develop a trusting relationship with participants in order to gain insight into their realities and a true understanding of personal perspectives (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

However, limitations of qualitative research can include ambiguity, researcher influence and bias, small sample size, time considerations, inappropriate field skills and abilities, and lack of generalization. Ambiguity relating to the multiple or inaccurate interpretations of data, data analysis procedures, and differing research designs can cause reliability and validity concerns (DeMarrias, 1998). Bias in the collection and analysis of qualitative data is a concern due to its interpretive nature (Ary, et. al., 2006). As a result, the researcher's personal interpretation may not truly represent the data from the participant's perspective. To confirm findings, the process of member checking and other credibility strategies are commonly employed.

Findings of the phenomenon may not accurately reflect the actual situation due to researcher influence. Field research and observation methods are commonly critiqued as a result of the unknown effects of the researcher's presence on the setting studied (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Also, the researcher may not have the necessary field skills to perform observations accurately, or the ability to conduct interviews appropriately.

Due to the intense time requirements associated with qualitative research, sample sizes are generally small, not random, and rarely representative of entire populations (Hatch, 2002). Instead, purposive samples are chosen based on the researcher's personal knowledge of participants that are believed to be informative (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Results from qualitative studies are also not generalizable to a larger population; however, findings can be used as exploratory research to be built upon, provide a basis for additional areas of research, and discover supportive information for existing research studies. Generation of theories is important to the development of a field of knowledge in areas which little is known about or extend knowledge to gain novel understandings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In all qualitative studies, rapport and trust between the researcher and participant must be built; without this,

findings may be inaccurate or unreliable. Therefore, a sufficient amount of time must be spent between the researcher and the participant to build an open, comfortable relationship for accurate data collection.

Measures of Validity and Reliability

All researchers must take measures to address validity and reliability concerns. Ways to control error in quantitative research include internal and external validity, construct validity, objectivity, and reliability measures. Yet, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) cite, “criteria defined from one perspective may not be appropriate for judging actions taken from another perspective” (p.293). Instead, Guba (1981) proposes four criteria to control error that are more appropriate for qualitative research: “credibility in place of internal validity, transferability in place of external validity, dependability in place of reliability, and confirmability in place of objectivity” (p.219).

Credibility refers to the truthfulness of the findings and can be addressed by assuring that the participants are accurately represented. Strategies associated with credibility include triangulation (the use of multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods for confirmation), member checking, peer/colleague examination, researcher subjectivity statements, and submersion in the research, or collecting data over a long enough period of time for sufficient understanding (Merriam, 1995). Dependability, or trustworthiness, refers to the consistency that the findings can be found again. Associated strategies include using an audit trail, peer examination, replication logic, code-recoding, inter-rater comparisons, and data or methods triangulation (Merriam, 1995; Ary, et. al., 2006).

Transferability refers to the extent the findings can be applied to other situations. While quantitative research focuses on the generalizability of findings, the goal of qualitative research is “to understand the particular in-depth, rather than finding out what is generally true of many” (Merriam, 1995, p.57). Rich, thick descriptions of the context and situations are detailed which

allows readers to easily transfer the findings to comparable situations (Merriam, 1995). Additional strategies include multi-stage designs that use several sites, cases, and situations; modal comparison which involves how typical the sample is compared to the majority; random sampling of component parts related to the study; cross-case comparisons, and reflective statements of the researcher's biases (Merriam, 1995; Ary, et. al., 2006).

Confirmability refers to the idea of neutrality and the importance of bias-free research. This concept specifically applies to the researcher's approach to procedures and interpretation of findings. Researchers must ensure that the data collected and the conclusions drawn would be confirmed by others in the same situation. Strategies include audit trails, triangulation of methods, and peer review (Ary, et. al., 2006).

Researcher Subjectivity

A qualitative researcher is never separate from the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, a researcher must explain personal perspectives that may influence the study and offer a context for readers. There are multiple influences that a researcher may impose on a study due to personal background, experiences, and education. It is essential that the researcher states predetermined subjectivities and allows the reader to understand these views. By offering personal knowledge and beliefs, the researcher is better able to monitor perspectives that could influence the interview process and misrepresent the data analysis and research findings (Glesne, 1999). The subjectivity of the researcher is therefore presented to state predetermined assumptions and alleviate any misconceptions.

Growing up in Texas, involvement with agriculture has filled my life with countless activities, including working on farms, horseback riding, and showing livestock, as well as opportunities to develop unique human and animal relationships. A career in agriculture has always been my professional goal. I attended Texas A&M University in College Station and

received a Bachelor of Science degree in Animal Science. In 2001, I completed my Master of Science degree at Texas A&M University – Commerce in Agricultural Sciences and received secondary agricultural teacher certification. My thesis research focused on the demand of soybean forages for Northeast Texas dairy farmers.

I am currently completing my doctoral degree in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida with emphasis on extension Education. While at the University of Florida, my research interests have included exploratory studies in experiential learning in formal and nonformal educational programs, collaboration between agricultural and extension educators, leadership development for rural agricultural organizations, curriculum design in agricultural education, leadership of agricultural extension agencies, and professional development activities. This academic coursework and research has helped to develop my interests in teaching and extension education, particularly in the area of agriculture.

My professional experience consists of a combination of agricultural industry and teaching positions. Upon graduation from Texas A&M University, I worked for the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service as a dairy market news reporter and as a sales consultant for a livestock genetics company. Then, I taught high school agricultural education while I completed my Master's degree. My interest in higher education strengthened when I was offered the opportunity to teach Farm and Ranch Management as an adjunct instructor at Texas A&M University- Commerce. Currently at University of Florida, I have been involved in teaching numerous courses in Agricultural and Extension Education.

My technical agricultural experiences include dairy, beef, and equine management. I worked on a dairy for four years as a farm assistant and then as a breeding consultant for a cattle genetics company. As a high school agricultural education advisor, I supervised all animal

projects, attended major stock shows with animal exhibits, and managed the school barn and facilities. Currently, my husband and I own and operate a small farm facility where we offer horse boarding services, riding instruction, and recreational riding.

As the current operator of a small farm, I understand the importance of reliable agricultural information. However, as I engage with other producers, their lack of agricultural knowledge is unsettling to me as an educator and a consumer. Agriculture and the environment are ever-changing, and it is critical to have contact with a reliable expert to help solve farm problems. Access to research is important for management and production decisions, and many owners are unaware of where to find this information. Herein lies the vital function of extension agents and the need for lifelong public education. Specifically, agricultural extension agents' responsibilities include the transmission of research-based information to farm owners in order to manage and care for their livestock properly (Seevers, et. al., 1997). The role and importance of these nonformal educators cannot be overlooked in the growth and development of society. They serve as a key link from the university to agricultural owners, like myself, to solve problems.

These interests and experiences led me to pursue a professional and academic career in agricultural and extension education. As a graduate student, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with county agents in their program and professional development efforts. For the past two years, I have assisted with the Florida Cooperative Extension New Faculty Orientation program to transition agents into their positions. This year long program allows agents to understand the extension system, teaching and learning processes, program development and evaluation, and develop necessary career skills. This particular experience has directly influenced my interest in the career decisions of extension agents. Not only is it imperative to

attract new agents into extension, it is just as important to train them to perform their jobs effectively.

Working with new and veteran agents, I have often seen the need for career assistance and continuing education in both professional and personal areas of life. Dissatisfied agents are leaving their positions and finding alternative occupations, while satisfied agents become lifelong employees. The factors and influences that affect the career decisions of agents must be recognized if the organization wants to improve recruitment and retention rates. Attention must be given to agents during all stages of their careers that encourages job satisfaction and leads to long-term employment. This continuity of personnel is a positive reflection of extension and a constructive influence on the community. A reliable educational resource builds overall community education and growth.

I believe that a focus on career growth and development of extension agents must be a priority for the future of the organization. Emphasis must be placed on understanding the factors and influences affecting the career decisions of agents. As the link between university research and nonformal public education, they are critical to societal improvement. Reasons why agents enter into extension can help improve recruitment strategies and techniques. Reasons why agents remain employed can help to improve organizational development and personnel satisfaction. Positive and negative influences on agents in all career stages must also be explored in order for the organization to provide necessary personal and professional support. In summary, these experiences, personal interests, and current issues in the field of extension have led me to pursue this particular research topic.

Ontology and Epistemology

Idealism

The nature of knowledge and truth associated with qualitative research must be considered during the initial phases of a study. Understanding the ontological and epistemological stances of qualitative research assists in determining the appropriate design (Crotty, 2004). Ontology refers to the study of being and is concerned with 'what is' the nature of existence, while epistemology is concerned with "the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope, and general basis" (Crotty, 2004, p. 10; Hamlyn, 1995, p. 242). Both the nature of reality (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology) heavily influence the theoretical perspective, methodologies, and data collection methods used in a particular study.

The ontology associated with qualitative research believes in idealism and the assumption of multiple realities. Based upon this belief, reality is not considered as a single truth, but instead is relative to and contingent upon the researcher and participants (Hatch, 2002). This particular stance influences the framework of a study and the researcher's engagement with participants. Using the beliefs of idealism as a basis, the researcher attempts to gain a variety of participants' perspectives about the 'what is' the nature of reality (Crotty, 2004). This subjective approach assumes that it is necessary to gain multiple perspectives and that each has its own validity in relation to the phenomenon. Additionally, the idea that multiple realities exist is an important assumption that offers support for data collection through personal interviews. This methodology permits the researcher to gain an understanding of the salient issues affecting participants' behaviors and actions. The researcher then analyzes and compares participants' stories to construct a representation of a collective reality.

Constructionism

The ontological stance of idealism directly relates to the epistemology of constructionism guiding the research process. According to Crotty (2004, p. 8-9), constructionism believes,

“There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon.”

Constructionism recognizes the construction of reality is subjective to each individual and that "knowledge and truth are created...by the mind" (Schwandt, 1994, p.125). It is built on the foundation that knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon exists as the result of active engagement with realities in the world. Humans become aware of truth only through exploration and communication with others.

The meaning of a phenomenon is co-constructed between the researcher and participants through interactive discourse (Crotty, 2004). This meaning may differ between participants because it is influenced by many internal and external factors, yet this is an underlying assumption of constructionism. Although different perceptions emerge, the resultant meaning represents the nature and scope of knowledge unique and true to each participant (Crotty, 2004). These variations of individual realities are essential to gain a true understanding of that phenomenon and critical to build a grounded theory. With constructionism, social interaction and engagement are necessary to examine meaning in different ways in relation to the same phenomenon. Therefore, a study must be designed appropriately and the researcher must be skilled in order to elicit this meaning from the participant.

Theoretical Perspective

Constructivism

A theoretical perspective is “a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. It involves knowledge and embodies a certain understanding of what is entailed in knowing, that is, how we know what we know” (Crotty, 2003, p.8). The theoretical perspective of constructivism supports the exploration of self-perceived meaning through the subjective nature of knowledge (Hatch, 2002). To understand one’s perspective, meaning must be self-constructed through interactions in a social context (Crotty, 2004).

Constructivism views understanding as the generation of meaning and is dependent upon critical reflection of experiences. Learning is the process of internal construction of reality and knowledge unique to each individual. Learners attempt to make sense of and interpret experiences for complete understanding (Crotty, 2004; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Key contributors to constructivism beliefs include Dewey, Piaget, Candy, Rogoff, Mezirow, and Vygotsky. Theorists’ perspectives on the importance of experience, the construction of knowledge, cognitive development, social interaction, transformational learning, and individual meaning making are combined to represent this theoretical orientation (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999).

The use of constructivism focuses on the unique experiences of each individual and acknowledges the validity of each person's method of making sense of the world (Crotty, 2003). Through the use of in-depth interviews, the researcher and the participants engage in the construction of a narrative to detail the participants' perspectives of the phenomenon. Each participant shares distinct personal beliefs and individual experiences as this approach allows them to reveal their thoughts and provides evidence of the decision making process in a structured format. Therefore, the use of constructivism is a suitable theoretical approach to cause

reflective thought of participants' experiences, factors, and issues to assist in the self-generation of meaning (Crotty, 2004).

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory allows for a theoretical understanding of the studied experience and permits the researcher to explore, direct, manage, and streamline data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The use of grounded theory offers the following benefits to a research study,

Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble "reality" than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation. Grounded theories, because they are drawn from the data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

The systematic methods of grounded theory offer principles that assist in the formulation of theory and generation of critical concepts. It is important when using this analysis method that a researcher does not begin with a preconceived theory in mind, but rather chooses an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory strategies advocate development of theories from research grounded in the data rather than using hypotheses or existing theories. According to Charmaz (2006), this method encourages the researcher to learn about participants in the research setting and discover their lives. Then, researchers study the participants' statements and actions and try to make meaning from their perspectives. By starting with the data, the researcher can construct meaning through observations, interactions, and materials gathered and follow up on key concepts.

Grounded theory is based on the technique of coding. Coding attaches labels to units of data that synthesize its meaning and allows for comparisons among other data segments (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this way, grounded theorists emphasize interpretation of the data for understanding. Open, axial, and selective coding procedures offer a systematic approach to streamline the data. The constant comparison technique allows comparisons of similarities and

differences throughout data to gain an analytic understanding of the data and develop relevant categories. Memos also offer additional data useful in creating the theory. Memos are preliminary analytic notes written by the researcher about the codes, comparisons, and ideas important to the data. Coding and memoing are the structured techniques that a researcher must employ to define and interpret the data through analytic categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe how agricultural extension agents make career decisions. Qualitative methodologies were selected to achieve insight into factors, experiences, and influences on agricultural extension agents' initial, past, present, and future career decisions that have affected their employment status.

Research Objectives

The interview process was used to investigate the factors that affected agricultural extension agents' decisions to enter and remain in extension, discover career experiences related to recruitment and retention, and identify significant influences on agents' careers at different career stages. From the data collected, two grounded theories were developed that explain the significant issues that affect agricultural extension agents' career decisions. The key objectives of this study included:

- Objective 1: To understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to enter into the organization
- Objective 2: To understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to remain in the organization
- Objective 3: To discover the influences that shape career decisions of agricultural extension agents at different career stages
- Objective 4: To develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents

Participant Selection

A comprehensive list of Florida Cooperative Extension agents generated through the Dean of Extension office was used to help identify the population. The list was subdivided by the extension program development and evaluation director to include only agents that have commercial agriculture as a part of their job responsibilities. 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. This list of 108 agricultural extension agents served as the eligible population for the study. The researcher then requested further information from the Dean of Extension office on 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 be currently employed extension agents that have at least an 80% appointment in commercial agriculture designated in their job responsibilities. A panel of experts consisting of the researcher, an extension education university professor, the Associate Dean of Extension, and the Associate Dean of agricultural programs in the state of Florida used this list to narrow the sample further. These particular individuals were chosen as experts because of their familiarity and regular interaction with agricultural extension agents. In a scheduled group meeting, the researcher explained the purpose, goals, and objectives of the study to the panel and requested their assistance in selecting successful agricultural extension agents. This status was determined through personal interactions, positive performance evaluations, career achievements, and professional reputations. Thirty dependable and respectable agents

with consistent work performance as identified by consensus from the panel constituted the sample.

The panel of experts then separated the sample of 30 agents into the three categories of the career stages model- entry, colleague, and counselor/advisor- according to a list of defining characteristics (Table 3.1) compiled from three career stage theories and models- (Kutilek, et. al., 2002; Dalton, et. al., 1977; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994).

Table 3.1 Defining individual characteristics of extension agents in the career stages model

	<p>Stage when entering into a new profession or job</p> <p>Psychological dependency- dependent upon and must be willingly to accept supervision and direction from others</p> <p>Developing knowledge and understanding of the position, the organization, and clientele</p> <p>Attaining skills to perform the job</p>
Entry Stage	<p>Building formal and informal channels of communication</p> <p>Works with a mentor</p> <p>Shows initiative and innovation in problem solving and risk taking</p> <p>Works as an apprentice to gain experience and respect – receives assignments as part of a larger project director by a senior professional</p> <p>Gaining acceptance among supervisors and peers</p> <p>Building relationships, respect, and acceptance among clientele</p> <p>Developing an area of expertise</p>
Colleague Stage	<p>Gaining independence without close supervision</p> <p>Developed a reputation and accepted as a professional in the organization</p> <p>Recognized in an area of specialization and shares expertise with others</p> <p>Has a high level of professional skills</p> <p>Self-confident and visible in the organization</p> <p>Peer relationships take on greater importance</p> <p>Independently contributes expertise to solving problems</p> <p>Some remain in this stage throughout their careers by making substantial contributions to the organization and experience a high degree of professional satisfaction</p>
Counselor/Advisor Stage	<p>Prepared to assume formal or informal responsibility in developing others</p> <p>Seek to broaden their interests, capabilities, skills, and areas of expertise</p> <p>Takes on leadership roles</p> <p>Interested in personal growth, development, and self-renewal</p> <p>Confident in own abilities to produce significant results</p> <p>Builds confidence in others</p> <p>Recognizes interdependency and accomplishes work through others</p> <p>Have established internal and external networks</p> <p>Influential in defining the direction, growth, and survival of the organization</p> <p>Catalyst for positive organizational change</p> <p>Established national reputation and credibility due to professional achievements/publications</p>

The 30 agents were then further divided by the researcher and an extension professor to select twelve interview participants. Due to the intense time requirements associated with qualitative research, sample sizes are typically small, not random, and almost never representative (Hatch, 2002). Instead, purposive samples are chosen based on the researcher's personal knowledge of participants that are believed to be informative (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This type of sampling advocates the selection of information-rich cases for study to provide thorough understanding and insight, rather than generate empirical generalizations common in quantitative studies (Patton, 2002).

A purposive sample based on aforementioned researcher-imposed criteria was used to select a total of twelve agricultural extension agents, four in each category of the career stages model, as the final participants. This table is presented in Chapter 4. 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.

In qualitative research, the number of participants required is not straightforward due to the number of factors involved and varying conditions between studies (Morse, 2000). Instead, the researcher must estimate based on each situation. Factors to consider are saturation and determinants of sample size (Morse, 2000). A single reference citing the specific number of participants needed to create a grounded theory was unavailable, however theoretical/data saturation was an important concept considered in the decision making process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). To achieve saturation, the researcher designed the interview to permit continuous

expansion of the participants' responses until new and relevant information was no longer provided (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Patton (2002) recommends the selection of information-rich cases that can provide thorough understanding and insight rather than empirical generalizations. The panel of experts assisted in the selection of suitable participants that could offer relevant data. The nature of the research was also believed to be important issues to participants. Therefore, it was expected that the discourse would be open and meaningful, while the quality of data obtained would be detailed, experiential, and sufficient requiring fewer participants (Morse, 2000).

From the population of 108 Florida agricultural extension agents, 30 were identified by the panel of experts, and then 12 were purposively selected for the final sample. The 12 agents represented approximately 11% of the population. The selection of the number of participants was also based on previous qualitative studies in agricultural education and extension research, including Warner (2006), Mutchler, et. al. (2006), and Smith, et. al. (1995). Each of these research studies used nine to twelve participants as the sample size to gather qualitative data.

Data Collection Procedures

The first step in the data collection process was to create an interview guide that was appropriate for the theoretical perspective and research objectives guiding the study. The content of the interviews focused on participants' initial career decisions, recruitment and retention factors, career experiences and influences, and professional needs. The guide was also designed to investigate previous findings in the literature in the areas of job satisfaction, career success, recruitment, organizational support, retention, motivation, work and life balance, and social relationships. Questions specifically focused on influences that have positively and negatively affected the participants' career decisions. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on their thoughts and express significant career factors and experiences.

A panel of experts revised the interview guide and offered suggestions for improvement.

Upon approval from the panel, the IRB protocol and informed consent was submitted for approval. The informed consent document can be found in Appendix E, IRB protocol approval is in Appendix D, and the interview question guide is located in Appendix F.

The interview guide was pilot tested with two agents from the population to ensure credibility. Pilot tests are a form of pre-testing in which subjects from the sample population are given the instrument and provide feedback to determine if the instruments is measuring what it is supposed to measure (Black, 1999). Cognitive interviews according to Presser, et. al. (2004) were conducted with the two pilot participants. These interviews focused on obtaining participants' thoughts to the questions immediately after the interview in order to reveal the process involved in interpreting the questions and arriving at the answers (Presser, et. al., 2004). Following the two pilot tests, the researcher made minor revisions to the interview guide.

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. (Appendix G). Of the twelve agents, 11 agreed to participate and one was unable to be contacted. Therefore, the next agent identified in the sample at the colleague/advisor level was contacted and became the final participant. 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 prior to the interview.

The researcher collected data 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 allow for more freedom and exploration during the interview sessions. This type of interview supported the ability of the researcher to present initially prepared open-ended questions, question unanticipated responses, probe for further clarification and thought, and improvise based on the participants' responses (Wengraf, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). The researcher used the set of guiding questions during the interview, but added probing questions to expand and clarify statements made by the participants (Hatch, 2002). All of the interviews were conducted at the extension agent's office. With the consent of the participants, all of the interviews were audio taped for transcription at a later time.

The constructivist framework influenced the researcher's approach to the data collection process. Interested in the co-construction of knowledge, the researcher asked the open-ended and probing questions which encouraged participants to reflect and construct a personal understanding of career decisions. Interviews were primarily participant directed as the researcher initiated questions through a relatively passive role that allowed participants to explore their self-perceived realities. This structure was critical for participants to reflect, discuss, and explore the career decision process. It was important for the researcher to remain

objective in order to eliminate any personal bias and influence on the direction and content of the interview. As a result, an in-depth understanding of participants was gained through progressive expansion of interview questions.

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. The member checking process is defined and detailed below in data analysis procedures.

Data Analysis Procedures

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. Grounded theory is “a detailed grounding by systematically analyzing the data sentence by sentence by constant comparison as it is coded until a theory results” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 16). 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 interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2003). The use of grounded theory offered the following benefits to the research study,

Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble "reality" than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation. Grounded theories, because they are drawn from the data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

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). “The result sought in grounded theory is a small set of highly relevant categories and their properties connected by theoretical codes into an integrated theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 42).

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 (Appendix G). This review process is commonly termed the member checking process (Hatch, 2002). The member checking process was performed after each interview was fully transcribed by the researcher. The researcher emailed the participants only their specific interview transcript to ensure validity and reliability of information. Each participant viewed only his/her interview transcription and no other participants. The researcher provided clear instructions for each participant to carefully review the interview transcription and clarify any misinterpretations of words or thoughts for accuracy purposes. The researcher also allowed the participants to eliminate any data that they felt was incorrect or harmful in anyway. This process ensured the participants were aware of the information being used in the research process. The

researcher made minor revisions to the interview transcripts using the participants' responses before the data was analyzed.

During analysis, the researcher used an objectivist grounded theory approach. When the researcher assumes this approach, the goal is to uncover the external reality that is already in existence. This method required the researcher to remain objective and work as an external and detached interpreter of the participants and their realities (Charmaz, 2003). In this way, the researcher only used the collected data to discover an external reality and did not offer any personal insight (Charmaz, 2006). Although some degree of interpretation in data analysis is inherent, in-vivo codes using the exact words of the participants were used as often as possible (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This objectivist grounded theory approach helped to ensure that the data were a collective representation of the participants with minimal manipulation from the researcher.

Coding

To study the data, the researcher separated, sorted, and synthesized the data using qualitative coding. "Coding helps us gain a new perspective on our material and to focus... and leads us in unforeseen directions" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 258). According to Strauss and Corbin, (1998), coding procedures: (a) build rather than test theory, (b) provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data, (c) help analysts consider alternative meanings to phenomenon, (d) are systematic and creative, and (e) identify, develop, and relate concepts that are the building blocks of theory (p. 13). 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, 2000). Analytic coding was specifically used to develop themes and facilitate interpretation for the grounded theory. Analytic coding highlights emergent themes, allows exploration and development of

new categories or concepts, emphasizes comparison techniques, and most importantly, questions the data for new ideas (Morse & Richards, 2000).

Initial analysis began with open coding of all twelve interviews concurrently using meaning units as separation points. The process of open coding “opens up the text to expose thoughts, ideas, and meanings” contained within and serves as a starting point to uncover and develop grounded concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998. p. 102). This procedure involves breaking down the text into discrete parts and close examination for similarities and differences among the data. In-vivo codes, or exact words that occur in the data, were used to represent the statements of participants as closely as possible and reduce biased interpretation from the researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morse & Richards, 2000). Open codes that emerged after analyses of all twelve participants’ responses were then sub-categorized into connecting axial codes between participants. Categories of similar events, actions, objects, and interactions were grouped to create axial codes, or concepts with shared properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The technique of constant comparison was used throughout analysis process. Constant comparison involves “the elements of theory... generated by comparative analysis are first, conceptual categories and their conceptual properties; and second, hypotheses or generalized relations among the categories and their properties” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 35). Using comparative analysis, an action, object, behavior, event, or happening that has the same characteristics with another was given the same code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

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). The axial codes, and selective codes generated from the data can be found in Appendix A. Diagrams in Appendix B and C were also created as they helped to create a conceptual understanding of the developed theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures were addressed throughout the analysis and coding process. To improve the credibility of findings, triangulation of data was achieved using multiple methods of confirmation including verification of transcripts through member checking, codes were examined by an extension professor, and in-vivo codes were utilized when possible. The transferability of findings was enhanced by rich descriptions of the interview context and situation; the use of twelve extension counties and all five districts in the state; the variety of characteristics used to select interview participants to represent the population as closely as possible; and, the use constant comparison to compare codes across participants. Dependability measures were acknowledged with coding-recoding strategies, use of two coders, and maintaining an audit trail of transcripts, codes, and correspondence. Finally, confirmability was addressed in the researcher's approach and interpretation of the data. An objectivist grounded theory approach was during analysis to eliminate researcher bias, in-vivo codes were used when possible, and findings were confirmed by an extension professor for accurate representation of participants' perspectives.

Summary

This chapter explained the research design and methodology used to accomplish the stated objectives. An overview of qualitative research and its foundations was explained through the researcher subjectivity, ontology, epistemology, and theoretical perspective related to the study. Research objectives, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis

procedures were outlined in the methodology section. Finally, measures of qualitative validity and reliability were addressed.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS OF AGENTS' DECISIONS TO ENTER AND REMAIN IN EXTENSION

This chapter discusses the results found from the research objectives (1) to understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to enter into the organization, (2) to understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to remain in the organization, and (4) to develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents.

At the conclusion of the transcription process, 198 pages of text were utilized in the data analysis process. From the data, categories emerged specific to factors and experiences regarding the decisions of agents to enter and remain in the organization. The systematic process of coding was used to separate, sort, and analyze the data. The constant comparison technique was also employed to identify similarities and differences of patterns found in the data. The figures included in Appendix A illustrate the relationships discovered between the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes. A grounded theory is also presented in Appendix B to conceptualize the career experiences of the twelve participants in the study and illustrate the theory that resulted from the analysis.

Description of Participants

To provide an overview of the participants in the study, the number of years employed with extension, gender, and researcher defined career stage has been outlined in Table 4.1. Participants were classified into the three career stages by the panel of experts based upon personal interactions, positive performance evaluations, career achievements, and professional reputations, not solely years of experience. Participants worked in the following areas of commercial agriculture: agronomy, horticulture, livestock, agriculture and natural resources, pest management, fruit and vegetable production, small farms, agricultural development, agricultural

and pesticide safety, and farm management. The ethnicities of participants included African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian. Additionally, four rural counties, three urban counties, and five mixed urban/rural counties were represented in the sample. To protect the confidentiality of participants in this sensitive subject matter, all demographic, background, or other descriptive information has been omitted. Pseudonyms have also been used and specific identifiers have been deleted throughout the analysis process.

Table 4.1 Description of Participants

Pseudonym	Years Employed in Extension	Gender	Career Stage
Jessica	4	Female	Entry
Eric	2	Male	Entry
Tammy	1	Female	Entry
Benjamin	2	Male	Entry
Sean	14	Male	Colleague
Brenda	7	Female	Colleague
Samantha	6	Female	Colleague
Adam	7	Male	Colleague
Harry	19	Male	Counselor/Advisor
Gabby	25	Female	Counselor/Advisor
Matt	11	Male	Counselor/Advisor
Patricia	7	Female	Counselor/Advisor

Agents' Decision to Enter into Extension

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 pursue a career in extension. An outline detailing the relationships between the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes is shown in Appendix A, Figure A-1. Each specific category is detailed below.

Agent Background

The category, agent background, was comprised of two axial codes including academic and work experiences and lack of 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.

Academic and work experiences. All of the participants had prior involvement in commercial agriculture through one or more of the following ways: industry work, research, academic programs, and growing up on a farm. Four participants specifically indicated that they were raised on a family farm, while seven had previously worked in the agricultural industry. Work experiences included equine operations, beef cattle management, livestock production and processing, agricultural sales, veterinary work, vegetable and crop producers, and nursery management. Those participants familiar with extension work prior to employment indicated that their knowledge of extension was obtained through internships, research assistance, industry collaboration, agent presence, or extension programs. Benjamin reflected upon his industry work with farmers and how it related to extension work, “I realized that I was nothing more than an agricultural extension agent... I was more involved in DEVELOPMENT, the development of management skills, the development of farmers’ ability to make money, more so than looking at rudimentary daily issues.”

Each of the participants had at least one academic degree in a technical agricultural area. The various degrees held were animal science, horticulture, agricultural engineering, agricultural and rural development, general agriculture, plant and vegetable science, and entomology. Of the twelve participants, only four had a degree in extension education prior to employment. From those with a degree in extension, each exuded confidence in their expected career path as an agent. Tammy stated, “I always wanted to be a livestock agent so I was on that career track,”

while Harry discussed his attitude at the completion of his graduate program, “When I got done, I didn’t think about what I should be doing. By that time, I knew that what I wanted to do was to be a county extension agent.”

All participants obtained a variety of work experiences during their academic programs. Graduate research was specifically cited by seven participants as a significant influence that led them to pursue extension. Research experiences ranged from working with extension and specialists to various types of livestock, plant, crop, and vegetable production-based research. However, many realized that they did not want to remain in a research type career. Gabby knew that research was not her desired path as she stated, “I knew I wanted something more practical in nature, so when the job in extension came up and I found out what it was, it sounded like something that I wanted to do.”

Lack of extension knowledge. Although all participants held an agricultural college degree, not all had prior knowledge of a career in extension. Seven of the twelve participants lacked extension education training before becoming an agent, and therefore, did not really know what to expect. Jessica discussed her lack of exposure to extension while in college, “I had no clue as to what extension was. How could you be in an Ag college and not know what extension is? But I had no idea because I wasn’t involved in 4H when I was in high school.” Gabby was looking for a suitable job and “had no idea what extension was,” while Jessica said she had “no real clue.” 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.”

Sean had worked in the industry, but said that he “really didn’t know much about extension...my involvement in 4-H was very limited.” Once the position became available, a

friend encouraged him to apply and his response was, “I was interested but I don’t have any idea. What do they do?” He further explained, “I didn’t know a lot about extension or have a personal relationship with extension. I never really used the extension office when I grew up.”

Additionally, only one participant was specifically recruited for an agent position, and just one had participated in an extension internship.

Career Contacts

The category, career contacts, was comprised of two axial codes including 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.

Encouragement by others. Positive encouragement from peers, clientele, administrators, friends, and advisors was influential on each of the participants’ decisions to pursue and enter extension. Patricia regarded encouragement by the Dean of Extension as one of the main reasons she applied:

I had already applied for another position in extension and when the Dean interviewed me, he said you would be a really good fit for extension and that actually had a lot to do with me considering that position... he made comments about... have you considered working with youth in 4-H, and here are some other positions that we have open, so that encouraged me to continue looking at extension. So when that position came open, I went ahead and applied for it.

Samantha was not looking for another job when the extension position became available, but “the clientele came to me and said... we think you’d be good, we’d like you to apply.” After consideration, she said, “So I did and I called the county director and talked to him about it and he was very excited.” Matt gave credit to his former farm manager and friends within the system for encouragement:

I was kind of uncertain about it, but I had a good friend that I went to college with... and he was an extension agent... and an old family friend was an agent... so knowing two

agents was very key because I could talk to them about it and ask what's involved, what do you do, and I think that's one of the hard things unless you've had personal relationships with an agent, a lot of stuff that we do are behind the scenes.

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." Brenda 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. Benjamin and Adam were both encouraged by people from the University of Florida to seek out available positions.

Six participants indicated that they 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. Brenda previously applied but "the extension salary at that time was low and there was no way that I could take that job," yet received continued encouragement from her graduate advisor.

Eric personally sought out extension as an alternative to working in the industry and said, "It took me a long time and several tries... I had looked at a couple of positions, but didn't quite get in there, and finally got this one." Sean described his career path as a lengthy process, "I filled out an application and interviewed for the job, went to campus and interviewed with all those people, interviewed with a county committee and did not get the job... later I applied for the job again, same as before, and went through all of those processes and was hired." Even though participants did not obtain a position on the first application, continuous encouragement

from others had a direct influence on their decision to keep trying. As Eric stated, “Persistence pays, I guess.”

Influential relationships. 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. Harry explained his perception of the agent that he encountered on his family farm as a young boy, “The local county extension agent that was there just happened to be one of those world renowned county agents and he was a super guy.” He continued, “I didn’t know necessarily what this was all about, but I knew when this guy came, he was treated special by our family.” 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.

Tammy also had a role model growing up that influenced her, “I think the reason that I went into extension was because of another agent I knew... I grew up around him and thought that it would be a really cool job to have.”

Eric’s prior exposure to extension was through involvement with state specialists and participation on advisory committees that he was in contact with while working in the industry. While Samantha said that the previous agent in her position strongly encouraged her to apply, as well as her grandfather who had been an extension agent. Brenda was most influenced by extension colleagues in her Master’s program and her graduate advisor, “I had some peers that thought it was a pretty good job. But I think my advisor just thought that I would be really good at it, she saw something in me that I really did not see. And I’m glad she encouraged me.”

Service to Agricultural Community

The category, service to agricultural community, was comprised of the 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. 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." Jessica was interested in "helping farmers," while Eric wanted to "find answers for people with problems."

Benjamin, Adam, and Harry regarded the service aspect as one of the main reasons that they entered into the organization. Benjamin displayed his feelings about working with farmers, "I am definitely at my best when I believe that I have the freedom to do the things that directly benefit the people that I am working for." He continued to describe his role as a link to help farmers solve problems and said you must evaluate the situation and realize, "The farmer is always right until you make him righter." Adam was pleased the university "is addressing the issue of helping people to increase their knowledge... and be able to better understand what they are doing." His devotion to the agricultural community was apparent as he described the results of one of his programs:

One time the wife called me back and cried because her husband was able to get a license which means he was able to hold a job and get a pay increase. So I felt very appreciative to that and for helping this community to get something.

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 were explicit factors that influenced participants' decision to enter into the extension organization.

Nature Of Extension Work

The category, 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.

Job expectations. Some of the job expectations expressed by participants were "helping farmers with their problems," "providing objective advice," and "answering questions in a non-biased way." The ability to help people with practical problems and utilize personal skills was cited by many as an attraction to extension. 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."

During her interview, she saw the potential growth in the job and thought, “This was an exciting place and I took the job. I came and I’ve not been sorry.”

Matt described his first day on the job and his mistaken assumptions about how an agent works with the public:

It is hard in the beginning in a very flexible open job with no set structure. I mean there are certain things that are expected. You’re expected to do at least two major educational programs, you’re expected to do some kind of written communication and you’re expected to make contact with the people you serve. That’s pretty loose. So, I think that was the thing that I struggled with is I just wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do, or what I was expected to do and I was pretty naïve. I thought the University of Florida hired me and I’ve got a college degree and I’ve got this experience, people are just going to call me. Wrong.

Although participants had a general idea of what was involved as an agent, several described the lack of clear, stated job expectations as “frustrating” to a new agent. Patricia commented, “Honestly, I didn’t know what agents did when I applied for the job,” while Gabby had a similar attitude as she searched for a place to start her programs, “I had no clue. I didn’t know what to expect because the previous agent in the position wasn’t real forthcoming about things.” Jessica did not have any previous exposure to extension so she had few expectations as a new agent, “I didn’t have a definitive idea. I had nothing to base it on.” Brenda discussed how she believes this issue of lack of job expectations could be addressed by the organization:

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 9 to 5 job where you go home and forget about your job at the end of the day... I know the application has vague basic things, but if there was some way to provide them with a realistic outline or flyer or booklet or something that gives some of the specifics of extension so they have some realistic expectations prior to going into the job.

Several participants agreed with Brenda’s comments about the need to have clearly stated job expectations and its importance in guiding new agents’ career efforts.

Position Fit

The category, personal and professional position fit, was comprised of the axial code, position descriptors. These descriptors included the details of position announcement, such as salary, location, and duties. The advertised description was cited by two participants as a deciding factor to apply for the job. Adam stated “the description of the job really, really identified with what my background was” and aligned perfectly with his career interests. Harry was happy working in another state extension system when he became aware of a position in Florida. He explained his thought process and how the position announcement affected his career decision:

This position description came along...and it would be a lot more contact with the on-farm demonstrations and things like that... Just the general description was a big factor. Prior to that, a standard position, I don't know if I would have felt like that was worth the risk of taking something that I already knew I could be happy at. So, 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 because I left something that I was already happy and satisfied in for the long term, my long term happiness.

Others cited various reasons related to personal and professional fit of the job to their needs. Examples were the job allowed “freedom and variety,” the “job was available,” the starting salary was “very competitive,” and it was the “right time and the right place.” Two agents specifically cited the job benefits as an important factor in their decision. 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.” Therefore, the importance of a detailed job description made a positive impact on participants’ decision to apply for a position that fit their lifestyle and interests.

University Supported Education

The category, university supported education, was comprised of the 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.

Nonformal structure. 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 described her expectations for the job and 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’s 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. He compared the nonformal environment of extension to the more formal industry workplace:

First, you have the flexibility to be able to do things and come up with ideas to and see that idea come to life rather than the rigidity of actually working for a particular company and doing a particular thing that is imposed on you. I’m not really comfortable in those environments.

The ability to take risks and try new things in programming without acceptance from others is another benefit that participants embraced. Benjamin appreciates the risk-taking behavior permitted in his work decisions, “You don’t even have to have your directors or anybody agree with you at first, they can be really skeptical, but as things start happening, they start seeing the value and they go huh, that really wasn’t such a bad idea.” As shown,

participants cited a variety of factors related to the nonformal structure of extension that compelled them to seek an agent position.

University affiliation. Participants agreed that the connection of the extension system with the University provides personnel and informational resources needed to support agents in their work. Sean describes his view on the advantages of the Extension-University relationship and its recognized reputation to the public:

I wanted to be able to provide information and advice and help to those people and said Ok, I know a little something and I've got an opportunity to share that information with other producers and it's the University information here. I mean the University's respected, although there's still a whole lot of people that don't have a clue or know what extension is... very few people in this state don't understand what the University of Florida is... that's got name recognition and when you talk to producers, they respect the University of Florida.

Several participants specifically remarked on the benefits of having the resources of the university available to find answers to client questions. Eric understands that 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." When Adam compared his previous extension system to Florida, he was impressed by the distribution and coverage of state resources, "We worked with very little resources and now here, you have plenty of resources to work with." He continued to explain how he utilizes offices, information, agents, clientele, and facilities around the state, and its positive effects on his work:

I think it's the resources that the University has to work in extension and you feel good that you have the support to do your job with technology, infrastructure, and communication. I think overall the resources that the University provides for the extension system allows you to feel comfortable and see results. If you use these resources in a good way and you apply it to your program, you will see some results.

The stability of a job in extension was cited by nine participants as a factor that played a role in their career decisions. Specifically, Eric had been working in the industry, but decided to

enter extension because it “was a little bit less risky than some of those production jobs.” He discussed his experiences as a farm manager and the buyouts that were occurring as producers went out of business. Even though he made more money in the industry, he described the reason that he left, “I said well I can go for this extension job or I can stay here and the place is probably going to sell and I’ll be out on the street again...I’m getting to the point where it’s kind of hard to, especially over in the area we’re living, there’s just no ag production jobs around anymore.” The university resources, public recognition, research-based education, and career stability were major factors that influenced participants’ decision to enter into the organization.

Agents’ Decision to Remain in Extension

The selective categories relevant to agents’ decisions to remain in the organization were internal satisfaction, community leadership, external motivators, career benefits, change agents, network of support, and extension work environment. All of these categories emerged as influential factors and experiences that affected participants’ decisions to stay in an extension career. An outline detailing the relationships between the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes is shown in Appendix A, Figure A-2. Each specific category is detailed below.

Internal Satisfaction

The category, internal satisfaction, was comprised of two axial codes including positive encouragement and emotional fulfillment. The encouraging feedback received about individual work performance and personal satisfaction gained from work experiences were both influential on agents’ attitudes to remain in the organization.

Positive encouragement. The feedback received from clientele, peers, supervisors, and administrators was cited as internal motivation by all participants. Positive feedback from clientele was the most important factor to participants’ internal satisfaction. Samantha discussed her experiences working with producers and the satisfaction she feels from their feedback, “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."

Harry discussed how he gauges his own success based on "clear messages from the clientele that what we were doing was right." Matt also regarded feedback from producers as encouraging but stated "if you live for that you're going to starve because that doesn't come that often and it certainly doesn't right away, so that's something that comes overtime." He understands that "you've got to build a long term relationship with people before you really start to get some positive feedback."

Feedback from supervisors was also considered as positive encouragement. Benjamin discussed his relationship with his extension directors, "I think I have a pretty fascinating CED and established a good rapport with the DED. He sends little tidbits and ideas and tries to nudge people in certain directions. Those have been really meaningful." Matt commented that the majority of his feedback comes from supervisors, "Probably the most feedback you get is from your supervisors...some are better than others, but the supervisors give you feedback to let you know you're doing a good job." More importantly, Matt regards feedback from his peers as the best way to gauge professional success:

I think your peers give you some feedback too and sometimes that's where you gauge yourself is by your peers. I get a lot of agents now that call me to ask my opinion. That didn't happen when I started, that's something you build over time and it's the same as the clientele, you've got to build those relationships.

Feedback from many different people was regarded as inspiring and encouraging to agents' work performance.

Emotional fulfillment. Participants regarded internal pride gained through work performance and clientele interaction as emotionally fulfilling. Brenda found the appreciation and interaction with clientele personally satisfying, "People are just so appreciative of you

answering their questions or just giving them information...I think it's the fact that people appreciate what we do for them and that's really satisfying." Samantha enjoys the challenge encountered in her job on a daily basis, "I just like the challenge because every day is different and you are solving problems for people."

Gabby explained that she gauges her personal success on "whether I have made a positive impact on the producers, made their life a little easier, helped them understand the rules and the changes a little bit better." Patricia commented that there are many job-related factors, such as pay and unequal recognition, that can be frustrating, but she feels "the clients that I work with have always been very rewarding" and give her that motivation to continue.

Three of the participants, Sean, Matt, and Harry, pointed out that job satisfaction must be "internal" when working in an organization that provides advice to solve problems and does not require clients to report results. Matt discussed his personal philosophy on job satisfaction and its connection to helping people:

The number one thing that's important is your personal satisfaction and I think that's probably one of the things that weeds people in or out of extension. If you don't enjoy what you do, then you're not going to be successful. I have seen some success working with people, the relationships you build, things that you work on and do well, and I feel like I'm helping people. Most days you feel like, I was a help to somebody today, and it may be something as little as just who to call for some service they need. But to me, that's the mission of extension, we're here to help you.

Sean also believes "that satisfaction is going to have to be self-satisfaction" because "when you provide a program or when you answer a question, people don't call you back and say Hey, that was great." Harry has relied upon "intrinsic reinforcement coming from clientele" to satisfy his emotional fulfillment. Personal work commitment, pleasure, and client experiences helped participants to be emotionally fulfilled in their careers.

Community Leadership

The category, community leadership, was comprised of two axial codes including public relations and community recognition. The abilities to provide needs-based education and be respected by the community were specific factors related to agents' decision to stay employed within extension.

Public relations. Similarities found among participants were in their desires to work with a variety of public audiences, meet client needs, and promote agricultural education. When asked to describe their primary clientele, participants included government officials, public leaders, youth, adults, private and commercial businesses, agricultural producers and growers, small farmers, master gardeners, homeowners, and the general public. Jessica described her clientele as "anybody that produces any type of thing on their place and ...the public as a whole."

Adam's dedication to meeting public needs was his primary motivation to stay in extension, "Just the fact to be able to socially help somebody or a community that is in need. Reaching out to people and trying to increase their salaries by getting a license or by getting education and being better prepared with job skills that they need to have." Gabby commented on how she works with numerous public agencies to implement programs to meet client needs:

I don't work alone. I can't say that any one thing that a grower does to make a big difference in their operation was just because of me. NRCS works with them and there are so many other groups and organizations that work with them. I think of it as a group effort and that's why it's kind of hard to come up with impacts for the university because I don't feel like anything I do is just strictly by me or because of my work.

Promotion of agricultural awareness to the public was also a priority. Gabby tries to schedule meetings at the Rotary club or Kiwanis whenever she can to promote awareness, "I will go talk about the importance of agriculture in the county and how important it is in the economy." Jessica also wants "the general public to have a good view of agriculture in the

county and wants them to see it in a positive light.” She discussed her efforts to promote agriculture and the importance of public perceptions:

When I do hear somebody, like at the farm tour, seeing some of our farmers doing something like, Wow I didn’t know farmers were so technologically advanced or I didn’t know farmers really work as much to protect the environment, that makes me feel good because it’s showing them in a good light and that’s what I’m here for. I want them to have the best public perception...I want them to be viewed in a really positive way because it’s a great job. I mean they do a great job for everybody. I’m proud of the farmers.

The promotion of agriculture to public audiences through needs-based education constituted important experiences that influenced agents’ to remain in extension.

Community recognition. Participants welcomed the opportunity to become a part of the community and be considered a community expert. Participants discussed the integration into the community and the feeling of acceptance gained from that recognition. As a new agent, Tammy understood the importance of being visible in the community, particularly at youth functions, “I was there to support the kids and to meet different clients. If you don’t get out in the community on those odd hours, then you don’t get to make those contacts.” Because she made the effort to build those relationships, Tammy has received personnel and resource support from various agricultural associations, public agencies, and community organizations. Jessica also worked hard to gain the respect of the community and as a result, she received assistance with her farm tour, attended a national agricultural association meeting, and won county and national awards.

Acceptance and recognition were encouraging to agents as they integrated into the community. Jessica noticed the acceptance in client behaviors, “The community, I really like the people here and they seem to respond well to me. They don’t treat me like an outsider.” Harry was encouraged to pursue personal interests that benefited both his family and the community during his career. While at the same time, he created positive organizational visibility and client

relationships. Matt was proud to be 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 are somewhat of a local person that's well known...it's kind of nice to be recognized as someone...part of the community. You're not just somebody who's working an 8-5 job and you go home and you're a nobody, I mean we're fairly plugged in here to what's going on.

Participants agreed that building and maintaining community relations was a significant factor affecting their work progress.

Career Benefits

The category, career benefits, was comprised of three axial codes including professional development, position benefits, and university resources. Each of these codes revealed the importance that agents placed on meeting personal needs, participating in professional growth opportunities, and having access to resources.

Professional development. Professional development opportunities were cited as contributing experiences to agents' career growth. Participants concurred that professional development helped to broaden knowledge bases, improve skills, and refine talents. The ability to enroll in higher education courses, attend in-service trainings, and participate in leadership workshops offered valuable career development. Three of the twelve agents completed their Master's degree since being employed, while one is currently working on a doctoral degree. Leadership workshops, conferences, and symposiums were also considered "good learning experiences."

Eric values the in-service received as he transitioned from the industry into the extension organization, "I needed to be brought up to date on how things are being done and we're allowed to go to these trainings and kind of see things from that aspect so that helps a lot... I was computer literate somewhat, but I really had to get up to speed on using a lot of these programs."

He also had the opportunity to travel to Brazil within the first years of starting in UF/IFAS Extension and found it to be a “good hands-on experience.” Tammy also appreciates the in-service training offered, “...in industry, you don’t have professional development opportunities like you do in extension.” Patricia credits her happiness to the wide range of career development opportunities offered through the organization:

I have really been happy in extension because I’m someone who has a strong desire to continue to learn new things and that’s definitely encouraged in extension. And we definitely have opportunities, sometimes more than others, but we definitely have opportunities to travel to national meetings, to go to in-service training, to take formal courses, so that’s appealing to me.

Brenda discussed several professional development opportunities that she has participated in during her career. Her district director organized a series of trainings for county directors and program leaders focused on improving management and people skills. Although Brenda had previous experience as a manager, she found it “extremely helpful to have refresher courses.” In addition, she has taken advantage of the professional development grants and “got to go someplace that I would not have gotten to go.” She attended a national extension meeting and said, “It was a great experience that I would never have a travel budget big enough for.”

Samantha was pleased with the new teams that have been formed to guide in-service trainings and reflected on the first group meeting with the specialists, “We got together, talked about problems, talked about issues, hot topics that all of our clientele have and then they’re going to rank those and work on in-service.”

However, four participants said that some professional development opportunities often interrupted their work responsibilities. Gabby found many of the required “meetings” prohibit her accessibility to clientele:

The way I look at things is if there is a meeting and I can get something out of it that will directly benefit my growers or help me do my job, then I will go. Otherwise I don’t have the time, my growers want me here. They told me if a problem comes up, they expect me

to be here to help them quickly...sometimes it's expected that you go to so many meetings a year and I don't believe in that.

Benjamin also believed that some professional meetings are unnecessarily forced upon agents such as, "the imposition of some of the core requirements of UNIFAS ... where you need to do five or six district meetings... or you are required to spend three days in Gainesville for the symposium." Regardless of whether they were required or not, professional development opportunities were seen favorably among participants to receive updated information and training necessary to perform work duties.

Position benefits. Participants acknowledged the benefits of being an extension employee, including salary, opportunities for advancement, flexible work hours, and job benefits, as a deciding factor in their career decisions. Eric and Tammy were particularly pleased with the medical insurance, annual, sick and vacation time as part of the fringe benefits package. Tammy said, "I think compared to the industry, the extension salary is pretty good...but the benefits are what makes it worthwhile." Samantha also found the extension salary to be highly competitive with agricultural education teachers, "The salary they started me out at was a lot better than what I was making in teaching."

Matt worked in the industry prior to extension and "realized how challenging it is and how few management positions are available." The opportunities for advancement within extension were more tangible and realistic to him. One of the reasons that Gabby, Samantha, and Adam chose their positions in extension was simply due to location, "the job was here," "I grew up in this county," and it happened to be "the right time and right place." Harry was encouraged by the flexibility to balance his personal and professional lives with extension. His supervisor supported his desire to pursue his personal interests and have time for his family, "That was a real critical thing and it allowed me to be with the family." While participants had different

personal interests, position benefits were an influential factor in agents' decision to continue working in extension.

University resources. Participants categorized university resources in different contexts including in-service training, networking opportunities, professional development, offices, the Extension Digital Information System, research information, specialists, and money. Resource accessibility was an important factor for Jessica to perform her job and she found that "whenever you need something, there's somebody to offer a resource. It may not be my county director, it may be one of the other agents, it may be somebody in a different county, it may be somebody within the county, or another county department that'll help you out." Matt claims one factor that adds to his job satisfaction is "I feel like we have resources that can help people do what they need to do." Tammy classified professional development as a useful resource because "You have to go to a lot of meetings to be able to interact with these different people and to get resources to take back to your clientele." Adam appreciates the quality of resources available to support his work:

I think the System, the University Extension in Florida is a very, very high quality system. It's very rewarding to work with high quality professional persons and be able to connect to resources that are there and you feel like you have great support having the University of Florida behind your back.

When conducting multi-county programs, Adam utilizes various resources located at each extension office in the state, "I have been very successful to network with the county and the agent in that particular area so they will connect me with the clientele there, we use their facilities, we use the mailing list, so many things that I can use in multiple locations."

All twelve participants agreed on the importance of university specialists as a valuable resource. Sean uses specialists to obtain current research information, "One of the things that has helped me the most is those extension specialists that I work with... that's where I get the

university information to share with the producers... so that's been a really big organizational help to me, all of those specialists." Patricia contacts specialists particularly when there is a client question that she cannot answer, "A lot of times it is just going straight to the specialists and saying this is what I've got with this grower, what do you think, what do you recommend, and going straight to them... a lot of times the questions pertain to things that you aren't even on EDIS, they haven't made it that far yet." There are a variety of resources offered by the university to support agents and enable them to function effectively in their positions.

External Motivators

The category, external motivators, was comprised of two axial codes including measurable performance indicators and external rewards. Each of these factors provided encouragement that shaped the agents' decision to remain in extension.

Measurable performance indicators. Program participation and evaluation results were the primary performance indicators used by participants. Sean discussed program participation as a gauge of performance because "people do come to programs, they fill out the little questionnaires that we give them...and most of those survey results are positive." Harry sees client loyalty and repeat customers as reliable indicators, "Most of what I base whether I have been successful or not is the relationships with the growers. I still have these growers that are repeat customer types that obviously want me to be involved with them and helping them." Adam measures his performance based on clientele comments, "I really see a lot of satisfaction coming from the clientele, a lot of good statements that they are telling me, and I really can measure how much I'm helping them." Tammy receives encouraging feedback through program evaluations when she "gives the people a survey and they've all been very positive. They want more education, they want me to come out and do farm visits, and they give me suggestions for new programs or new ideas." While Jessica referred to the change in clients' attitudes as an

observable measure, “Since from when I first started to now, they’ve called more. They’ve asked me more questions, when I go by to see them, they’re not just ignoring me and they’re real friendly with me.” She has seen their confidence in her increase as well, “They’re just more accepting of me… and that says they have some kind of confidence in me.”

External rewards. Participants labeled external rewards as awards, scholarships, recognition, promotions, financial incentives, and grants received during their careers as positive experiences. Harry discussed the rewards of extension work and views personal success in two ways, one is “related to interaction with clientele” and the other is a “more outward way, a more tangible way of viewing the success from the university side would be in the area of awards and recognition.” He has won awards from “a state and national standpoint” and feels he’s “gotten more than enough as a member of teams and recognition within the institution,” as well as “gained recognition from my colleagues through the county agents association…as peer awards.”

Jessica and Brenda both received grants that allowed them to do attend conferences and implement programs that they would not have been able to do with their limited budgets. Samantha attended leadership conferences, completed her Master’s degree, and received “some promotions along the way and little incentives from the university which have been good.” Matt earned state and national recognition for his work and has been recognized by his peers as a top agent “so that means a lot.” He explained what he has learned through the years about receiving awards and the importance of self-promotion:

This is a different kind of industry. You’ve got to promote yourself and that took me several years to get over because all those awards I’ve won, I had to fill out the application for. So you’ve kind of got to toot your own horn, but that’s also kind of how you gauge yourself…that’s part of playing the game to get promoted.

Jessica revealed her feelings about receiving a national award and being recognized as county employee of the year, “I don’t know if that constitutes success but I feel it’s been good.”

Change Agents

The category, change agents, was comprised of the axial code affecting social change. The majority of participants regarded themselves as “change agents” and discussed several experiences concerning change in extension. Harry’s internal reinforcement of success is based upon behavior changes seen over the years in client practices:

I see changes as a result of what we’ve been doing so the adoption of plastic mulch early on my career going from zero acres to probably 15,000 acres in the region, there’s things that you can visibly see the impact that you’re making. So I would say the measure of success would be for me related to what’s it mean to the people I’m working with for the most part. I’m seeing things that we’re working on, I’m seeing them change, I’m seeing them adopt the practices and learn how to do it themselves and then not needing me other than maybe just a little bit of help along the way to continually guide them.

Gabby talked about the importance of career longevity for agents to see the change occur, “Change happens slow and unless you’ve been here for a while, you don’t see much change. If you come in as an agent and stay three or four years, you are not going to see much because change doesn’t happen that fast and that can be frustrating for new agents.” She continued to explain the difficulties in changing behaviors and her shared role in the process:

Change is hard and it’s hard to get growers to change. Something has to happen in order to make them do it, either money or regulations or something. So once that happens and it’s been set, then I can step in and help them achieve that goal to meet that change. That’s the way that I think of it more than just me going out and say look what I have done, I got this many growers to go to drip irrigation. It wasn’t just me, it was part regulations, part the water management district, and all this kind of stuff. But, I feel like I have been successful in helping them.

Adam supported Gabby’s view on the length of time it takes for change to occur, “... after four or five years that you’ve spent here, then you see some results.” Harry discussed the problems with instability and turnover in agent positions when dealing with change:

It takes time in an area to vision and the longer that you are stable in the position, the better that person probably is about doing that. So if there is constant change, turnover, and constant turmoil, I think that is tough to be able to do those kinds of things. It’s important in my mind that county agent positions in particular have long term continuous relationships with people.

The ability to affect societal change is a priority for extension agents, but requires long-term commitment to clientele and work responsibilities.

Network Of Support

The category, network of support, was comprised of the two axial codes including supportive relationships and teamwork activities.

Supportive relationships. Relationships with peers, specialists, mentors, clients, advisory committees, administrators, and office staff had a direct influence on agents' career decisions. Participants regarded community and clientele relationships as the most influential in their careers. Jessica experienced a "huge amount of support" from the community as they "responded well to me" and helped her to become an established agent. Eric received "pretty good feedback from clients" and as a result, decided to stay in his current position when another job became available. He said, "I've developed a lot of good will over here... and some of the relationships I've developed with the people in the industry is probably one of the big reasons I didn't pursue it."

Organizational relationships also provided essential support. Tammy received support from "within the office, the other agents around the state, and the agents here in my office" and gives a lot of credit to her county director for being "very, very supportive of me...she just tried to support me and help me to make the right decisions." Jessica showed her appreciation for the Dean of Extension and the way that he interacts with agents, "He's very interested in the agents and wants to know them and does...he's a big advocate for Extension like a Dean should be, he's a good fellow." Sean described the importance of having a mutual relationship with specialists, "The specialists that I deal with and I use those specialists and work with them regularly because they come and help me do programs, and I go and help them do programs and

so forth. If I didn't have a good relationship with those people or didn't get along and work with them well on a regular basis, I would not be here."

Teamwork activities. Benjamin credited teamwork as one of the reasons for his overall job satisfaction, "I think there is quite a bit of teamwork going on in the extension office and people see each other as comrades and are supportive of your programs." Eric saw the benefits of teamwork when he was involved in several local and statewide programs, "I think the team things, the more you can do, the better. It seems like the more ground you can cover." Matt stated that "at about a year and a half, I was ready to quit," but explained how his peer group reversed his decision to leave when he was struggling as a new agent:

I had some problems in the office I worked in. I didn't have very good supervisor, he gave very little support, so I felt like I was on my own, struggling and if it hadn't been for the other agents, I don't know that I would have stayed. So it was definitely the...that peer group... I learned from them how to do a program. By going to the programs, I got refreshed as to what the current information is and then I also had a group that I can bounce ideas off of and build some success with, so I got some success out of something they had already started, their momentum.

Samantha attributed her professional success to "working with a group of agents, 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." Matt also credited his peer group for helping him to become established:

The thing that was probably the most significant for me was the county agent group that was a group of mid level agents and veteran agents that were all working in the same field... That peer group really pushed me along, I've also benefited from the Florida Association of County Agriculture Agents and that certainly that has been good because it opened me up to folks outside of our district and to a broader focus...so that has been very helpful and it gives you an avenue to apply for awards and get to go on some trips to see other states and see a more, broader, diversity of things than just what's found in your county and a neighboring counties.

Extension Work Environment

The category, extension work environment, was comprised of the two axial codes including freedom and variety in job and characteristics of extension work.

Freedom and variety in job. The freedom and variety in extension work was referred to by all of the participants as a determining factor to remain in the organization. The daily variety of environments, situations, clientele, and activities were valuable assets to the job. Being a former teacher, Samantha found that she enjoyed her career in better because of the diversity in clientele and responsibilities encountered in a typical day, “Everyday is different... Every day I get different phone calls about different problems dealing with people... and you never know what’s going to occur.” Jessica explained that her primary motivation to remain in her position was the variety in the work environment, “I mean this job changes, you know it’s not like you’re stuck doing the same thing day after day and it’s not like you’re stuck in an office looking at four walls or looking at the back of somebody’s head or even in a cubical.” Matt appreciates the flexibility to help people with their problems and finds his work interesting:

That’s what it’s about, it’s helping folks and when you’re helping people with problems or...things they just want to do. It’s interesting. I mean you never know what today is going to bring. Sometimes things are frustrating until you work through them, but there’s a lot of variety and you have some freedom to kind of choose what you’re going to focus on and what you’re doing.

Participants enjoy the freedom to decide program needs for the clientele without needing approval from supervisors. When asked about the one factor that influenced job satisfaction the most, Brenda replied:

We have a lot of freedom in this job, even though we are accountable, we have a lot of freedom. We can assess what needs to be done in our county, we can develop our program around those needs, I would like to say that we can set our hours and our timeframe. But I think that freedom is really nice, I have had in my working career a lot of different jobs where I have been in management and I don’t think any of them have been as satisfying as this job.

Patricia supported this perspective, “I think that I have a lot of creative freedom and a lot of opportunities to make decisions about how I want my programs to go. I like the input of advisory committees... but I still feel like most of the decision making falls to me and I like that, it appeals to me. I like the flexibility that I have to try new things.” Gabby had opportunities to leave extension as other agencies attempted to recruit her throughout the years, but her main motivation to stay was “the lack of having to travel a lot and the flexibility in hours and things, set my own schedule, and pretty much determine what my own program is with assistance from the growers, I’m pretty well left alone to develop the program that I see the need for and that’s good.”

Characteristics of extension work. The absence of micromanagement, flexible work, job stability, independence, work environments, and challenging situations were characteristics that participants value in extension. Adam enjoys the freedom to structure his program around client needs and is proud of the success he achieved from “taking a pilot program to a permanent program” specifically designed by himself. Gabby appreciates the flexible nature of work, “I think in industry sometimes, you’re not allowed that flexibility, you are told here is what you are gonna do and go sell this.” To reach clientele, she “uses every educational tool that we can think of to reach these people” including newsletters, emails, fax, meetings, site visits, research demonstrations, grower trials, and public tours.

Matt likes the ability to make his own decisions in a non-restrictive office atmosphere, “There’s nobody who stands over your shoulder and tells you, you’re going to do this today.” This allows him the freedom in his job to assist clientele in the best manner possible. He also believes that extension is unique as it offers agents the opportunity to use “their own talents” and improve upon them even though they may be different from others. In this way, he points out

that “you can both do the same job and do it well and do it differently. There is no magic formula.”

Grounded Theory

From the data analysis, a grounded theory was developed to describe the career decisions of the twelve Florida agricultural extension agents who participated in the study. A grounded theory is a “theory derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process where data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship with one another and the theory emerges from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). The grounded theory presented conceptually in Appendix B illustrates the multiple influences that made varying impacts on the participants’ decisions to enter and remain in the extension organization.

Factors that encouraged participants’ decisions to enter into the extension organization are represented in Figure B-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.

The factors relevant to participants’ decision to remain in the extension organization are represented in Figure B-1. Participants received internal satisfaction from positive feedback and

emotional fulfillment from extension work. External motivators consisted of measurable performance indicators and rewards received for work accomplishments. Career benefits consisted of professional development, position benefits, and university resources that provided valuable career assistance. Network of support focused on supportive relationships and teamwork activities that were beneficial to participants' work responsibilities. The extension work environment included freedom and variety in the job and characteristics of extension work as positive influences. Community leadership focused on the positive experiences in public relations and expert community recognition. The ability to serve as a change agent and affect societal change was also a positive factor. All of these categories emerged as influential factors and experiences that affected participants' career decisions to remain in the extension organization.

Summary

This chapter explained the results found from the research objectives (1) to understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to enter into the organization, (2) to understand the factors and experiences that influence agricultural extension agents to remain in the organization, and (4) to develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents.

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. The selective categories relevant to agents' decisions to remain in the organization were internal satisfaction, community leadership, external motivators, career benefits, change agents, network of support, and extension work environment. A grounded theory was created to conceptualize the career experiences of the twelve participants in the study and Appendix B illustrates the theory that resulted from the analysis.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS OF INFLUENCES ON AGENTS AT DIFFERENT CAREER STAGES

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the career decisions of agricultural extension agents. This chapter discusses the results found from research objectives (3) to discover the influences that shape career decisions of agricultural extension agents at different career stages, and (4) to develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect the career decisions of agricultural extension agents.

At the conclusion of the transcription process, 198 pages of text were utilized in the data analysis process. From the data, categories emerged specific to positive and negative influences that shaped career decisions of agents at different career stages. The systematic process of coding was used to separate, sort, and analyze the data. The constant comparison technique was also employed to identify similarities and differences of patterns found in the data. An outline detailing the relationships between the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes is shown in Appendix A, Figure A-3. A grounded theory is also presented in Appendix C to conceptualize the career influences of the twelve participants in the study and illustrate the theory that resulted from the analysis.

Influences on Agricultural Extension Agents at Different Career Stages

Entry Level

The decisions of entry level agents were categorized into positive and negative influences according to participants' responses. Comments from all twelve participants have been included in this section as each reflected on the entry level career stage.

Positive influences

Positive influences on entry level agents' career decisions were comprised of the six axial codes including personal skills and characteristics, knowledge bases, internal motivators,

external motivators, support system, and informational support. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as an entry level agent and discuss factors that affected career growth.

Personal skills and characteristics. Personal skills focused on agents' ability to apply their individual talents, such as critical and creative thinking, problem solving, relationship building, public speaking, people skills, and communication and listening. 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 with thinking outside the box, maybe a little more creatively with problem solving."

Being able to help producers with practical problems was an appealing feature of extension work to participants. Benjamin offered his opinion on skills that new agents must posses, such as people skills and the ability to establish relationships:

First and foremost, you have to be a people person because you are working with people and that can be hard for some agents to learn especially if you haven't been exposed to that environment before. And you don't have to be effervescent or bubbly all the time, but you have to learn how to establish relationships and make connections with potential clientele. Also never dismiss anyone regardless of how ridiculous the question is because that person is highly likely to be an asset in something else or another area and may well be giving you ideas that will definitely help you. Those are very important to understand.

He continued to say that flexibility and willingness to change can make the difference between program success and failure:

Flexibility, make sure that you have the skills to see there is a need to make a change and making a change sometimes is not easy. But if you have to do it, you really should because it can make the difference between having a meaningful outreach or not. So, if something is not working properly or the program is not working properly, be willing to drop it or to change it.

Essential personal characteristics according to participants were willingness to learn, humbleness, patience, comfort with people, organization, self-confidence, and a challenging and

cooperative attitude. Jessica explained how dependence on others was a critical factor for her survival as a new agent, “You must have a willingness to admit that you don’t know something. Don’t think you’re going to know things. I mean maybe you will, but if you’re fresh out of college, you’re going to know nothing probably. So, not being afraid to ask someone for help because you’re going to have to ask somebody for help. You cannot do this alone.” A cooperative attitude assisted in agents’ ability to network and relate to clientele. Jessica learned how to use public partnerships to her advantage, “You have to know what other departments do and not just county departments, but federal departments too, and how they can work into doing stuff with you or how you can help them because they have their clientele base built up already and it’s usually your same clientele base.”

Personal interests in community education, program development, and production agriculture were additional dimensions that matched to professional responsibilities. Tammy expressed her desire to “educate producers about best management practices and educate youth about career choices.” Matt felt that his personal and professional background was a good match for an agent position, “I had some expertise and I had some talents that fit more with people skills and communication skills, but I also had a practical background that fit with the job.” 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.” During her interview, she saw the potential growth in the job and thought, “This was an exciting place and I took the job. I came and I’ve not been sorry.”

Knowledge bases. Having knowledge in the areas of extension, evaluation, program development, community development, change, and production agriculture were beneficial to understanding work responsibilities. This knowledge allowed agents to immediately address clientele problems and build relationships upon entering the system. All of the participants had

prior involvement in commercial agriculture through one or more of the following ways: industry work, research, academic programs, and growing up on a farm. Each had at least one academic degree in a technical agricultural area and obtained a variety of work experiences during their academic programs and graduate research. The majority of participants indicated that their knowledge of extension was obtained through internships, research assistance, industry collaboration, agent presence, or extension programs.

Participants specifically discussed the importance of practical field experience in agriculture as a primary factor influencing their career success. Tammy believes that having practical experience is critical to complement the academic knowledge of new agents:

Just the basic knowledge of whatever the clients need... I have such a strong knowledge of it because of my background. I mean you can go to the classes and stuff, but if you don't have the experience, hands on experience and really working with it, then you're not able to give that advice, like personal advice...if you can't offer them real hands on experience then...it would be really hard for the agent to give advice if they don't know.

She said that the lack of having practical experience is one reason why agents leave because "they don't know how to answer the questions and it's really hard." Tammy continued to explain how experience helps to develop an understanding of client problems:

You can relate to what the people are going through and you can kind of feel their pain for them, so it really helps the client for them to know that you understand what they're going through because if they think that you know what they are talking about, I think they are a lot more apt to ask you a question.

Additional areas of knowledge that were beneficial to agents included reporting and accountability measures, tenure and promotion requirements, computer programs and technologies, and diversity in agriculture.

However, participants agreed that two current problems with many new agricultural agents is the lack of field experience and limited exposure to careers in extension. Four participants believe that agricultural field experience should be a requirement for new agents. Tammy said,

“I think a lot of the problems with getting new agents is that there’s not people educated in the subject matter.” Matt supported this statement, “I honestly believe that we should, especially in agriculture, require our new agents to have an internship somewhere working in the field we’re going to be working in… it would sure help folks if they just had a little bit of taste of what the industry is doing.” Samantha also agreed that “less kids coming out of college have an agriculture background…so that’s the problem, they don’t have the experience or the background to jump into a position like this.”

The other issue mentioned by participants was the limited exposure of agriculture students to careers in extension. Only five of twelve participants had deliberately been exposed to extension prior to employment. Tammy stated, “…there aren’t young people with that education or they just don’t know those jobs are available. So I think just getting extension more visible into maybe the high schools or FFA so that those students that want to go into agriculture know that extension is a really good career to go into.” Matt gave his view on the existing recruitment process and the need to improve strategies:

I feel like we’ve done a very poor job of recruitment. I mean it’s basically if you want a job with us, there’s all these jobs in our website, but that’s not how you get good people. If you want the best football player to come play for the Gators, you don’t just tell them well you just apply on-line and you can come play football, you go out and find them and you recruit them.

Several participants referred to the adage, “extension is the best kept secret” and identified this as one of the problems with recruitment. As Patricia stated, “That’s the biggest hindrance in hiring people in extension would be people don’t know about it. I think even in agricultural colleges, people don’t know about it.” Matt pointed out that it is important to “have the right person for the right job…and sometimes we just settle for whatever is in the pool and we pick the best in the pool. Maybe some of those times we should have just started over.”

Support system. A strong support system was mentioned by all agents as a positive influence on their career decisions. Having the support of peers, supervisors, mentors, colleagues, specialists, clients, and administrators had a direct impact on new agents as they began. Matt was very appreciative of guidance from his supervisor when he began his position, “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 what are some things that you need to do right away.” Jessica experienced a “huge amount of support” from the community as they “responded well to me and don’t treat me like an outsider” which helped her to establish herself as an agent. Tammy has received support from “within the office, the other agents around the state, and the agents here in my office,” as well as from her advisory committee, “They give me ideas and suggestions.” Most importantly, Tammy appreciates her county director because she “keeps up with the agents and supports them with what they’re doing, I think that’s really beneficial.” She gave an example of how her director shows interest in each agent every week:

She walks around on Monday morning and says how did your program go this weekend and she wants to know everything that happened and a lot of times, she’ll even come to your programs and I think that’s just really important to have a good CED.

Eric’s praised his district director’s management style as he explained “if you need something, he is more than happy to give you feedback, but as long as you’re cruising along, he’s not going to mess with you.” Jessica specifically made it a point to compliment the Dean of Extension for his interest and familiarity with agents:

The Dean really seems to care about you which surprised me. I mean he’s the Dean of Extension. There’s a bunch of us, but he knows all of us. How does he do that? And he seems to actually care...how many managers of big companies...they don’t care. I think that if I actually had something going wrong with my family, he’d care.

Harry was strongly influenced by a colleague agent that he worked with and described him as a mentor that shaped his perspective of being an extension agent:

He knew how to work with people and he was a people person and starting out in extension with a guy like this was a godsend to learn how to treat people and service people and have fun in the job and all that kind of stuff...he had been there a long time and just had the respect of everybody that he ever touched, a storyteller, and starting out with him as a mentor was just really phenomenal. I don't think it could ever be replaced.

Matt summarized important considerations for new agents, "The thing that's going to make it good or bad is when you step into that job in that county, what support system do you have? Are you just left on your own or is there somebody strong there that's going to kind of guide you and give you some directions, take you out...I mean, get in the truck with them and go riding and meet some of the key people."

Informational support. Access to educational resources, in-service training, new agent orientation, professional development, specialists, and university resources were positive influences on entry level agents' career growth. Eric appreciated "having the full resources of the university at your disposal" and the fact 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." Resource availability was important for Jessica to perform her job as she found "whenever you need something, there's somebody to offer a resource. It may not be my county director, it may be one of the other agents, it may be somebody in a different county, it may be somebody within the county, or another county department that'll help you out." Matt claims one factor that added to his job satisfaction was "I feel like we have resources that can help people do what they need to do."

All twelve participants agreed on the importance of university specialists as a valuable resource. Sean uses specialists to obtain current research information, "One of the things that has helped me the most is those extension specialists that I work with... that's where I get the university information to share with the producers... so that's been a really big organizational help to me, all of those specialists." Patricia contacts specialists particularly when there is a client question that she cannot answer, "A lot of times it is just going straight to the specialists

and saying this is what I've got with this grower, what do you think, what do you recommend, and going straight to them... a lot of times the questions pertain to things that you aren't even on EDIS, they haven't made it that far yet."

Professional development opportunities including extension symposium, focus teams, short courses, in-service, conferences, and new agent orientation were also critical for new agents to build their knowledge and expertise. Tammy values the in-service training provided for entry level agents, "I think things like that really help because it gives you programs you can provide for your clients and then it also helps to educate yourself at the same time with new information to keep you up to date on what's going on in the industry." She continued to discuss the additional benefit of social networking at the trainings, "It gets new agents oriented into what's going on, trains them, and gets them introduced to new agents, or other agents and other programs that are going on around the state." Adam appreciates the quality of resources available to support his work, "I think the system, the University Extension in Florida is a very, very high quality system. It's very rewarding to work with high quality professional persons and be able to connect to resources that are there and you feel like you have great support having the University of Florida behind your back."

Internal motivators. Internal motivators created positive reinforcement for entry level agents to gauge their success and provide direction for the future. Feedback, freedom, job variety and flexibility, goal setting, and reputation establishment were all positive influences. Feedback received from clientele, peers, and supervisors guides agents as they become established in the county. Tammy relies upon program evaluations to establish a needs-based program agenda, "Having the surveys is really helpful to know what they want and what I can

provide for them that they will be interested in.” Benjamin agreed, “Evaluate everything because that actually gives you feedback on what you are doing right and what you are not doing right.”

Positive feedback from clientele was considered the most important factor to participants’ internal satisfaction. Samantha discussed her experiences working with producers and the satisfaction she feels from their feedback, “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.” Harry discussed how he gauges his own success based on “clear messages from the clientele that what we were doing was right.” Matt also regarded feedback from producers as encouraging but stated “if you live for that you’re going to starve because that doesn’t come that often and it certainly doesn’t right away, so that’s something that comes overtime.” He understands that “you’ve got to build a long term relationship with people before you really start to get some positive feedback.”

Feedback from supervisors offered positive encouragement. Benjamin discussed his relationship with his extension directors, “I think I have a pretty fascinating CED and established a good rapport with the DED. He sends little tidbits and ideas and tries to nudge people in certain directions. Those have been really meaningful.” Matt commented that majority of his feedback comes from supervisors, “Probably the most feedback you get is from your supervisors…some are better than others, but the supervisors give you feedback to let you know you’re doing a good job.”

The freedom and variety in extension work was referred to by all participants as a determining factor to remain in the organization. The daily variety of environments, situations, clientele, and activities were valuable assets to the job. Being a former teacher, Samantha found that she enjoyed her career in extension better because of the diversity in clientele and work

responsibilities encountered in a typical day, “Everyday is different... Every day I get different phone calls about different problems dealing with people... and you never know what’s going to occur.” Matt appreciates the flexibility to help people with their problems and finds his work interesting:

That’s what it’s about, it’s helping folks and when you’re helping people with problems or...things they just want to do. It’s interesting. I mean you never know what today is going to bring. Sometimes things are frustrating until you work through them, but there’s a lot of variety and you have some freedom to kind of choose what you’re going to focus on and what you’re doing.

Jessica explained that her primary motivation to remain in her position was the variety in the work environment, “I mean this job changes, you know it’s not like you’re stuck doing the same thing day after day and it’s not like you’re stuck in an office looking at four walls or looking at the back of somebody’s head or even in a cubical.”

The freedom to decide program needs for the clientele without needing approval from supervisors was also appreciated. When asked about the one factor that influenced job satisfaction the most, Brenda replied:

We have a lot of freedom in this job, even though we are accountable, we have a lot of freedom. We can assess what needs to be done in our county, we can develop our program around those needs, I would like to say that we can set our hours and our timeframe. But I think that freedom is really nice, I have had in my working career a lot of different jobs where I have been in management and I don’t think any of them have been as satisfying as this job.

Patricia supported this perspective, “I think that I have a lot of creative freedom and a lot of opportunities to make decisions about how I want my programs to go. I like the input of advisory committees... but I still feel like most of the decision making falls to me and I like that, it appeals to me. I like the flexibility that I have to try new things.” The one thing that Jessica really enjoys about her job is “that the university allows a lot of freedom in deciding what your programs are.” Eric appreciates the self-directed type of work characteristic to extension, “I

don't see a whole lot of ultimatums passed down, you will do this or you will do that. It's kind of up to you and I think they should keep it that way."

External motivators. External motivators referenced by entry agents 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 establish their reputation. As Harry reflected, "It's obvious to me that teams are also what help the new agents survive those first five years."

The ability to see client behavior changes was noted as principal motivating factor. Benjamin explained his primary motivation is his comfort in helping others to change:

The fact that I understand what I am doing, the fact that I am comfortable in this zone, the fact that I believe that one of the greatest satisfiers for me is to make somebody else happy with making a decision that I have suggested, to make a change based on what I suggested, and it works out in their favor both economically and otherwise. To quite a degree, those things are more meaningful than money.

He added his view on the importance of visible changes, "I really want to see change happen and I want to be a part of that change. I've been there before, I've done things and changed things and I was and still am very very happy about some of those things that I have seen. It makes me feel like I am leaving a mark, an ecological mark on this earth."

Participants discussed the struggles of program development including where to start programming efforts, how to identify clientele, and where to obtain program funding. Jessica discussed her gratitude for professional development grants to develop new programs and expand her outreach:

Those mini grants that they offered...that is so welcomed and so appreciated because I mean we might have these grandiose ideas, but we don't have any money. So having a few dollars to work with can really help you get some of your ideas off the ground...and maybe to people that don't know about extension. Some of the money, what we're using it for is going towards people who don't know about extension or don't know about what your program is.

Not only did grants give her financial support for programs, it also helped to expand her clientele base, gain public and peer recognition, receive awards, and motivate her to continue.

Negative influences

Negative influences on entry level agents' career decisions were comprised of the four axial codes including initial mandated requirements, personal work management issues, lack of direction, and job pressures.

Initial mandated requirements. Meetings, reporting and accountability, tenure and promotion, completion of a Master's degree, programming efforts, and the hiring process were difficult to handle as an entry level agent. Participants referred to the initial hiring process as "time consuming," "lengthy," and "inefficient." Matt said, "It takes forever for us to hire somebody." Patricia has seen the organization lose highly qualified candidates as a result of the length of hiring process, "They are moving onto other things because they don't have the time to wait so we're losing out on some wonderful people."

Matt discussed the combined pressures on entry level agents to succeed and obtain a Master's degree at the same time, "I think that it's pretty tough to try to go to school and establish yourself... the first year you're frustrated, the second year is when you start to come up with something, and the next thing you know, you're trying to go to school too." Jessica is working on her graduate degree and regrets not completing it earlier "because it stresses me out not having it done and always being bothered and asked about it." Sean agreed, "I think it would've been nice to have Master's before I got here," but he also recognized the advantages of experience while being enrolled in the program and working at the same time.

Several of the twelve participants commented on the difficulties encountered with the reporting and accountability requirements. A commonality found among all agents was the

negative experiences with the reporting system. As Benjamin stated, “it must be easier to work with...it’s time consuming and cumbersome... if reporting is not made easier, more manageable, and less cumbersome, then it’s gonna drive people away.” Participants discussed the stress of having to complete an annual report without proper training and supervision upon entering their positions.

Personal work management issues. Personal work management issues that negatively affected new agents included scheduling difficulties, poor time management, inadequate salaries, limited access to resources, long work hours, and out of pocket expenses. Salaries and high cost of living was an issue new agents were trying to overcome. As living costs rise in the state, Tammy said, “It’s really hard to find a place to live with the way housing and land development is going.” Even though salaries may increase, she stated, “I don’t know if that increase will be enough to make it over what the cost of living will be.”

Several agents had initial troubles with organization, time management, planning, and efficiency in their work. Eric discussed the difficulties he faced, “I was kind of haphazard with that and there’s times when you spend half a day trying to find an email, just little things like that, that’s just learning...when you go from getting four or five emails a month to four or five an hour, it’s a whole different world. So just understand how much information you’re dealing with and getting my plans all set out.” Lack of self-confidence can also be prohibiting to new agents as Jessica stated, “I don’t know if I am ever going to be the kind that will be able to answer questions right off the bat just about some random thing...I probably wish I knew more.”

Lack of direction. Lack of direction, unclear guidance and expectations, inadequate leadership, and the absence of a job description were problematic during the early years. Matt commented on the vague job expectations that confront new agents, “That’s the biggest thing

I've heard is people starting out...they don't understand the expectations." Brenda reflected on her first day and how she felt lost, "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 described similar experiences as he reflected on his challenges in the first year:

It's hard...extension agents are very independent. Nobody tells you when you come in, you've got these five things to do today...you kind of feel like you're on your own. There's nobody to tell you what you need to be doing...It is hard in the beginning in a very flexible open job with no set structure. I mean there are certain things that are expected. You're expected to do at least two major educational programs, you're expected to do some kind of written communication and you're expected to make contact with the people you serve. That's pretty loose. So I think that was the thing I struggled with is I just wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, or what I was expected to do.

Tammy explained how lack of leadership and program understanding among directors negatively affects new agents:

Some of the CEDs, they don't have very good leadership skills and they try to micromanage their agents and that doesn't work at all. I mean that makes people leave extension really fast...so having good leadership is really critical...even the district directors, they may not understand what the ag agents deal with on a daily basis, they don't have agriculture experience so they don't understand why we do the programs, the way we do them, or why we don't have that many programs for the cattlemen because they just don't come.

She added that directors' inadequate support for agents can cause added stress:

I think the county directors and the district directors and all the way up they have to understand what's going on in the county level and to be able to know what the agents are doing. And support the agents, not criticize them.

Although participants had an idea of general responsibilities as an agent, several described the lack of a clear, stated job description as "frustrating" to a new agent. Matt explained, "There is no job description that tells you what to do. You're just supposed to relate and do problem solving and do education programs for these folks, whatever group of folks you were hired to work with and nobody says, this is what you ought to do." Patricia commented, "Honestly, I didn't know what agents did when I applied for the job," while Gabby had a similar attitude as

she searched for a place to start her programs, “I had no clue. I didn’t know what to expect because the previous agent in the position wasn’t real forthcoming about things.” Jessica did not have any previous exposure to extension so she had few expectations as a new agent. She remarked, “I didn’t have a definitive idea. I had nothing to base it on.” Brenda discussed how she believes this issue of lack of job expectations could be addressed by the organization:

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 9 to 5 job where you go home and forget about your job at the end of the day... I know the application has vague basic things, but if there was some way to provide them with a realistic outline or flyer or booklet or something that gives some of the specifics of extension so they have some realistic expectations prior to going into the job.

Job pressures. Job pressures assumed by entry level agents can be overwhelming. These pressures include the pressure for success, tenure and promotion requirements, building programs, and obtaining a Master’s degree. Matt believes that “backing off the pressure” would be helpful because “the first year you’re frustrated, the second year is when you start to come up with something, and the next thing you know, you’re trying to go to school too.” He continued to discuss the issues faced by entry level agents and the pressure to succeed, “You’ve got to have some recognition, you’ve got to show them some excellence, and you have to have written some things. So there’s a fair amount of pressure now on new people coming in to succeed and succeed quickly when they really don’t know what they’re doing.”

Although Tammy completed her degree before entering extension, she revealed her thoughts on this issue, “If I was a new agent and I had that to tackle, that might be one reason for getting out of extension. I think maybe that is why a lot of younger agents have left just because they don’t have their Master’s and they have that staring them in the face...so I think having your Master’s degree is critical to starting a career in extension.” Eric discussed the increase in number of farm visits, programs, and work responsibilities he experiences as a new agent, “I

guess now there's gotten to be more and more on my plate and that's the toughest thing to keep up doing what you're doing, so I need to figure out a way to be able to continue." Preparation for tenure and promotion was mentioned by all participants as a constant pressure that is enforced, but lacks clear guidelines, expectations, and standards.

Colleague Level

The decisions of colleague level agents were categorized into positive and negative influences according to responses by participants. Comments have been included from eight participants, four colleague and four counselor/advisor agents, in this section as each reflected on this career stage.

Positive influences

Positive influences on colleague level agents' career decisions were comprised of the five axial codes including internal motivators, external motivators, career growth opportunities, career management strategies, and collaboration with key people.

Internal motivators. Internal 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's 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... I think I made a difference...to make a difference and to be able to affect change for the better." At one point, she told the Dean of Extension, "I would almost pay you to do this job because it really is a very satisfying job and I enjoy it...I think it's the fact that people appreciate what we do for them and that's really satisfying."

Samantha explained the professional satisfaction that she felt after completing the tenure and promotion process, "I feel pretty good about what I've done...I finished my five years and

went up for tenure and promotion...so I think that's pretty successful if you can stick with it for that five years and get the promotion packet completed." Adam discussed the importance of being able to see changes happen and how it drives him to continue. He recognized the importance of longevity in a position and its connection to results:

It would be different if I wasn't here for four or five years... I would really have to look around and see how can I answer that but for me, that gap is filled. I can see my job connected with the clientele and also the clientele making some progress or some results, so I think that's the main thing that really keeps me going at this point.

Internal motivators were helpful in building agents' self-confidence as they developed internal and external networks, leadership skills, and solidified their reputation with peers and clients.

External motivators. External motivators mentioned included awards, promotions, financial incentives, program success, recognition, community acceptance, increased salary, work expansion, clientele improvements, and an established reputation. Samantha has received "some promotions along the way and little incentives that the university provided which have been good." Along with incentives, she appreciates recognition and approval from her supervisor, "A pat on the back every once in a while... it can be pretty lonely with the workload." Brenda considered evaluation feedback as encouraging performance measures, "I have good numbers and survey results which have shown relevance and that they have learned something." Peer recognition was also an external motivator as Patricia explained, "Peers have been really important and encouraging me to apply for awards and asking to share my work with them. I am getting good feedback on that." She added, "I have been called on by people from around the state to help with things and that's nice too, that's a nice incentive to keep doing the job."

Career growth opportunities. Participants discussed various career growth opportunities that positively influenced their careers including professional development, conferences,

completion of Master's degree, leadership positions, and in-service. Sean reflected on the completion of his Master's program and offered mixed emotions on the experience:

I think it would've been nice to have a Master's before I got here... But, as I went through that Master's program, even though it took me forever, there is a lot of benefit to being in the real world before you go and get a Master's... I learned a lot that maybe I wouldn't have learned if I had gone straight through... it was just a lot more real-life application.

Samantha also completed her Master's degree while employed and appreciated the financial support the organization offered, "They waive your tuition and everything...so that's a pretty good deal."

Patricia has served in several leadership positions including program leader, committee chair, district director, and on a national board which have all "been positive." 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 also helped me with just working together with people so you've got somebody you can call." She was also selected by her county director to participate in a leadership conference which was "a good learning experience." Brenda was especially appreciative of the approachability of administrators:

I'm pretty happy with the way things have gone. I have gotten a lot of support along the way, I think that extension administration is very approachable and it was very refreshing to find people in administration so approachable and I'm not intimidated. So I felt like if I needed information and I wasn't getting it, I can just go to the top... Definitely, you feel like you can voice your concerns and that to me is very important and I'm very appreciative and glad about that.

Professional development and in-service were regarded as beneficial career improvement activities. Brenda specifically appreciates the in-service training and grants available to agents, "I received maybe eleven hours of training over this past year and that was extremely helpful because I have had a lot of it before, but it doesn't hurt to have it again because refresher courses are good...Also, the administration offers professional development grants and I applied for one and I got it and got to go someplace that I would have not gotten to go."

Career management strategies. Participants reflected on career management strategies that influenced job satisfaction including experiential learning, client communication, establishing limits, organization, time management, resource utilization, empowering others, independent learning, overcoming obstacles, and program promotion. Establishing personal limits and time management were particular strategies that agents learned as they became more experienced. Samantha commented on the importance of scheduling, “Don’t get too overwhelmed with everything you can do. Because we can’t do everything...I’ve learned to say no some because at the beginning, I was doing everything and you can’t do that, you can’t. You’ve got to learn to say no and learn to schedule your time.” She gave an example of her approach, “I’ve learned to try to schedule and spend more time with my kids and my family... I’ve also tried to schedule my evening meetings so that I don’t have them back to back or three in one week which when I started, it was like that....you’ve got to learn to schedule programming time and work that accordingly.” 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 on how to get it done efficiently that is still turning out a quality product.” Brenda makes it a priority “at the beginning of the year to put days off...even if you may not take it at that point, at least you’ve got it already sequestered and you have the possibility of having time off. It took me several years to learn that in order to get free time, you had to make it first.”

Samantha recommended to “keep a separate record” of information and “don’t rely on the database... develop your own system.” Sean spent the majority of his early years building a reputation and as he reflected on this experience, he saw how this time was well spent:

You work and hopefully through that work you develop a good program...You are building a reputation early in that career and that pays off for you later. But at the same

time, it can't be tell me what you did for me, it's tell me what you did for me LATELY. It's all got to be current. You can't just rely on a reputation.

Brenda credits her success to the time available at this point in her life, "I not sure that I would've been as successful in extension if I had come to it younger when I still had children at home. I think I have the ability to give more time now because I have it."

Participants emphasized the importance of experiential, independent, and continuous learning. Not having a formal background in education, Brenda learned as much as possible on teaching methods, "You have to learn about adult education and the techniques. And I think if you don't get that pretty soon after you come into this job, then it makes it pretty hard." Patricia agreed and devotes time to observe other agents' programs to improve her teaching skills, "So I really spent a lot of time, well still now, but even those first years, I spent a lot of time intensively looking and seeking out other people who were doing a good job, attending all their classes, stealing their ideas, trying to get into other trainings...most of everything that I do has been taken from somebody else." Adam would like to "increase skills in one particular area of knowledge...get more specific opportunities to increase education and methodology skills...and really become a highly specialized person."

Collaboration with key people. Collaboration with advisory committees, colleagues, specialists, communities, and professional associations provided positive experiences for colleague level agents. Samantha collaborates with her advisory committee not only to plan her program agenda, but the group serves as her support system, "You need to work very closely with an advisory committee because they back you up in programming if you ever have a problem, they're there to back you up. I've got ten or twelve people on my advisory committee that are my best friends, I can call them up for anything, and they're also large producers in my county, so I think it's good to have that clientele advisory committee relationship." She also

relied on association involvement as “that gives you opportunities to win awards which looks good” and specialists because “it’s hard for young agents to get a journal article, but if you can, pair up with a specialist.”

Matt gave credit to a multi-county agent group for his early successes, while Samantha also relies upon her colleagues for support, “Working with that group of agents, 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.” Samantha’s dedicated involvement in the agricultural agents association has been a commitment that has provided numerous career contacts, “Our Ag agents association, FACAA, I’ve found that through the years it’s good to get involved because that gives you some people all over the state if you need to call or need help.” Brenda also understands the importance of collaboration as she serves as program leader and manager in her office. She has “divided up sub-management,” “empowered the master gardeners,” has “a supportive office,” and works with colleagues in teams to accomplish goals. The regional teams that she worked with offered “a wealth of experience...a good informational sharing organization and good for learning and getting support for what you were doing or to know that you were on the right track.”

Negative influences

Negative influences on colleague level agents’ career decisions were comprised of three axial codes including performance evaluations, salary disparity, and personal work management issues.

Performance measures. Inconsistencies in the reporting system, performance evaluations, promotion requirements, and evaluation guidelines negatively affected agents’ job satisfaction. Difficulties with the reporting system were referenced by all participants as a

negative experience in their careers. Sean described his ongoing experiences with reporting, “They ought to do whatever it is in their power to streamline annual reporting and it might help with retention of future employees. I see that as an annual obstacle that usually is a maze of stuff ...and you know the thing is, the report that they want you to do is different every year.”

Samantha believes the university needs to “work out the kinks in the reporting system so that it’s easier and user friendly because that right there can drive an agent away.”

The constant changes in the reporting systems have been detrimental to organization and record keeping. Samantha explained how she faced these changes and their effect on her tenure and promotion process:

Get organized, get your own system because they told us that when you get ready to do your tenure and promotion packet, we can combine all these four different databases or four different systems that I’ve been on, or we can pull it all together and it will be right there in the format. No it’s not. Wrong, it doesn’t happen.

Sean reiterated this lack of reliability and compatibility of the reporting system, “We would get this system and they would say if you fill these out, then it’s gonna generate your promotion packet and it wouldn’t. Actually, the promotion packet is a whole different thing.” Adam faced particular difficulties with the tenure and promotion process and said, “I was very disappointed...and it was frustrating...you expect to have a very fair evaluation...you have to have very clear rules because if you don’t then the guidance for people will not really be good and people will get disappointed with the system.”

Salary disparity. Disparity in salary compression, program comparisons, and pay raises were cited as negative influences on career satisfaction. Salary compression was the primary concern among agents at this level. Samantha expressed her perceptions of the problem with salaries and agent experience:

Salary compression is a problem because now people with Master’s degrees are starting out at \$40K which I did not start out at six years ago and so they get closer and closer to

what I'm making now. It's worse for people that have been in the system for 15 or 20 years, so I think that's an issue...there's agents making not much less than me that started just a year ago and don't have the experience that I have.

Patricia agreed that pay was an issue when "people starting out are gonna get as much as you are with no experience because they adjusted the salaries." Adam felt that salaries need to be more competitive, considerate of the different living costs throughout the state, and compensate for expanding areas of work.

The correlation between evaluation scores and pay raises was also an unsettling issue. Sean offered his view on the ineffectiveness of the current pay raise system, "They've got a system where they read and evaluate your reports and they give you a score and that score is from one to seven...my point is there is no spread in that raise whether you get a three or a four or if you get a seven...It doesn't convert to anything real."

Personal work management issues. Personal work management issues that negatively affect agents' careers included lack of contact with specialists, travel issues, increasing responsibilities, time constraints, and community conflict. Brenda compared the differences in the type of stress between industry and extension work, "The stress that I have here in extension is the kind of stress that I create for myself. Deadlines, pressures to succeed, or to do too much in one week and that's a little bit easier to manage than stress that is put on you by other people."

Gabby reflected on the increasing demands from clientele and the university that contributed to her burnout at this point in her career:

I think it was when I first hit that first burnout period which I think everybody hits after about 10 years, 8-10 years. You finally have gotten one promotion and now you're looking at a second and third promotion and they want national and international type of experience 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 and I do think people tend to burnout at about 8 years or so. So, that was a time when I looked really seriously at some of the other positions because the salary wasn't that great.

She added, “You start getting put on more committees, getting more asked of you from the university, and from even within the counties, and it just seems to be all of a sudden almost more than you can handle.” According to Patricia, the increasing responsibilities “make you feel there is not enough hours and that you are just not gonna get finished and there are too many things happening.”

All colleague level agents recognized the value of specialists to complete their work responsibilities, however there were specific problems related to contact with specialists. Brenda described her frustration with the sharing of information between specialists and agents:

Probably one of the most frustrating things, occasionally there will be a ...problem that a researcher at the university is working on, but they haven't shared that information with us. This happened to me twice and there has been an article in the paper about it and we didn't know about it. I hate people calling me and asking me for information on something that I have no idea about and that's embarrassing to us. If they are working on something that is that important and it gets into the paper, then we need to know about it two or three weeks at least before the paper is working on it.

She described another experience stemming from the lack of communication with specialists, “Sometimes extension specialists come into the county invited by groups other than extension and we don't even know about it. We'd like to know, we might come or we might use them while they are here. So, I think that is a communication thing. So communications could probably be better between specialists and agents.”

Counselor/Advisor Level

The decisions of counselor/advisor level agents were categorized into positive and negative influences according to responses by participants. Comments from the four counselor/advisor level agents have been included in this section as each reflected on this career stage.

Positive influences

Positive influences on counselor/advisor level agents' career decisions were comprised of the four axial codes including internal motivators, external motivators, career growth opportunities, and career management strategies.

Internal motivators. Internal motivators for agents included personal enjoyment, helping people, having an expert reputation, positive feedback, recognition, community respect, client loyalty, colleague interactions, and challenging work. Harry has remained in extension because "I feel like this is what I was born to do." Patricia described the personal satisfaction that she receives from working in extension, "I really enjoy what I do and that has been the driving factor in keeping me in extension, I do enjoy what I do, I feel like I am making a difference and that's important." Matt had a similar opinion on what drives agents to stay in extension:

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 want to do your best and you have that drive to do your best, but you also genuinely want to help people. I don't know that the administration can give you that, drive and satisfaction.

Matt regards feedback from his peers as the best way to gauge his professional success:

I think your peers give you some feedback too and sometimes that's where you gauge yourself is by your peers. I get a lot of agents now that call me to ask my opinion. That didn't happen when I started, that's something you build over time and it's the same as the clientele, you've got to build those relationships.

Gabby finds the challenge of extension work motivating, "Everyday I say well, I learned something new today. It's a challenge keeping up with these growers because they're so intelligent. I have learned a lot more about agriculture." Harry's internal satisfaction was apparent as he reflected on his career choices, "I would say the likelihood that I could've done any better, fit any better, enjoyed it any better, I don't think that would've been likely."

External motivators. External motivators at this career stage included awards, outreach funding, creating independent learners, community impact, client behavior change, feedback, teamwork results, outcome indicators, and client success. 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.”

Changes in client behaviors were a primary motivator for agents. Harry’s measurement of success is based upon changes seen over the years in client practices:

I see changes as a result of what we’ve been doing so the adoption of plastic mulch early on my career going from zero acres to probably 15,000 acres in the region, there’s things that you can visibly see the impact that you’re making. So I would say the measure of success would be for me related to what’s it mean to the people I’m working with for the most part. I’m seeing things that we’re working on, I’m seeing them change, I’m seeing them adopt them practices and learn how to do it themselves and then not needing me other than maybe just a little bit of help along the way to continually guide them.

Gabby gave her opinion about change and her supportive role in the process:

Change is hard and it’s hard to get growers to change. Something has to happen in order to make them do it, either money or regulations or something. So once that happens and it’s been set, then I can step in and help them achieve that goal to meet that change. That’s the way that I think of it more than just me going out and say look what I’ve done...But, I feel like I have been successful in helping them.

Harry discussed the rewards of extension work and views personal success in two ways, one is “related to interaction with clientele” and the other is a “more outward way, a more tangible way of viewing the success from the university side would be in the area of awards and recognition.” He has won awards from “a state and national standpoint” and feels he’s “gotten more than enough as a member of teams and recognition within the institution.” He has also “gained recognition from my colleagues through the county agents association...as peer awards.” Patricia appreciates the “incentives, whether it be awards, scholarships, or whatever” that are offered by the organization and for “allowing education and formal coursework to continue.” Matt has earned state and national recognition for his work and has been recognized by his peers as a top agent “so that means a lot.”

Career growth opportunities. Advantageous career growth opportunities were mentoring, continuous learning, improved talents, leadership positions, and career stability. The mentoring program was motivating for agents to influence others and grow professionally. Patricia did not have a formal mentor when she first started her position, but feels it is an important part of her job, “I know there is a mentoring program now and I think that is really important. I am mentoring somebody else in the system now and I can see that as being a really positive thing and should be taken advantage of more often.” 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.” Matt believes mentoring should involve all colleagues, “I think it’s important that the other agents, not just the director, but other agents in the office, mentor the new folks and a lot of times that job gets dumped on somebody two and three counties away and you just don’t have that contact with them.”

Leadership positions have offered valuable career growth to all counselor/advisor level agents. Matt has been involved in numerous leadership trainings as he prepares for “a more administrative role” and learned that “you get out of everything what you want to, what you put into it, how much you take it home and think about it and try to apply it.” Harry has assumed several leadership roles throughout his career, and has recently been appointed to a new management challenge. Gabby makes it a priority to become involved in local and statewide leadership that “directly benefits the growers.”

Career management strategies. Strategies for career management include self-promotion, clientele guidance, humbleness, limiting non-productive activities, aggressively seek

clientele, prioritization, separation of work and family, and setting personal goals. Matt explained what he has learned through the years about receiving awards and the importance of self-promotion:

This is a different kind of industry. You've got to promote yourself and that took me several years to get over because all those awards I've won, I had to fill out the application for. So you've kind of got to toot your own horn, but that's also kind of how you gauge yourself...that's part of playing the game to get promoted.

Harry credits the involvement and support of his family for his ability to manage his career:

The understanding from my family certainly played a big factor and having their support has been immense in what I have been able to achieve and there's no question in that... So I think there was a conscientious strategy on our part of how can we pay the bills and get through raising the family...but we've not always had the luxury of financially doing what we want to do.

Matt has also learned to prioritize family and work, "I don't need to kill myself and sacrifice my time with my family and all that to be there, so I think that's part of trying to learn what really is important and what we make important." Placing personal limits on time was extremely beneficial to balancing responsibilities, "I have consciously tried to go home at 6:00...but the longer you're in extension, the more you get involved in and the more you work on, you can't get it all done and you just finally have to draw a line and say, I'm going home, it'll be here tomorrow and it'll get done when it gets done." Factors and experiences that have helped Patricia to be successful included goal setting, creative freedom, advisory committee input, flexibility to try new things, and having a supportive office work environment.

I think overall in the whole course of my tenure of being in extension, the fact that I set my goals for the year and my performance then is measured on those goals that I set for myself. I think that I have a lot of creative freedom and a lot of opportunities to make decisions about how I want my programs to go. I like the input of advisory committees but I still feel like most of the decision making falls to me and I like that, it appeals to me. I like the flexibility that I have to try new things, my happiness here in this office has to do with the work environment in this office...Having supportive support staff and having extension agents work well together as a team, having a supervisor that is supportive, anything but a micromanager.

Negative influences.

Negative influences on counselor/advisor level agents' career decisions were comprised of two axial codes including career overload and job dissatisfiers.

Career overload. 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. Each of the four agents expressed the overwhelming responsibilities that they have encountered with years of experience. Disappointment with the promotion process was expressed by Gabby, "Incentives are nice, but if you're one of the ones who doesn't get it, it's a real disincentive...it makes a difference in how you see the university." Harry's devotion to his work can sometimes create undesirable stress, "I love what I am doing, but the frustration at times is to figure out how to do all the things I want to do. So the stress for me is self-imposed to a large degree." Matt discussed the increasing number of leadership trainings that he is involved in, "I feel like I've been hit over the head with a skillet because they've started several and they wanted me to be in all of them." In addition, he remarked on his excessive committee assignments and its relation to employee burnout:

The other thing that does get a little frustrating is the longer you're around, the more they know you, the more you get stuck on task forces and committees and they need all that stuff, I understand it, but it does wear you down... If you overload good people, you burn them out and you take away their drive to excel if they're overloaded... It helps the organization, but it really doesn't help with their mission and their job. You've just added frustration to their job and so I think that's something the administration needs to keep an eye on. We need to protect our good people, not overload our good people.

Harry has seen "the biggest strain in the last couple years" as he has taken on "two different jobs...and having a little more of a gray area in terms of supervisory stuff which has been challenging." In addition, it has been difficult to handle "mixed messages from administration...so having a clear message from all different points of administration is really

critical.” The main problem he has seen is the ability of the organization to support his needs, “Their ability to listen to what I felt through the experience was learned and so...I needed support for what I was being asked to do.

Job dissatisfiers. Participants described factors that produced job dissatisfaction at this career stage as burnout, lack of professional support, overwhelming responsibilities, increased leadership positions, time limitations, excessive committees, reporting limitations, promotion process, disregard for service quality, lack of financial incentives, self-induced stress, and unequal recognition. Gabby explained how required meetings interfere with her ability to serve clientele effectively and limit her time, “I just want to do my job to the best of my ability and I will do whatever I have to do to do that or learn more to do that, but I’m not just gonna go to a meeting, a three day meeting, to get a couple of hours of information, I just don’t have the time.” Focus on quantity and not quality of service for reporting and accountability purposes was also upsetting to Gabby. She discussed how the emphasis on numbers can mask the significant impacts of extension work on her small clientele group:

The university is more interested in the numbers that we generate more than the actual quality because my clientele as a group is small as compared to an urban agent where you may have the whole population in the county as your clientele group. So mine is small when compared so I am not going to generate those huge numbers so I think it’s more of a quality issue.

Insufficient pay raises was a negative issue expressed by all four agents. Gabby explains why she is more concerned with the happiness of her clients rather than her performance evaluation results, “I pay more attention to what they say than the number on my evaluation each year because it doesn’t really make much difference if you get a 1% or a 2% raise. Raises haven’t been enough to worry about to be honest.” Matt expressed his discontent with the raise system, “We pay the same...basically the same raise to the sorriest people as we do the best people...only two or three years did we actually get a raise based on our evaluation, a merit pay

increase.” He believes that the organization should “use finances to reward excellence...it is a little frustrating when I got the top score and a 3.25% pay increase and the guy who got the lowest score got a 2.8% increase...it didn’t make a lot of difference, so why kill yourself?”

Reporting and accountability issues were additional job dissatisfiers. Gabby reflected on the constant changes in the reporting system, “It seems like it changed every year...It would be nice if for once we got a consistent reporting system so that we could go through the year reporting on this system and know that it is still gonna be there next year.” She further explained, “We hear people talking about quitting when it is around report time. It gets frustrating.” Harry continues to have difficulties with the compatibility of the system to report his accomplishments, “If you’re doing good things, then sometimes you say, I WANT to report this and where can I fit this into the report and UNIFAS to a certain degree doesn’t give that ability ... there’s only a limited little space in that area for success stories and so that area is WAY too limiting.”

However, the salary itself did not seem to have an influence on the four agents in a positive or a negative way. Gabby explained her view on salaries, “The salary is not a huge factor, it could’ve been less, it could’ve been more, but it didn’t make much difference because I like what I was doing. I could’ve made twice as much with industry, but I don’t want to have to travel.” Harry explained that “it has not been a detriment, but I’m certainly not in it for the money.” He described the financial strains that his family confronted in his career:

We recognized that that was a sacrifice that we were willing to take. But, that was something we accepted. So to me, money was not an attraction or a detraction, it’s been adequate and it’s getting better. I would say this though if somebody is getting into this career to make money, that’s a BAD mistake, a BAD mistake.

Matt adds, “It’s got to be personally satisfying. We’re not going to be paid enough to do this job even if we hate it.”

Grounded Theory

From the data analysis, a grounded theory was developed to describe the career decisions of the twelve Florida agricultural extension agents who participated in the study. A grounded theory is a “theory derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process where data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship with one another and the theory emerges from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). The grounded theory presented conceptually in Appendix C in Figure C-1 illustrates the positive and negative influences that shaped career decisions of participants at the different career stages: entry level, colleague level, and counselor/advisor level.

Positive influences on entry level agents’ career decisions can be classified into three categories: personal traits, motivators, and support systems. Within personal traits, individual characteristics and skills focused on the agents’ ability to apply their talents and personality to extension work, as well as having foundational knowledge in agriculture, extension, and program development. Motivators can be classified as internal or external depending upon their effect. Internal motivators focused on internal satisfaction and positive reinforcement as a gauge of success. External motivators included client engagement and awards to measure work performance. Finally, support systems can be categorized into people and information. Dependence on others is important for survival as a new agent and having a network of people at all levels assists in career understanding and establishment. Informational support was valuable to build knowledge, answer client questions, and develop a community reputation. These influences were beneficial for agents to understand work responsibilities, immediately address clientele problems, and build relationships upon entering the system.

The negative influences of entry level agents can be 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 by agents. Unclear guidance from supervisors and absence of clear, stated job expectations caused agents to be uncertain of duties, responsibilities, and programming efforts. Initial mandated requirements and job pressures encompassed the overwhelming responsibilities placed on a new agent and the pressure for success from the university. Personal work management issues referred to the agents' inability to organize and manage time in accordance with work responsibilities common at the beginning of an extension career.

Positive influences on colleague level agents' career decisions can be classified into four categories: motivators, career growth opportunities, career management strategies, and collaboration with key people. Motivators can be classified as internal or external depending upon their effect. Internal motivators included observable results, client behavior changes, feedback, and expert recognition important for reputation establishment. External motivators were awards for work performance, promotions, and financial incentives that motivated agents to excel. Advantageous career growth opportunities focused on professional development, leadership positions, and career achievements that offered continual learning. Career management strategies improved agents' ability to manage time, establish personal limits, and balance personal and professional responsibilities. Collaboration with key community leaders, professionals, and colleagues provided positive experiences to solidify relationships.

Negative influences on colleague level agents' career decisions can be divided into three categories: performance measures, salary disparity, and personal work management issues. Inconsistencies in the reporting system, evaluations, promotion were specific experiences causing dissatisfaction with the organizational structure. Disparity in salary referred to

disproportionate salary adjustments among all levels of agents. Personal work management issues referred to agents' struggles in balancing increased work demands and available time.

Positive influences on counselor/advisor level agents' career decisions can be classified into three categories: motivators, career growth opportunities, and career management strategies. Motivators can be classified as internal or external depending upon their effect. Internal motivators focused on personal satisfaction measured through positive feedback and community respect. External motivators centered on community impact and client success resulting from work performance. Career growth opportunities were motivating for agents to influence others and grow professionally through mentoring and leadership programs. Career management strategies improved agents' ability to prioritize time and achieve career goals.

Negative influences on counselor/advisor level agents' career decisions can be divided into two categories: career overload and job dissatisfiers. Career overload was a time period characterized by increased responsibilities, promotional stress, and excessive assignments associated with having an established professional identity. Job dissatisfiers that led to burnout included self-induced stress, lack of support, unequal recognition, insufficient pay raises, reporting difficulties, excessive committees, and disregard for service quality.

Summary

This chapter discussed the results found from research objectives (3) to discover the influences that shape career decisions of agricultural extension agents at different career stages, and (4) to develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents. A grounded theory of the positive and negative influences that shaped the career decisions of agents was created from the analysis.

CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION

This qualitative study sought to explore and describe the career decisions of agricultural extension agents. The interview process was used to investigate the factors and experiences that affect agricultural extension agents' decisions to enter and remain in extension, and discover positive and negative influences related to decisions of agents at different career stages. From the data collected, two grounded theories were developed that explain significant issues that affect agents' career decisions.

To carry out this research study, a purposive sample was used to select twelve extension agents who worked primarily in commercial agriculture. They were identified by a panel of experts as having a dependable and respectable work reputation, and then they were classified into one of the three stages of the career stages model. Each of the agents participated in an in-depth interview to share their thoughts on influences that shaped their decision to enter into the organization, remain in the organization, and shaped their decisions at different career stages. Grounded theory was used as the primary data analysis method.

Results from the analysis were presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. From the 198 pages of transcribed data, 47 axial codes were grouped into 20 selective codes. These selective codes comprised the categories relative to each of the four research objectives and were used to create the grounded theories. The open and axial codes provide additional support and evidence for the selective codes.

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. The selective categories relevant to agents' decisions to remain in the organization were internal satisfaction, community leadership, external

motivators, career benefits, change agents, network of support, and extension work environment. The categories relevant to the positive and negative influences that shaped career decisions of agents at different career stages are detailed in the previous chapter. This chapter will present key findings from the research, offer recommendations for future research, and discuss implications for the extension organization.

Key Findings

Agents' Decision to Enter into Extension

Primary influences related to the agents' background on their decision to enter into extension were prior industry experience, graduate research in extension, and having an agricultural degree. These findings support the importance of a match between a person's skills, knowledge, and abilities to the job requirements endorsed by the person-fit paradigm (Anderson, et. al., 2004; Chan, 2005; Hollenbeck, et. al., 2002). 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. Although all participants held an agricultural college degree, significant differences were found in the amount of knowledge that each held about extension. Seven participants stated that they lacked exposure to extension as a youth and in college, as many agreed with Jessica's statement, "I had no clue as to what extension was."

Career contacts were a major influence on all participants' decisions to enter into the organization. These findings support the significance of personal contact with applicants as an effective recruitment strategy studied by Grogan and Eshelman (1998). The most influential relationships were those with extension agents, advisors, and specialists. Each was considered a

role model that participants' admired and respected. Positive encouragement from peers, clientele, administrators, friends, and advisors to apply for jobs in extension was motivating. 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.

Providing service to the agricultural community and the ability to work with farmers were two primary reasons for entering extension. Participants found that extension allowed them to help agricultural producers solve problems with research-based educational advice. Harry's comment illustrates the personal commitment to service shared by all participants, "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."

The nature of extension work was centered on the job expectations held by participants. The ability to apply individual talents, educate clientele, and utilize personal professional knowledge were attractive features of extension work. 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."

The fit of the position to participants' lifestyle and background was ultimately determined by the advertised position description. The importance of the position description relates to the person-job fit paradigm and the need for the job to support the applicant's personal and

professional needs (Anderson, et. al., 2004; Chan, 2005; Hollenbeck, et. al., 2002). The detailed position announcement 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 cited as the most important details.

The affiliation of extension with the university and its nonformal work environment were beneficial aspects. These findings relate to the valued characteristics of job satisfaction reported by Ensle (2005). The flexibility and variety of work, creative freedom, ability to take risks, and challenging environment compelled participants to seek agent positions. In addition, participants specifically remarked on the benefits of having the personnel and informational resources of the university available to support their work. 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." Finally, the stability of a job in extension was cited by nine participants as a factor that played a role in their career decisions.

Agents' Decision to Remain in Extension

Encouraging feedback received about work performance and personal satisfaction gained from work experiences motivated participants to remain in the organization and is supported by the belongingness and esteem needs in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Huitt, 2001). Positive feedback from clientele, peers, and supervisors were the most important factors of internal satisfaction. Samantha expressed, "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." Participants also regarded internal pride gained through work performance

and clientele interaction as emotionally fulfilling. Brenda commented on her personal satisfaction, “It’s the fact that people appreciate what we do for them and that’s really satisfying.” However, participants realize that clientele feedback can be limited without follow-up on results.

The desire to work with a variety of public audiences, promote agricultural awareness, and meet clientele needs through education influenced participants’ decisions to remain in the organization. Each agreed that building and maintaining community relations was a significant factor affecting their work progress. They welcomed the integration into the community and the feeling of acceptance gained from that recognition. Matt was proud to be 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... part of the community. You’re not just somebody who’s working an eight to five job and you go home and you’re a nobody.”

The career benefits that influenced participants’ decisions included professional development, position benefits, and university resources. These findings are supported by the six factors of job satisfaction outlined by Riggs and Beus (1993). Higher education coursework, in-service trainings, and leadership workshops were all contributing experiences to agents’ career growth. However, four participants said that some professional development opportunities often interrupted their work responsibilities. Participants acknowledged the fringe benefits of being an extension employee, including salary, opportunities for advancement, flexible work hours, and vacation time. Finally, accessibility to university specialists and resources enables all agents to function effectively in their positions.

External motivation from performance indicators and rewards had a positive effect on participants’ career decisions. Program participation, client loyalty, and positive evaluation

results were considered reliable indicators of work performance. Tammy receives encouraging feedback through program evaluations when she “gives the people a survey and they’ve all been very positive. They want more education, they want me to come out and do farm visits, and they give me suggestions for new programs or new ideas.” Participants also value the financial incentives, promotions, and awards received as a measure of professional success, however peer nominations and recognition were the most significant awards.

The ability to affect societal change was a priority for participants, but requires long-term commitment to clientele and work responsibilities. Internal reinforcement of success was based upon the creation of independent learners and changes seen in client behaviors. Harry’s perception of change offers an overview of participants’ comments, “I see changes as a result of what we’ve been doing…there’s things that you can visibly see the impact that you’re making. So I would say the measure of success would be for me related to what’s it mean to the people I’m working with for the most part. I’m seeing things that we’re working on, I’m seeing them change, I’m seeing them adopt practices and learn how to do it themselves and then not needing me other than maybe just a little bit of help along the way to continually guide them.”

Having a network of support directly related to participants’ level of job satisfaction. This factor directly relates to the organizational strategies defined in the career stages model (Kutilek, et. al., 2002). Support at all levels was needed, but emphasis was placed on clientele and organizational relationships, specifically administrators, specialists, and office staff. Teamwork activities with colleagues were regarded by all participants as a primary factor of success. Teams provided a source of support for programming, cooperative projects, experiential learning, and establishment as an agent. Samantha attributed her professional success to “working with a

group of agents, 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."

The freedom and variety in extension work was referred to by all of the participants as a determining factor to remain in the organization. These findings were supported by the job satisfaction factors found by Ensle (2005). The daily variety of environments, situations, clientele, and activities were valuable features to the job. Participants described extension as unique because it offers the opportunity to use "their own talents" and improve upon them even though they may be different from others. Matt explained, "You can both do the same job and do it well and do it differently. There is no magic formula." The flexible nature of scheduling and making decisions gives participants the freedom to structure programs around client needs. The absence of micromanagement and job independence were additional characteristics valued by participants as Matt stated, "There's nobody who stands over your shoulder and tells you, you're going to do this today."

Influences on Agricultural Extension Agents at Different Career Stages

The positive and negative influences of entry, colleague, and counselor/advisor level agents are outlined in Chapter 5. When reviewing these influences, it is important to identify how these findings approve or disapprove findings from previous literature. It is also important to notice the most influential factors and experiences of each career stage. Primary influences on each career stage will be highlighted and then compared to past studies, theories, and models.

Entry Level

Positive influences defined by participants can be divided into three main categories: personal traits, motivators, and support systems. These findings directly support the career stages model motivators, organizational strategies, and individual characteristics of entry agents (Kutilek, et. al., 2002; Dalton, et. al. 1977; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994). Personal characteristics,

skills, and knowledge bases are essential to perform the job and encourage creativity and initiative as described in the model. Personal and informational support systems assist agents in understanding the organization, structure, and culture, as well as establish linkages as defined in the model. Support systems displayed the importance of dependence on others for survival, and supported the model's progress of agents from dependence to independence. Finally, the importance of mentors, teams, new agent orientation, and in-service training was helpful to all participants and directly aligns with the organizational strategies of the model. The influences cited by participants, but not specifically mentioned in the model were motivators and affecting societal change. However, participants regarded internal and external motivators and the process of change as positive reinforcement necessary to gauge their success and provide direction. These findings offer examples of positive influences and experiences necessary to motivate entry level agents and add to the specificity of the model motivators.

The negative influences of entry level agents can be divided into four areas: lack of direction, personal work management issues, job pressures, and mandated work requirements. These findings 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 of Rousan and Henderson (1996). Lack of direction and supervisory support confirms findings from Kutilek (2000) and isolation mentioned by Ewert and Rice (1994). The negative influences not referenced in the literature, but found in this study were the difficulties in reporting and accountability system. This was a common negative experience that created additional stress, confusion, and job pressures on participants.

Colleague level

Positive influences defined by participants can be divided into four main categories: collaboration with key people, career growth opportunities, career management strategies, and motivators. These findings were directly supported by the career stages model motivators, organizational strategies, and individual characteristics of colleague agents and relate to the literature on job satisfaction (Kutilek, et. al., 2002; Dalton, et. al. 1977; 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, and Herzberg's Theory motivators were also mentioned by participants (Buford, et. al., 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 (Place & Jacob, 2001; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997). The influence that was not mentioned in the literature, but found to be important was the importance of observing changes in clientele behaviors and communities as a result of their assistance.

Negative influences defined by participants can be classified into three main categories: personal work management issues, salary disparity, and performance evaluations. These findings support previous literature on factors of job dissatisfaction, including high stress levels, overload, and burnout (Rousan & Henderson, 1996; Ewert & Rice, 1994; Riggs & Beus, 1993; Place & Jacob, 1991; Buford, et. al., 1995). Salary disparity was supported by the literature, however participants' concerns were specifically on salary compression and insignificant pay raises. The negative influence of performance evaluations could be considered a hygiene factor

by Herzberg's Theory, but revealed more specific problems (Buford, et. al., 1995).

Inconsistencies in performance evaluations, the promotion process, and unreliable reporting systems were negative experiences expressed by participants.

Counselor/Advisor Level

Positive influences defined by the four counselor/advisor agents can be divided into three major categories: career growth opportunities, career management strategies, and motivators. These findings were also directly supported by the career stages model motivators, organizational strategies, and individual characteristics of counselor/advisor agents and relate to the literature on job satisfaction (Kutilek, et. al., 2002; Dalton, et. al. 1977; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994; Buford, et. al., 1995). The motivators defined in Herzberg's Theory of achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement for personal growth were common themes found in the analysis. The motivators in the career stages model, including expertise, leadership, and influence, directly connected to the findings. Participants engaged in career growth opportunities and considered mentoring as a mutually beneficial experience. Client loyalty, community impact, and change were also positive influences not specifically highlighted in the literature, but critical to personal satisfaction of the study participants.

Negative influences defined by participants can be classified into two main categories: career overload and job dissatisfiers. These findings support previous literature on factors of job dissatisfaction and reasons for leaving extension. 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 organizational factors related to reasons for leaving extension found by Rousan and Henderson (1996) and stress and turnover among extension directors reported by

Clark (1992). Factors that produced job dissatisfaction including burnout, lack of professional support, increased 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 job dissatisfiers not specifically stated in the literature but emphasized by participants were reporting limitations, inefficient evaluation system, and disregard for service quality. Each of these factors also had a negative influence on counselor/advisor level agents' careers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Previous qualitative research in the area of career decisions of extension agents is limited. This study uncovered specific variables beneficial to understanding Florida agricultural extension agents' career decisions. Additionally, previous studies on job satisfaction and dissatisfaction tend to concentrate on people who have left extension rather than those who are currently employed. Future research must be conducted to discover the influences on current agents, so the organization can take a proactive approach to meet their career needs and retain 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 and remaining in 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 particular study could be replicated as a comparative analysis between the perceptions of agents versus administrators and directors on agents' needs and

influences at different career stages. Finally, 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 Agricultural Education in Domestic and International Settings: Extension and Outreach research priority area two in the National Research Agenda in Agricultural Education and Communication 2007-2010. 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 utilize the person-job fit paradigm and test its applicability to the extension hiring and selection process.

Career influences that shape decisions of agents at different stages must also be expanded. Research that focuses on agents in each specific stage must be conducted to verify the positive and negative influences. This information can then be used to create career development plans for agents within each stage. This could include a guide of job expectations, first year activities, and the key experiences identified in this study for new agents. It can then be extended to include necessary individual and organizational support important for colleague and counselor/advisor level agents with a yearly checklist of accomplishments. This plan could be created and tested on its usefulness in assisting agents' career growth and satisfaction, as well as add to the general understanding their career needs.

Longitudinal studies focused on the career decisions of extension agents should be designed. These studies can be beneficial to discover changes in agents' attitudes and needs over the course of their careers. It is important that researchers continually develop this area of

research and discover how changes in society, clientele, technology, and agriculture affect agents' career needs. A longitudinal study of the participants in this study should also be conducted as follow-up research.

Research on the retention, turnover, and organizational costs must be conducted on the Florida Cooperative Extension System and nationally by the USDA Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service. Although recruitment and retention of agents is commonly identified as a problem by Florida Cooperative Extension administrators, there is currently a lack of verifiable, statistical information available. Having these data will not only clearly identify the issues, but can provide evidence to support additional funding requests for career and professional development of extension agents.

The lack of knowledge of 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. Findings 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 and remain in extension at all career stages. Connections with extension agents and specialists, peers, mentors, clientele, administrators, and advisors were critical to career satisfaction and longevity. Personal contact with these individuals encouraged participants to pursue a career in extension, while positive encouragement and feedback served

as the driving factor for internal satisfaction during careers. Collaborative teams also offered significant personal and professional assistance to accomplish work responsibilities. These networks played an important role in motivating agents and provided necessary physical, emotional, and mental support that assisted in career success. This area of research should become a priority to identify personal connections that agents have made before entering extension and those that have remained influential during employment. 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 satisfaction. Additionally, opportunities for agents to build and maintain working relationships were important for participants' career growth. Research on the effects of teamwork, agent groups, collaborative programming, and social networks should be investigated to discover their career impacts. Having an understanding of the effects of social relationships can ultimately assist in organizational recruitment, retention strategies, and career development programs.

Implications and Recommendations for Extension

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 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 frequently 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 could utilize the person-job fit paradigm. If extension can use this framework in the hiring process, it may prove beneficial to selecting more suitable applicants that fit in extension careers.

The organization must work to meet the needs of its employees and provide the necessary support at the appropriate career stage. As shown, the positive and negative influences on participants at different career stages varied according to many factors. The organization must continue to provide resources, education, incentives, and professional development for all agents. University professional development extension specialists must be specifically assigned to design appropriate career development opportunities, maintain relationships with agents beyond orientation, and collaborate with agents in the field to improve career satisfaction. In addition, two-way communication between university subject matter specialists and extension agents must remain a priority. Current research needs to be disseminated from the university to extension agents in a timely manner, and it is important for specialists to maintain regular contact with county offices.

Extension administrators and directors should be knowledgeable about career development models to raise awareness of what agents are experiencing at different career stages. This information can be useful to gauge the progress of agents and serve as an educational resource on

career planning. The motivators and organizational strategies of the career stages model, as well as findings from this study, can offer a useful starting point for creating and staffing professional development programs. Results of this study indicate that if agents are motivated and supplied with appropriate career development, then they will have greater job satisfaction and retention.

Having an understanding of the negative influences currently being experienced by participants offers an appropriate starting point for future career development for the Florida Cooperative Extension System. The organization must address these issues in order to improve the current career satisfaction of agents. A brief summary of the most common negative influences found within each career stage are detailed below.

Lack of direction and support was the most common barrier for all 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. The importance of a supportive mentor was expressed by Jessica, “It’s the best experience, I love it. I love having somebody that I can talk to because he’s seen it all, done it all. If I have questions I can call him anytime. He’s like a daddy.” The job expectations must expand upon the vague guidelines in the position description and offer recommendations for establishment of programs so agents don’t “waste time” wondering what to do. These expectations need to be supported with examples of previous agents’ work and offer suggestions for improvement. In addition, new agents should be required to shadow an agent during the first year of their employment. This will help to build the agents’ knowledge, understand the organization, improve self-confidence, establish networks, and provide experiential learning.

Salary compression and insignificant pay raises were the most common 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. The similarity in pay raises for all agents also serves as a disincentive. Agents must be compensated for work excellence with merit pay increases and higher raises based on higher evaluation scores. Currently, the difference in pay raises is insignificant and not a motivating factor influencing agents to excel. The pay raise system must be adjusted to provide meaningful incentives that reward agents for exceptional work performance.

Counselor/advisor level agents discussed career overload as the most negative influence on their satisfaction. This time period was characterized by increased responsibilities, promotional stress, salary concerns, and excessive assignments that led to high stress levels. The excessive assignments on county and university service committees, task forces, and leadership positions were specifically time consuming and contributed to burnout. These overwhelming responsibilities encountered by agents with years of experience must be studied. As Matt said, “We need to protect our good people, not overload them...if you overload good people, you burn them out...and take away their drive to excel.” The organization must work on balancing leadership and committee assignments placed upon senior agents to reduce burnout. Maintaining a comprehensive list of agents and responsibilities could help to alleviate overload and offer professional growth opportunities to other qualified agents.

Reporting and accountability was a problem expressed by all participants. Difficulties with the use of and inconsistencies with the reporting system were referenced as a negative experience on agents’ careers. The constant changes in reporting systems have been detrimental to organization and record keeping, and the lack of reliability between the reporting system and the tenure and promotion process were contributing factors. As Benjamin explained, “If

reporting is not made easier, more manageable, and less cumbersome, then it's gonna drive people away." The need to streamline reporting and make the system more "user friendly" was recommended.

Summary

This qualitative study explored and described the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents. Although many of the findings were supported by previous literature, there were unique factors, experiences, and influences reported by participants that 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.

APPENDIX A CODING

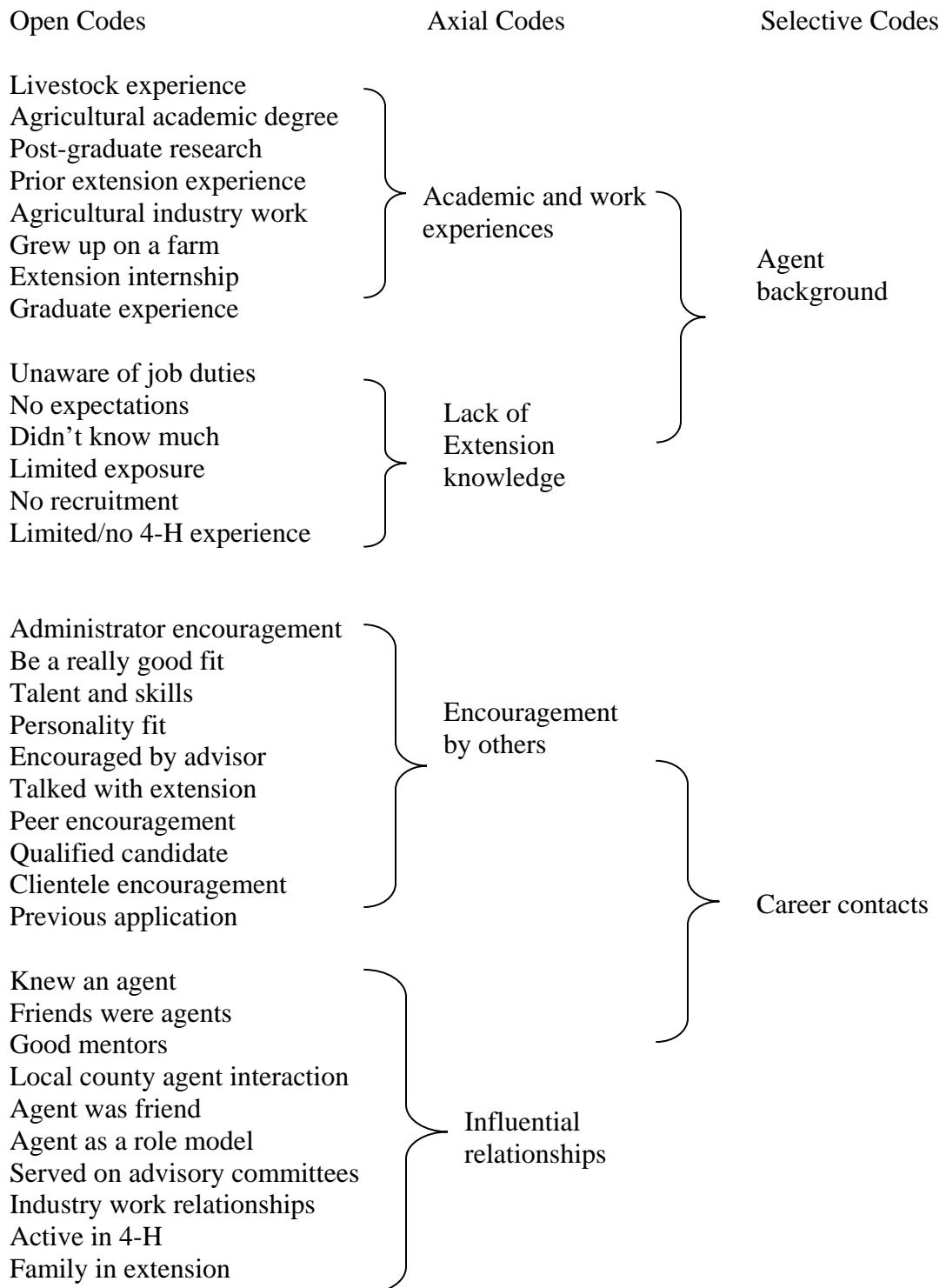


Figure A-1. Influences on agricultural extension agents decisions to enter into the organization.

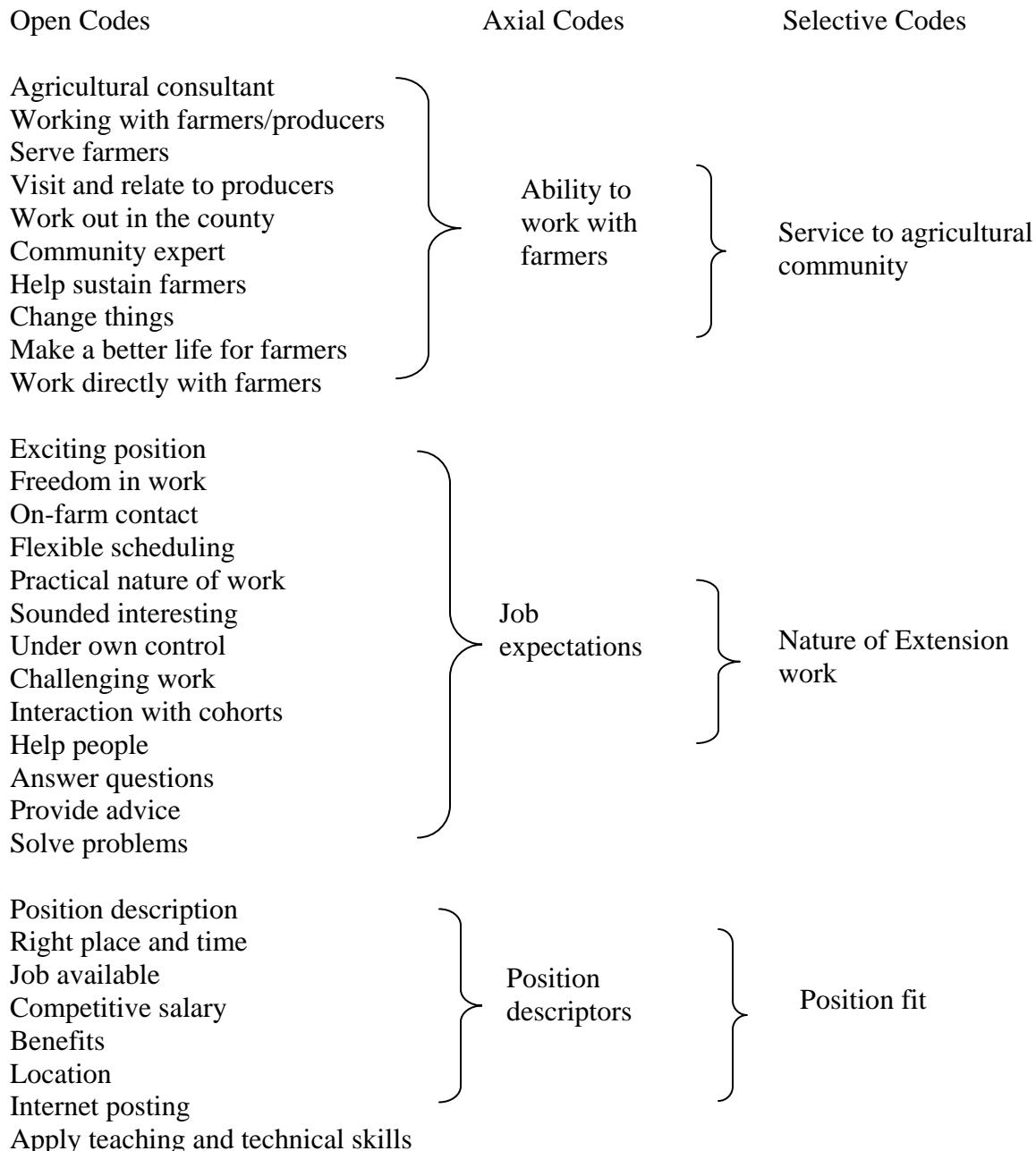


Figure A.1. Continued

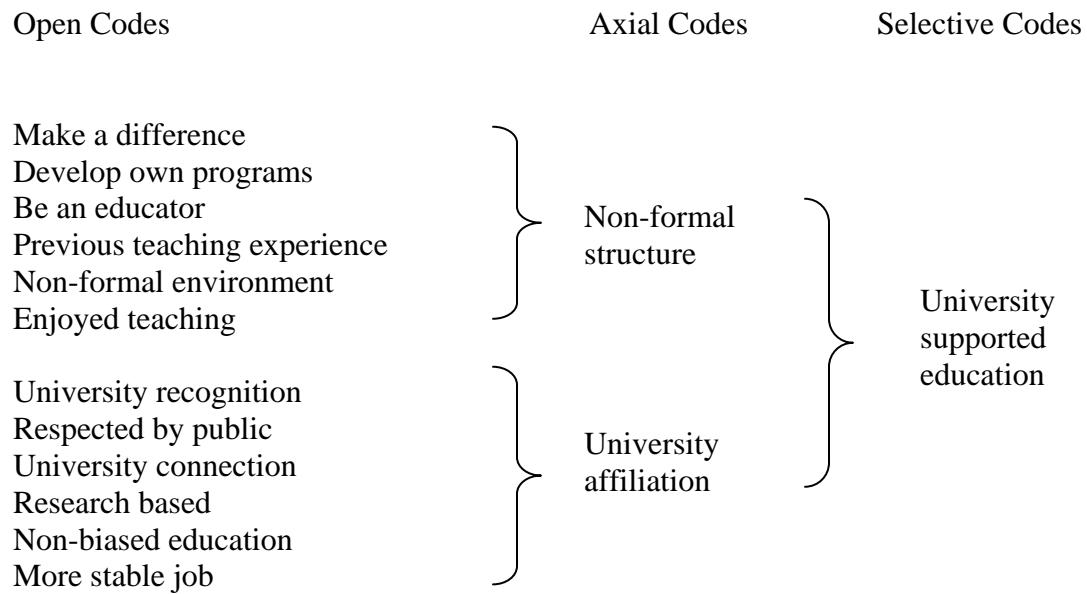


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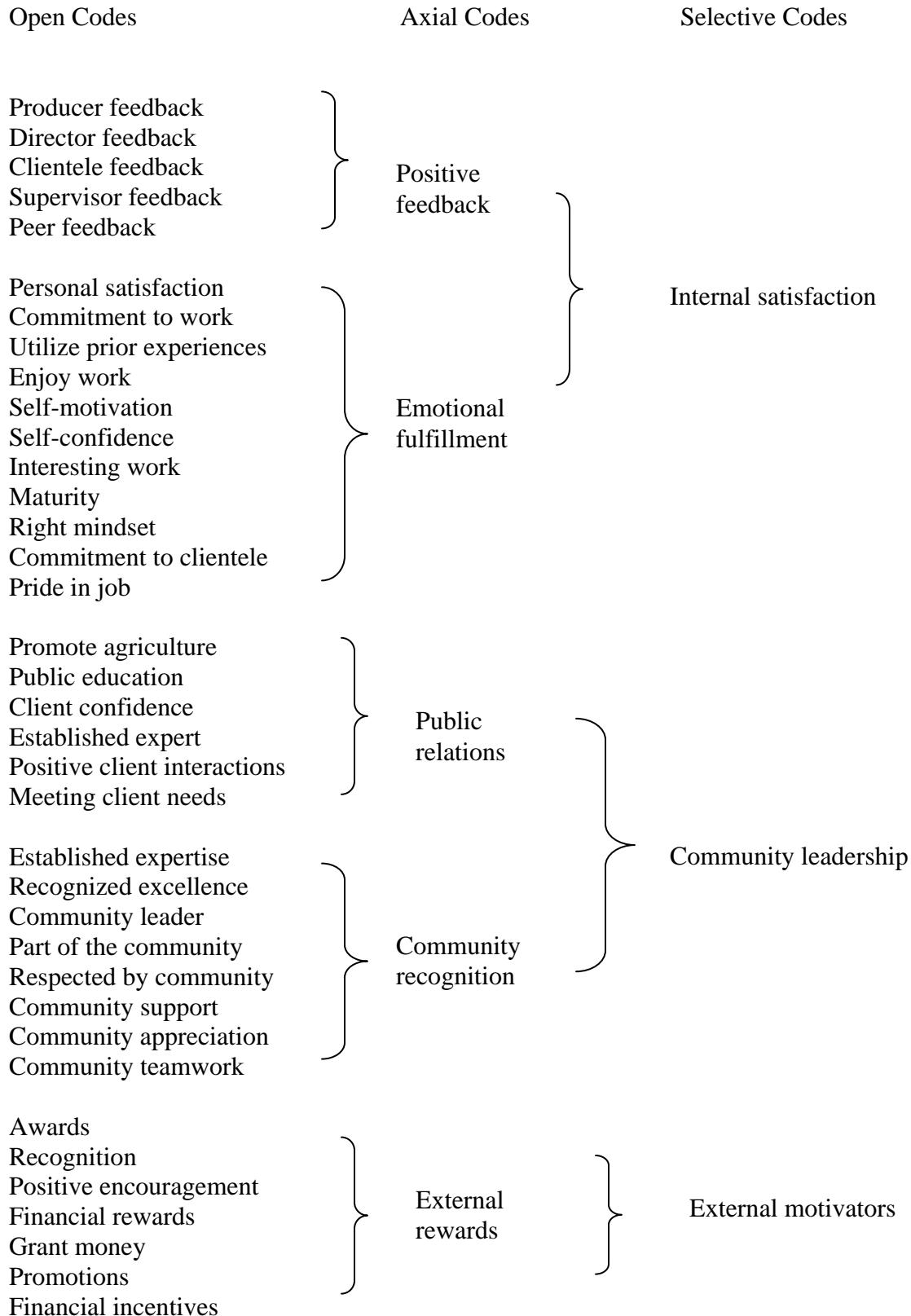


Figure A-2. Influences on agricultural extension agents to remain in the organization.

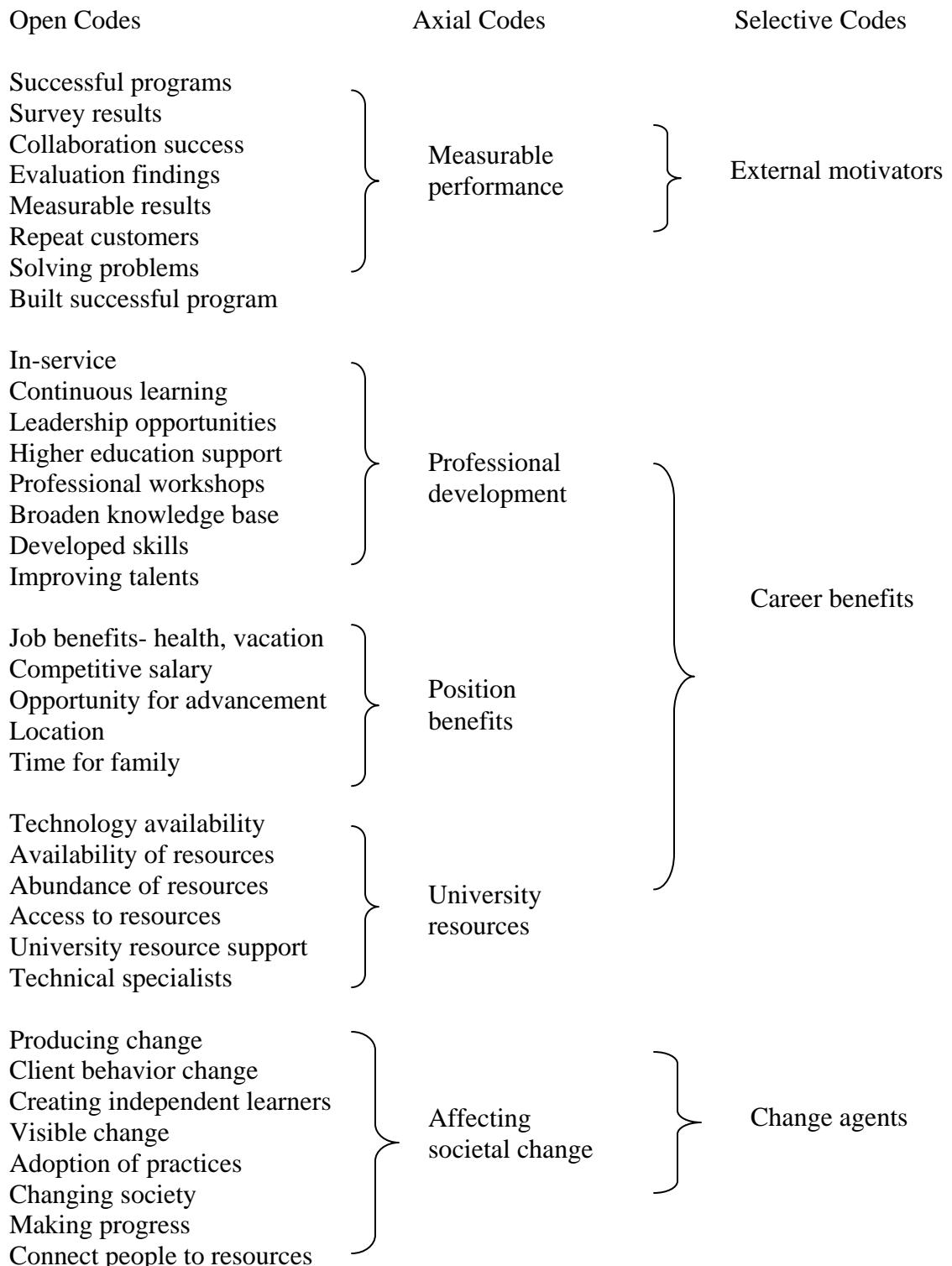


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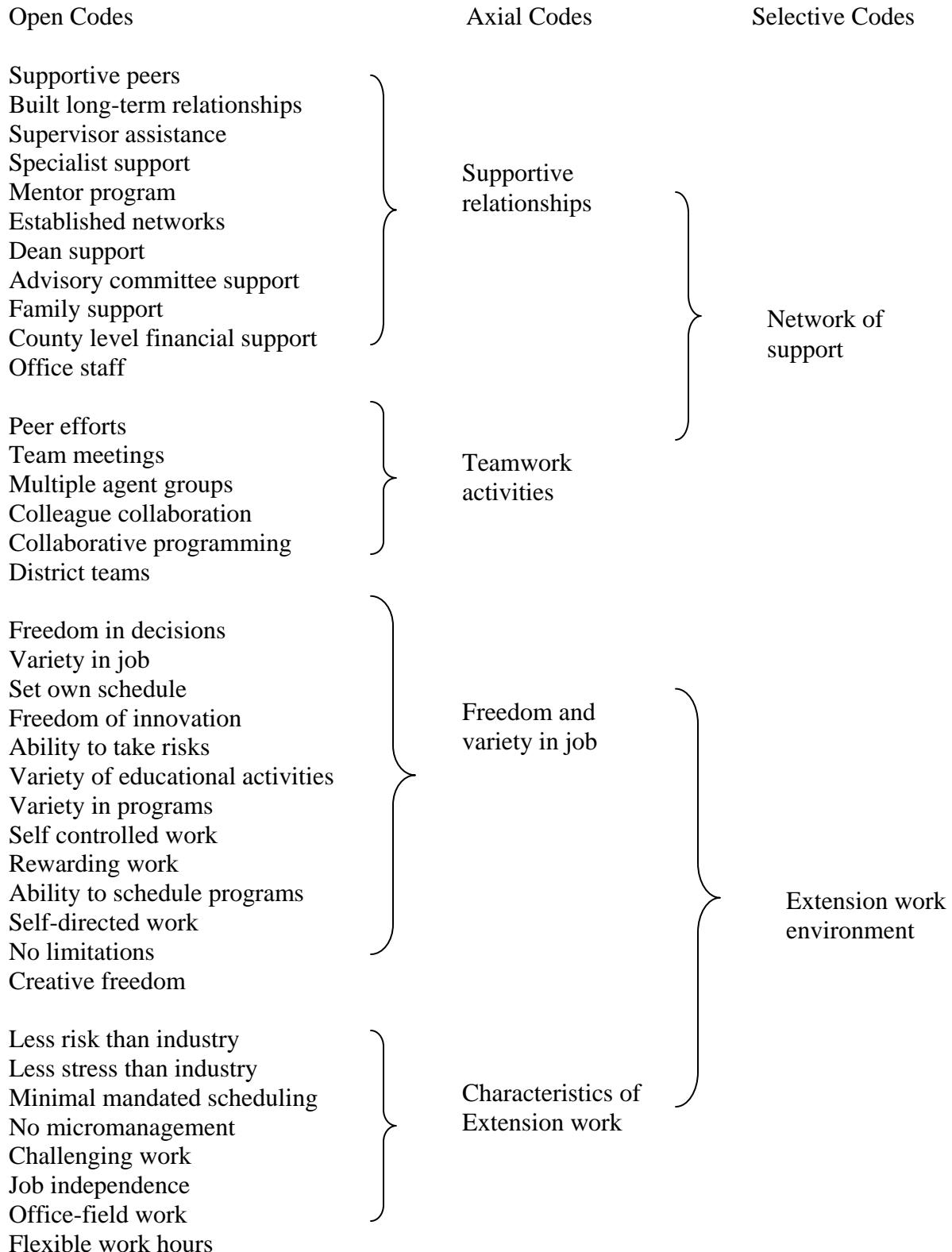


Figure A-2. Continued.

Open Codes

Entry Level Agents

Ability to build relationships
Defining programs
Organization
Community involvement and visibility
Promotion and marketing skills
Creative and innovative thinking
Handling conflict
Patience
Listening and communication skills
People person
Survival techniques
Critical problem solving skills
Fair, unbiased attitude
Enjoy challenges
Comfort with public speaking
Self-confidence
Humble
Willingness to learn

Extension knowledge
Practical field experience
One strong area of topic knowledge
Evaluation knowledge
Program development skills
Needs assessment training
Community development knowledge
Familiar with research linkages
Understand change process
Master's degree
Technology literate

Axial Codes

Personal skills
and
characteristics

Knowledge
bases

Selective Codes

Positive influences
on Entry level
agents' career
decisions

Figure A-3. Influences that shape career decisions of agricultural extension agents at different career stages.

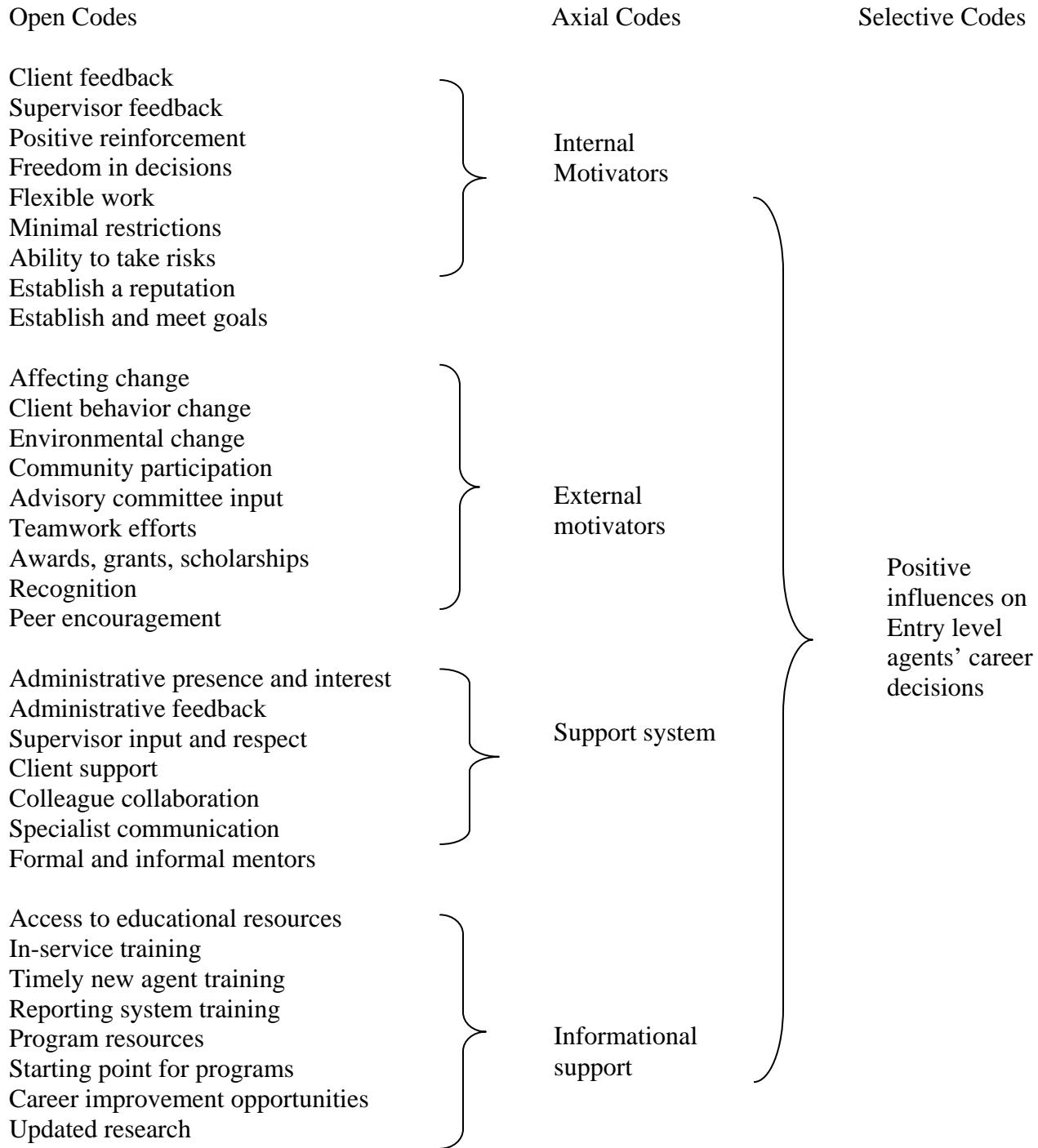


Figure A-3. Continued.



Figure A-3. Continued.

Open Codes

Colleague Level Agents

Completion of tenure and promotion
Long-term results visible
Client behavior changes
Client feedback
Supervisor feedback
Considered a community expert
Peer recognition
Developed friendships
Approachable administrators
Challenging tasks
Solved problems
Established a reputation

Awards, grants, scholarships
Evaluation results
Promotions
Financial incentives
Program successes
Established internal and external networks
Internal and external recognition
Community improvement
Community acceptance
Reputable programs
Long-term changes
Expansion of work areas
Increased salary

Professional development
Conference and meeting participation
Master's degree completion
In-service training
Leadership development programs
Leadership positions
Mentoring program

Axial Codes

Internal motivators

External motivators

Career growth opportunities

Selective Codes

Positive influences on Colleague level agents' career decisions

Figure A.3. Continued.

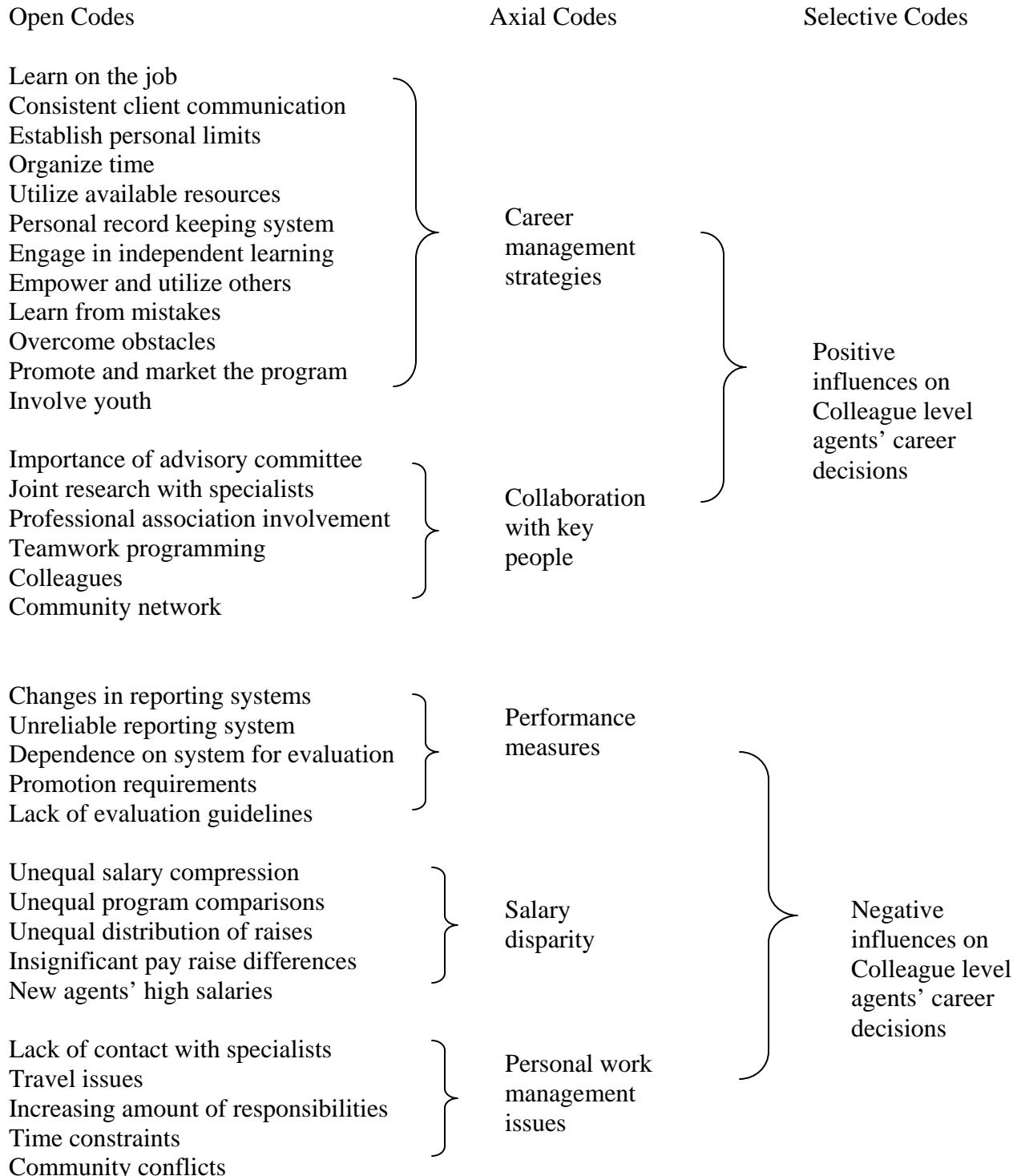


Figure A. 3. Continued.

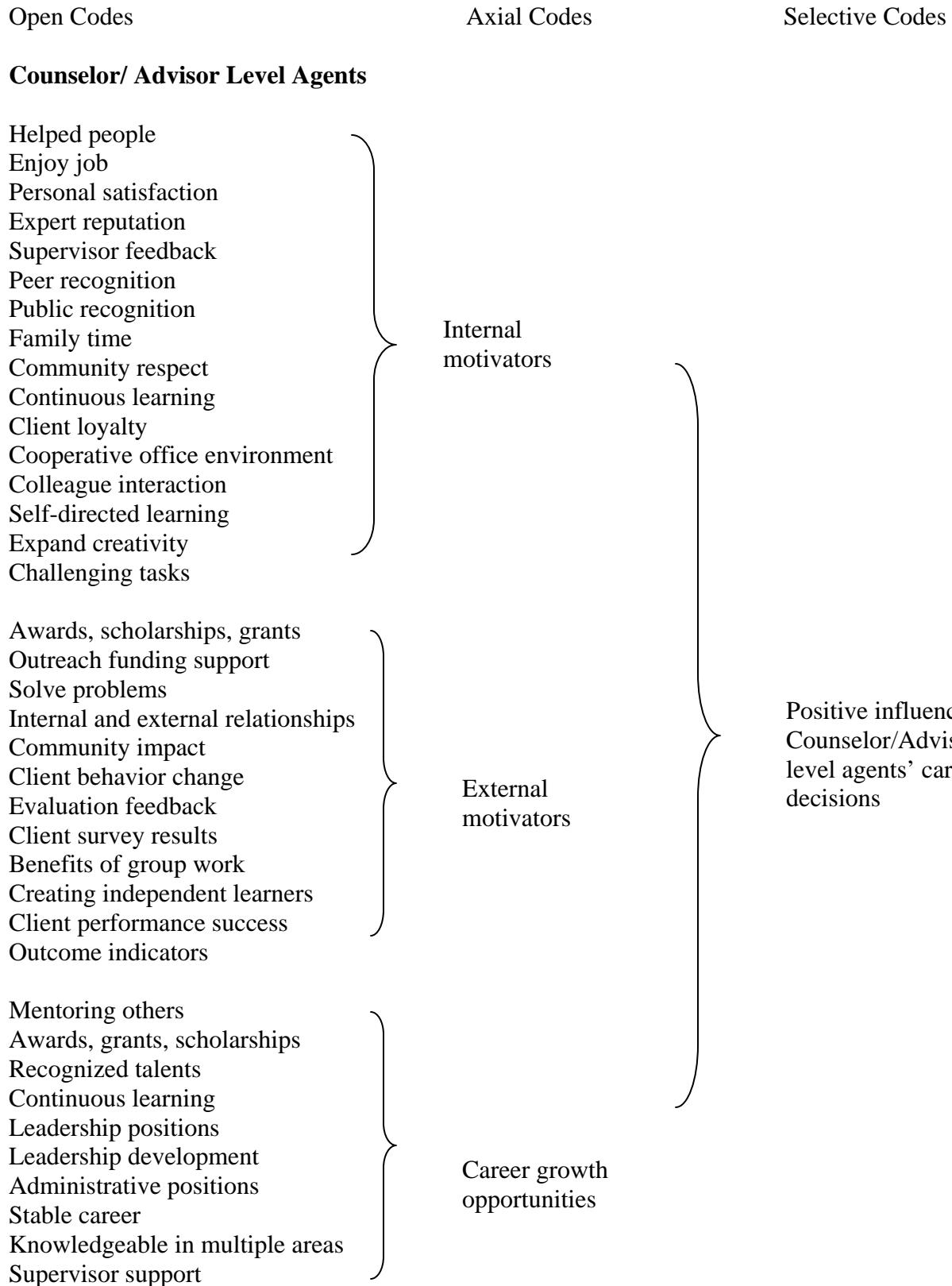


Figure A-3. Continued.

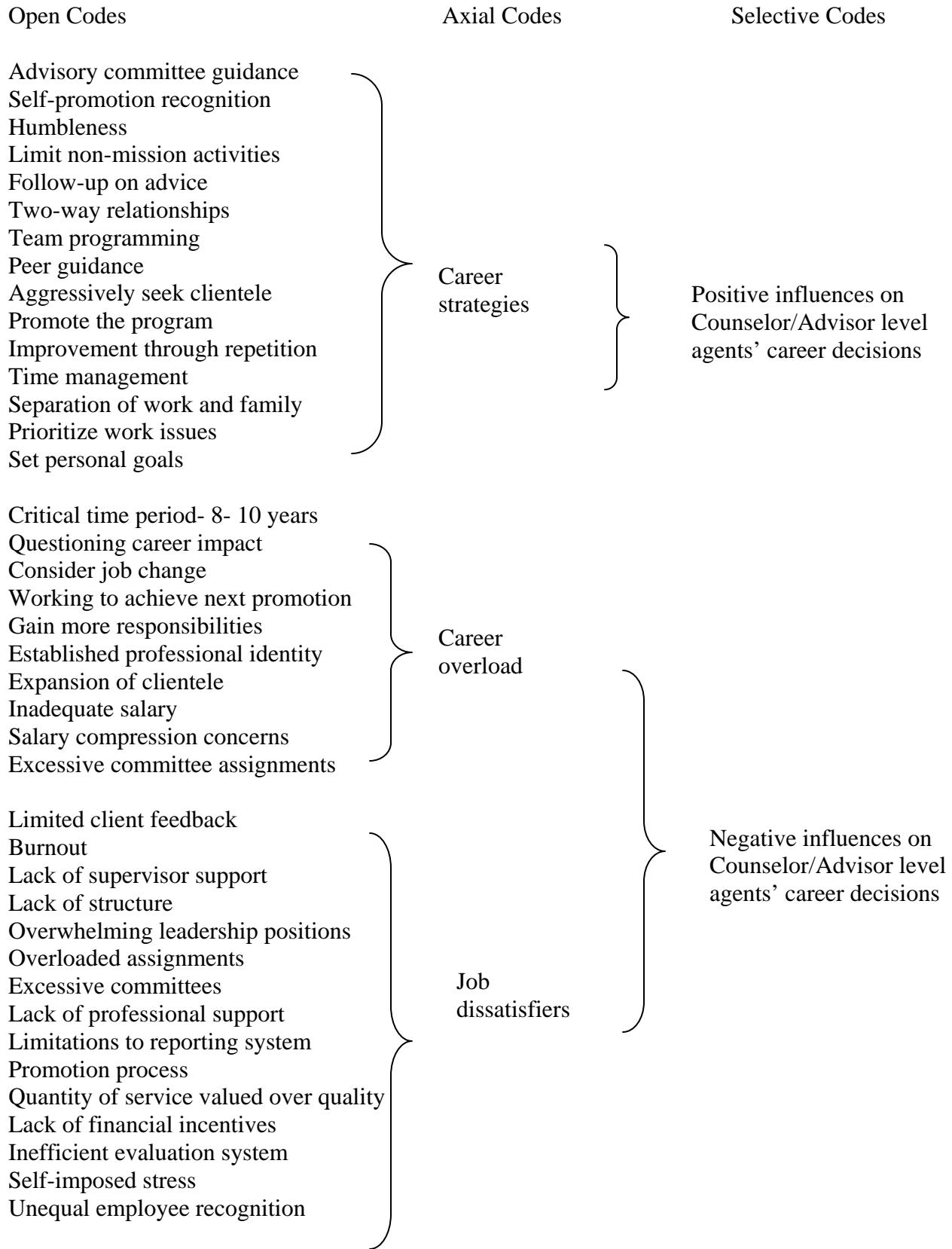


Figure A-3. Continued.

APPENDIX B
GROUNDED THEORY

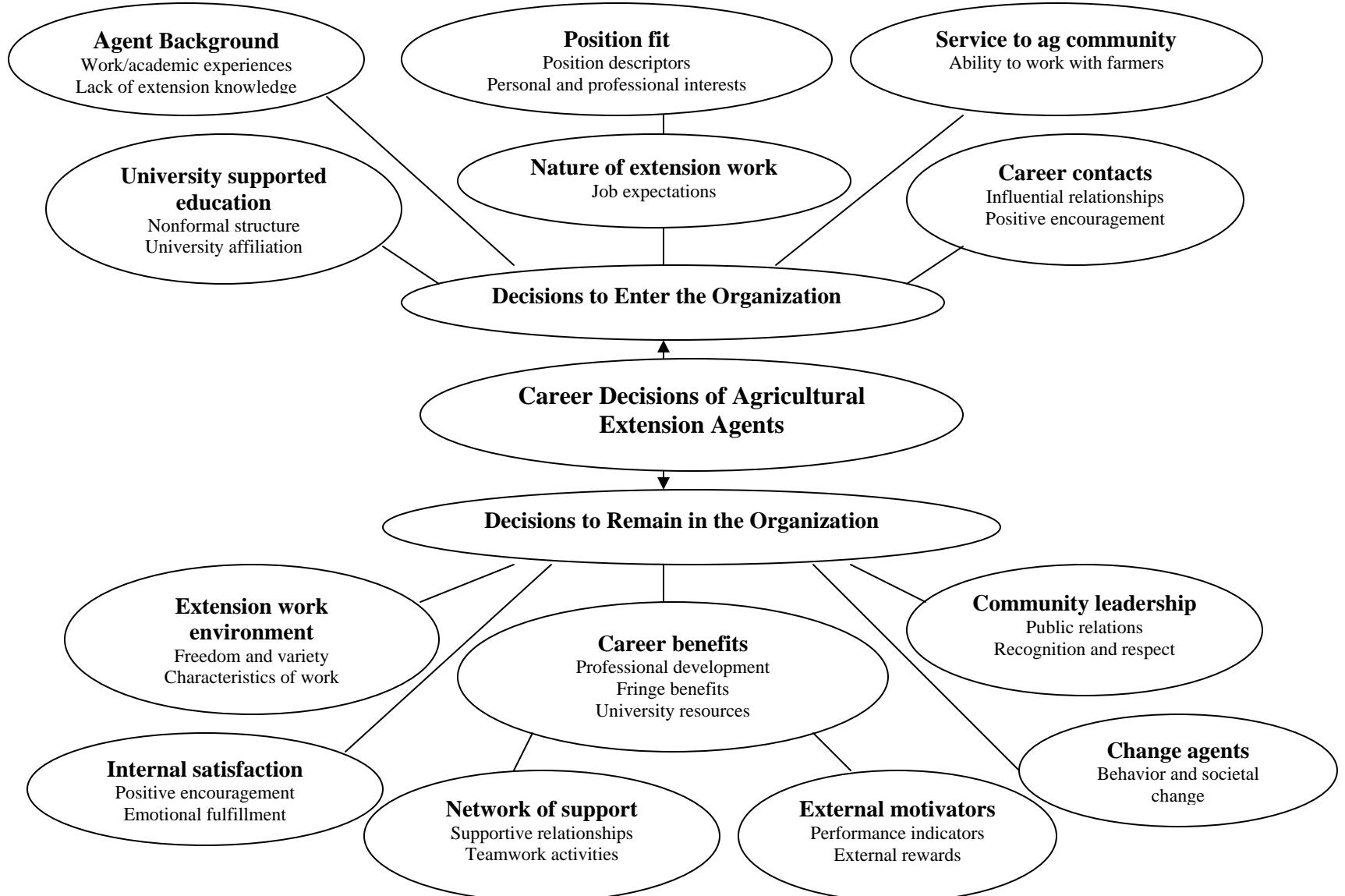


Figure B-1. Grounded theory of the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents to enter and remain in the extension organization

APPENDIX C
GROUNDED THEORY

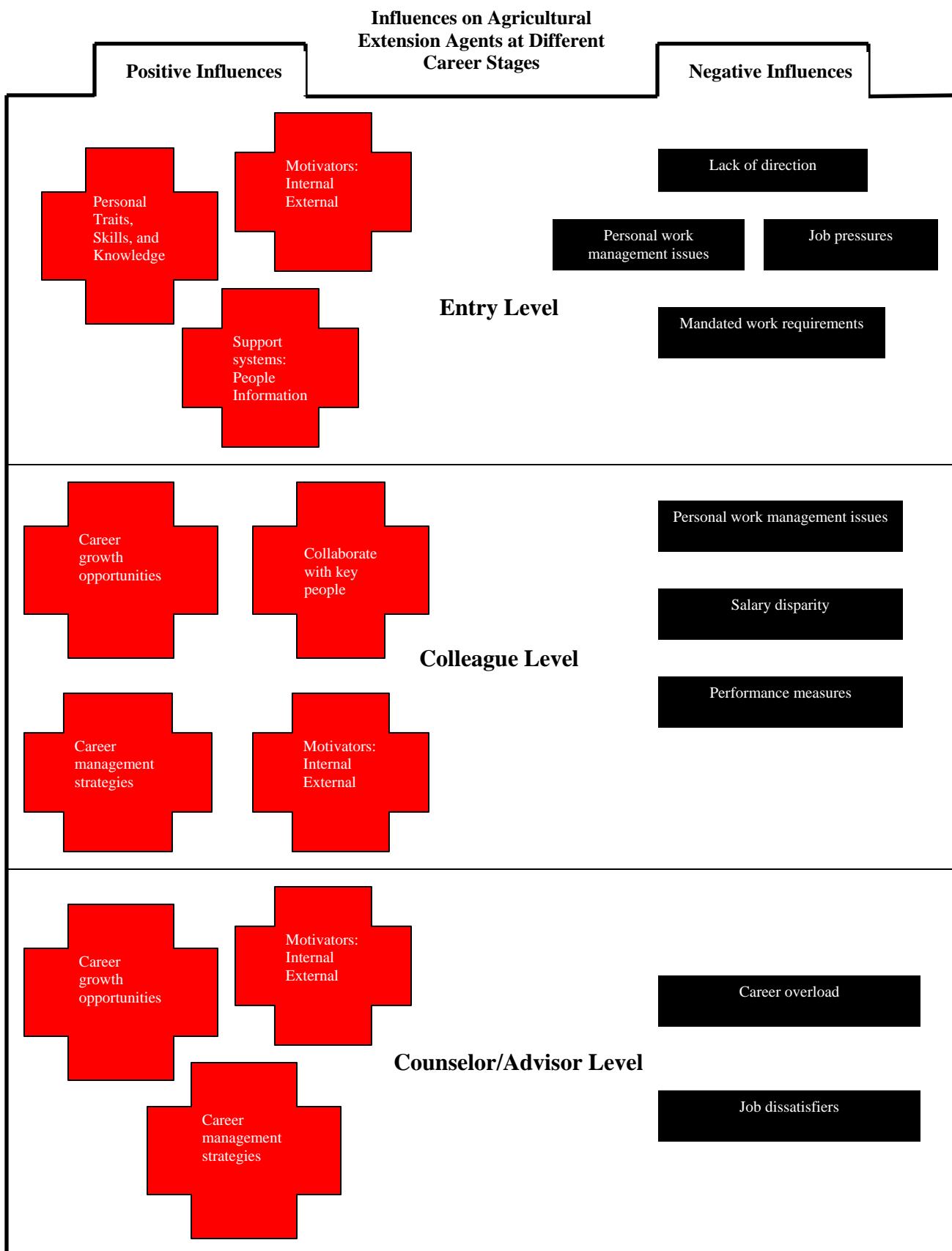
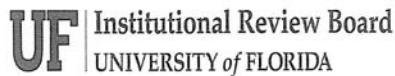


Figure C-1. Grounded theory on career decision influences of agricultural extension agents at different career stages.

APPENDIX D IRB APPROVAL



PO Box 112250
Gainesville, FL 32611-2250
352-392-0433 (Phone)
352-392-9234 (Fax)
irb2@ufl.edu

DATE: May 9, 2007

TO: Shannon Arnold
PO Box 110540
Campus *PSHdl*

FROM: Ira S. Fischler, PhD; Chair
University of Florida
Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol #2007-U-0336

TITLE: Career Decisions of Florida Agricultural Extension Agents

SPONSOR: None

I am pleased to advise you that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board has recommended approval of this protocol. Based on its review, the UFIRB determined that this research presents no more than minimal risk to participants. Given your protocol, it is essential that you obtain signed documentation of informed consent from each participant. Enclosed is the dated, IRB-approved informed consent to be used when recruiting participants for the research.

It is essential that each of your participants sign a copy of your approved informed consent that bears the IRB approval stamp and expiration date.

If you wish to make any changes to this protocol, *including the need to increase the number of participants authorized*, you must disclose your plans before you implement them so that the Board can assess their impact on your protocol. In addition, you must report to the Board any unexpected complications that affect your participants.

If you have not completed this protocol by May 7, 2008, please telephone our office (392-0433), and we will discuss the renewal process with you. It is important that you keep your Department Chair informed about the status of this research protocol.

ISF:dl

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Career Decisions of Florida Agricultural Extension Agents

Purpose of the research study: To explore and describe how Florida agricultural extension agents make career decisions to enter and remain in the extension organization.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to participate in one face-to-face personal interview conducted by the principal investigator. The interview will last about 60-90 minutes, and it will explore factors and experiences that have affected your career decisions while employed with Florida Cooperative Extension Service. In-depth interviews will be used to achieve insight into your initial, past, present, and future career decisions. Focus will be placed on recruitment and retention influences that have affected your employment status. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed at a later time.

Finally, the researcher may ask you to review the transcript of your interview to ensure that the responses were accurately recorded. This review process is commonly termed the member checking process. The member checking process is performed after each interview is fully transcribed by the researcher. The researcher will email you only your specific interview transcript to ensure validity and reliability of information. Each participant will view only his/her interview transcription and no other participants. The researcher will ask you to review your interview transcription to clarify any misinterpretations of words and thoughts for accuracy purposes. The researcher will also allow you to eliminate any data that you feel is incorrect or harmful in anyway. This process will ensure that you are aware of the information being used in the research process and allow you to clarify or voluntarily remove any harmful comments.

Time required: Approximately 60-90 minutes

Risks: Although the names of potential participants were generated from administrators, your participation will not affect your employment in any way. The administrators will not know exactly who actually participates, cannot make recruiting contacts to their subordinates on behalf of the researcher, and cannot discuss participation in the study with agents. Finally, administrators cannot urge potential participants to consent to be interviewed.

Benefits/Compensation: This study will add to the understanding of recruitment and retention issues facing Florida Cooperative Extension and its agricultural agents. In addition, the study may improve the knowledge level of Extension administrators, educators, and researchers. No compensation will be given.

Confidentiality: Although participants have been recommended for interviewing by their supervisors, those supervisors will not know who actually participated. The participants' identities will be confidential to the extent provided by law. Participants will be given pseudonyms when quoted in the dissertation and other reports stemming from the research. Information will be kept confidential and the researcher will destroy

Approved by
University of Florida
Institutional Review Board 02
Protocol # 2007-U-0336
For Use Through 05/07/2008

APPENDIX F INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

Recruitment and retention of highly qualified agents is a significant, growing problem in Florida Cooperative Extension System. The career decisions of current and potential faculty are determining the future of extension right now. Therefore, I would like to discuss the factors and experiences that have influenced you to enter and remain in the organization. I am interested in understanding the positive and negative influences that have shaped your career decisions and career development needs. The intent of this interview is to gain insight into your perceptions and thoughts that can help explain the most significant issues that have affected your career decisions. This may include previous, initial, and future experiences, extension responsibilities, professional relationships, and your personal point of view.

1. As an agricultural agent in this county, what are your work responsibilities, clientele, and major programs?
2. Based on your career up to this point, do you feel that you have been successful?
How do you measure success?
What has contributed to your success as an agent?
3. Thinking back to the beginning of your extension career, what factors led you to become an agricultural agent?
Experiences?
Influences?
People?
Background?
Expectations?
Recruitment?
4. How satisfied are you with your current position? What factors and experiences have influenced your job satisfaction/dissatisfaction?
Teamwork atmosphere?
Organization culture?
Self-directed work?
Variety and flexibility?
Relationships?
Salary?
Opportunities for growth?
Colleagues?
Leadership positions?
Personal influences?
5. What types of organizational support have helped you to succeed or fail in your position?
What have you had?
What would you have liked to receive that you did not? Gaps of support?
What are your future needs?
6. Have you ever had days/other opportunities that you made you think of leaving extension? What factors played a part in your thoughts?
Pay?
Hours?
Work responsibilities?

- Requirements of advancement?
 - Other jobs?
 - Family obligations?
 - Personal life conflicts?
 - Conflict with values?
7. Throughout your entire career, what factors and experiences have motivated you to remain in your position?
- Organizational structure and culture?
 - Social interactions?
 - Work environment?
 - Organizational support?
 - Nature of the work?
 - Professional identity?
 - Innovation?
 - Position of influence?
8. How would you rate your ability to balance your personal and professional life? What have you done in order to promote a healthy life balance?
- Strategies?
 - Challenges?
 - Beneficial organizational support?
9. How have social relationships affected your performance and influenced your decision to remain in extension?
- Peers?
 - Clientele?
 - Stakeholders?
 - Advisory committees?
 - Community?
 - Mentors?
 - CED/DED?
 - Others?
10. What do you see as the primary issues that FCES faces related to future recruitment of agricultural agents?
- Advice?
11. What do you see as the primary issues that FCES faces related to future retention of agricultural agents?
- Advice?
12. What would you do differently if you could re-live your career in extension all over again?

APPENDIX G

EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE

Invitation Email sent to participants

Dear <Insert name of participants>

I am a PhD student working on a research study with Dr. Nick Place in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida. As an agricultural extension agent, your employment is critical to the success of extension and the agricultural industry. To better understand your career decisions, my research is focused on exploring why Florida agricultural extension agents enter and stay employed in the organization. Your personal perceptions, experiences, and attitudes, and opinions are important to the future survival of the organization. You have been chosen as an exemplary professional by extension administrators and are among a select group of agricultural agents important for this study. Therefore, I am writing to solicit your involvement in this important research area. If possible, I would like to conduct a 60-90 minute interview with you concerning factors and experiences that have influenced your recruitment and retention decisions.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please confirm your interest via email at sarnold@ufl.edu by April 6th. I will then contact you with a telephone call and we can arrange a convenient time for an interview. I truly appreciate your willingness to consider this research project.

Thank You,
Shannon Arnold

Member Checking Email sent to participants after the interview:

It was wonderful to meet you and I would like to thank you again for participating in my study. Your input was truly valuable and insightful. I have attached the transcript of our interview for you to review. This is a verbatim transcript and it will NOT be included with my dissertation. It will be used for analysis and I am the only person who will have access to this information. For my dissertation, I will only use key concepts, ideas, themes, and some direct quotes from the transcript to support my findings. Any specific identifiers will be deleted and your name will not be revealed. Your review of this transcript will ensure that the responses were accurately recorded, while also improve the validity and reliability of information. Feel free to clarify any misinterpretations of words and thoughts. You may also voluntarily eliminate any data that you feel is incorrect or harmful in anyway. The purpose of this process is to ensure that you are fully aware of the information being used for my analysis. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions via email or on my cell phone.

Below is a copy of an excerpt from the Informed consent form that you signed that explains this process and its purpose.

The researcher will ask 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. The member checking process is performed after each interview is fully transcribed by the researcher. The researcher will email the participants only their specific interview transcript to ensure validity and reliability of information. Each participant will view only his/her interview transcription and no other participants. The researcher will ask each participant to review his/her interview transcription to clarify any misinterpretations of words and thoughts for accuracy purposes. The researcher will also allow the participants to eliminate any data that they feel is incorrect or harmful in anyway. This process will ensure the participant is aware of the information being used in the research process and allows them to clarify or voluntarily remove any harmful comments.

Sincerely,
Shannon Arnold

LIST OF REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shannon Kristin Arnold was born in Buffalo, New York. When she was four years old, her family moved to Katy, Texas. Katy is a small, rural rice farming community west of Houston, Texas. In May 1992, Shannon attended the University of Texas in Austin and then transferred to Texas A&M University in College Station in January 1993 to pursue an animal science degree.

At Texas A&M University, she was heavily involved in numerous clubs and activities including the Horseman's Association, the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association, Saddle and Sirloin, and the Dairy Cattle Judging and Show Team. In addition, she worked at the Texas A&M Dairy Cattle Center throughout her undergraduate program. In May 1997, she received her Bachelor of Science in Animal Science from Texas A&M University.

Upon graduation, Shannon worked in the agricultural industry and teaching fields. As a dairy market news reporter for the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, she communicated with industry contacts to formulate a weekly marketing report. She was employed by Genex, Inc. as a regional sales coordinator and served as a livestock consultant.

In December 2003, she completed her Master of Science in Agricultural Sciences at Texas A&M University Commerce and also received secondary agricultural education teacher certification. She taught secondary agricultural education in Texas during completion of her master's program. Her interest in higher education strengthened, and she joined Navarro College and Texas A&M University Commerce as an adjunct instructor.

In 2004, she received a graduate teaching and research fellowship in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida and began to work on her Ph.D. in agricultural education. During her time in graduate school, she assisted in a variety of traditional and distance education courses for undergraduate and graduate students, and served

as the lead instructor for three undergraduate courses. She was involved in extension and community outreach education, and conducted research related to agricultural and extension education. She is currently pursuing an assistant professor position within the United States.