

# **Influences on Agricultural Agents' Decisions to Remain in an Extension Career**

Shannon Arnold, Assistant Professor  
*Montana State University*

Nick Place, Associate Dean and Associate Director  
*University of Maryland*

*This qualitative study sought to explore and describe why Florida agricultural agents remained in an extension career. A purposive sample was used to select twelve agents who were classified into one of the three stages of the career stages model (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002). In-depth interviews were used to investigate positive and negative influences that affected agents' decisions. Grounded theory was used as the primary data analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Seven selective codes emerged as the most influential factors on agents' employment decisions. These codes were internal satisfaction, community leadership, external motivators, career benefits, change agents, network of support, and extension work environment. A grounded theory was created to delineate the relationships between the codes and explain the findings.*

## **Introduction**

Retention of employees is one of the greatest internal challenges currently facing the Cooperative Extension System (ECOP, 2005). 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 employment is the most important factor inhibiting the “agility and flexibility” of an extension organization (ECOP, 2002). Employee departures cause excessive financial and time strains on the organization (Kutilek, 2000). Therefore, Extension administrators must critically examine how to employ competent staff for long-term survival. Developing hiring, incentive, motivation, and professional development strategies to retain qualified employees in today's society is a key component for the future viability of extension.

Discovering the reasons agents leave extension must first be identified before targeted assistance can be provided to retain them. According to ECOP (2005), low salaries, staff cuts, downsizing, and aging faculty are causing agents to leave. Kutilek, Gunderson, and Conklin (2002) found that high quality agents are leaving due to organizational factors, non-work related factors, and individual related

factors. In 2000, Kutilek identified job stress, low pay, and lack of supervisory support as the top reasons contributing to agents' departure. Other studies have linked job satisfaction and retention to an agent's ability to balance work and family life (Ensle, 2005; Fetsch & Kennington, 1997; Place & Jacob, 2001; Riggs & Beus, 1993;). The issues of job stress, time management, and balancing one's personal and professional life are prevalent problems in extension today (Place & Jacob, 2001). With the variety of reasons related to agents' career decisions, each state extension organization must identify which directly affect its employees and consider how to best address them.

When discussing retention issues, it is imperative to assess employee turnover. The Florida Cooperative Extension System is currently facing an ongoing problem of extension agent turnover and burnout. To address these problems, the organization must understand the influences that affect agents during their careers. Exploring agents' experiences can help to identify issues and concerns that affect significant career decisions. Proactive attention by the organization that addresses these concerns will help to retain agents in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

### Conceptual Framework

Continual learning is vital for agents to be knowledgeable on the rapidly changing industry, improve work and life management skills, and perform effectively in their positions (Martin, 1991). 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. Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977) created the original model for professional career stages which was subsequently adapted by Rennekamp and Nall (1994). Kutilek et al. (2002) further modified this model to create an integrated approach for personal and organizational success.

The Kutilek et al. (2002) *systems approach* model is divided into three separate stages that coincide with an employee's career growth and development—the entry stage, colleague stage, and the counselor/advisor stage. The model also outlines appropriate motivators for employees based upon the stage and recommends organizational professional development strategies to address career needs (Kutilek et al., 2002). The motivators provide the incentive for agents to participate in and select among various learning opportunities. The organizational strategies focus on relevant professional development for employees to engage 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. Utilizing the most effective program techniques can provide relevant strategies that facilitate employee growth.

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

#### Colleague Stage

The colleague stage focuses on an agent's career growth and development in the areas of education, problem-solving, independence, and expertise. 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; Kutilek, et. al., 2002). The length of time an agent remains in this stage varies and can be highly dependent upon work responsibilities. Independent learning and maturity are common characteristics of individuals in this stage; however, structured learning opportunities must also be available. Organizational strategies that can be implemented include in-service education, professional development funding, and formal education opportunities (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

#### 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. 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 can address employees' developmental needs in this stage through life and career renewal

retreats, mentoring and trainer agent roles, leadership assessment centers, and organizational sounding boards (Kutilek, et. al., 2002).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

This qualitative study sought to explore and describe why Florida agricultural agents remained in an extension career. The interview process was used to investigate factors of influence on agents' decisions. From the data collected, a grounded theory was developed to explain the most significant issues. The key objectives of this study were:

1. To identify the factors and experiences that influence Florida agricultural extension agents to remain in an extension career.
2. To develop a grounded theory that explains the most significant issues that affect Florida agricultural extension agents' decisions to remain in the organization.

### **Methods**

#### *Participant Selection*

A comprehensive list of commercial agricultural agents in Florida was used to establish the population. One-hundred and eight agricultural agents were identified as eligible participants for the study. Each was currently employed with at least an 80% appointment in agriculture. A panel of experts was consulted to narrow the sample further to selecting dependable and respectable agents who would provide accurate, non-biased information. This qualifying status was determined through personal interactions, positive performance evaluations, career achievements, and professional reputations. Thirty agents were identified by consensus from the panel and classified into one of the three stages of the career stages model—entry, colleague, and counselor/advisor (Kutilek et al., 2002).

A purposive sample was then used to select twelve dependable and respectable commercial agricultural agents with consistent work performance as the final participants. This type of sampling advocates the selection of information-rich cases for study to provide thorough understanding and insight (Patton, 2002). To assist in transferability, dependability

and credibility of findings, the selected 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. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

#### *Data Collection*

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

A semi-structured interview format was used to organize the process which allowed for more freedom and exploration during the interview sessions (Hatch, 2002). At each agent's office, sixty to ninety minute interviews were conducted and audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. An informed consent form was signed by each participant prior to the interview process. Researcher field notes and memos were recorded during and after each interview which included key points, impressions, and observations to assist analysis.

#### *Data Analysis*

Grounded theory by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was the primary data analysis procedure used due to its focus of how meaning-making advances the understanding of personal perspectives and insight. 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). Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed. To address credibility, trustworthiness, and confirmability, the researcher asked each participant to review the transcript of their

interview to ensure that the responses were accurately recorded. This review process is commonly termed the member checking process (Hatch, 2002). To study the data, the researcher separated, sorted, and synthesized the data using open, axial, and selective qualitative coding procedures. Coding 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). 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).

### Findings

The selective categories found 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 the most influential factors and experiences that affected participants' career decisions to stay in an extension career.

#### *Internal Satisfaction*

Encouraging feedback and internal pride gained from work experiences provided the motivation to remain in extension. Positive feedback from clientele, peers, and supervisors were considered the most important. 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." Matt 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." Matt also commented on the significance of feedback from supervisors, "Probably the most feedback you get is from your supervisors...they 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.

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 the motivation to continue.

Three participants 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.

### *Community Leadership*

The desire to work with public audiences, promote agricultural awareness, and meet clientele needs through education made positive impacts on participants' career decisions. Each agreed that building and maintaining community relations was a significant factor affecting their work progress. 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 organizations that work with them. I think of it as a group effort.

Promotion of agricultural awareness to the public was another priority. Gabby tries to schedule meetings at local clubs whenever she can, "I will go and talk about the importance of agriculture in the county and how important it is to the economy." Jessica wants "the general public to have a good view of agriculture in the county and wants them to see it in a positive light." Each participant also welcomed integration into the community and the feeling of acceptance gained from recognition as an expert. 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 leader... you are somewhat of a local person that's well known.... You're not just somebody who's working an 8-5 job and you go home and you're a nobody."

### *Career Benefits*

The most significant career benefits

mentioned were professional development, fringe benefits, and university resources. Participants concurred that professional development helped to broaden knowledge bases, improve skills, and refine talents. The ability to enroll in higher education courses, attend trainings, and participate in leadership workshops offered valuable career enrichment. Tammy 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 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...to travel to national meetings, to go to in-service training, and to take formal courses, so that's appealing to me.

However, four participants stated that some professional development often interrupted their work responsibilities. Gabby and Benjamin found many of the required "meetings" prohibit accessibility to clientele.

Participants acknowledged the advantages of fringe benefits associated with being an extension employee, including salary, opportunities for advancement, flexible work hours, and vacation time. Samantha found the salary in extension to be highly competitive with agricultural education teachers. 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.

Finally, all twelve participants agreed on the importance of university specialists and resource accessibility. Participants categorized resources into different contexts including in-service training, networking opportunities, professional development, research information, specialists, and money. Jessica found that "whenever you need something, there's somebody to offer a resource." Sean uses specialists to obtain current research information, "One of the things that has helped me the most is the 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."

#### *External Motivators*

Measurable performance indicators and external rewards provided encouragement that shaped the agents' decision to remain employed. Program participation, client loyalty, and positive evaluation results were all considered reliable indicators of work performance. 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." Tammy receives indicators of her performance 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 labeled external rewards as scholarships, recognition, promotions, financial incentives, and grants received during their careers as positive experiences; however, peer nominations and recognition were considered the most significant. Jessica and Brenda both received grants that allowed them to attend conferences and implement programs that they would not have been able to do with their limited budgets. Others were able to attend leadership conferences, complete graduate degrees, earn state and national recognition, and receive peer recognition.

#### *Change Agents*

The ability to affect societal change was a priority for participants. However, each acknowledged the necessity of a long-term commitment to clientele and work responsibilities in order to see results. The majority of participants labeled themselves as "change agents" and discussed several experiences concerning change in extension. Reinforcement of success was primarily based upon the creation of independent learners and changes seen in client behaviors. Harry's 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...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.

Adam emphasized the length of time it takes for change to occur in extension, "... 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,

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.

#### *Network of support*

Supportive relationships had a direct influence on agents' level of job satisfaction. Support at all levels was needed, but emphasis was placed on community, clientele and organizational relationships, specifically administrators, specialists, and office staff. Tammy received support from "within the office, the other agents around the state, and the agents here in my office...to help me to make the right decisions." Teamwork with colleagues was 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. 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 activities, 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. 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.”

#### *Extension Work Environment*

The freedom and variety in extension work was referred to by all of the participants as a determining factor in job satisfaction. The daily variety of environments, situations, clientele, and activities were valuable features to the job. Being a former teacher, Samantha found that she enjoyed her career 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.” 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 absence of micromanagement, flexible schedules, independence, and challenging situations were characteristics that participants value in extension work. As Matt stated, “There’s nobody who stands over your shoulder and tells you, you’re going to do this today.” 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 going to do and go sell this.” 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.

#### **Conclusions/Grounded Theory**

A grounded theory was developed using the axial and selective codes of highly relevant categories that emerged during analysis. In-vivo codes, or the exact words of participants, were used as often as possible to classify codes and represent participants’ perspectives (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Selective codes are identified in bold and corresponding axial codes are listed for each category. Grounded theory methods allow for the establishment of a close connection between data collection, analysis, and theory formation. They are useful to create a conceptual understanding of the realities expressed during the interviews (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants received internal satisfaction from positive feedback at all levels and emotional fulfillment gained from extension work. External motivators included measurable performance indicators and rewards received for work accomplishments. Career benefits consisted of professional development opportunities, fringe benefits, and university resources that provided valuable career assistance. Network of support centered on the social relationships and teamwork activities that were beneficial to participants’ work achievements and job satisfaction. The extension work environment highlighted the freedom and variety in the job and characteristic nature of extension work as positive influences. Community leadership emphasized the positive experiences in public relations and community recognition. The ability to serve as a change agent and affect societal change through education was the final positive factor.

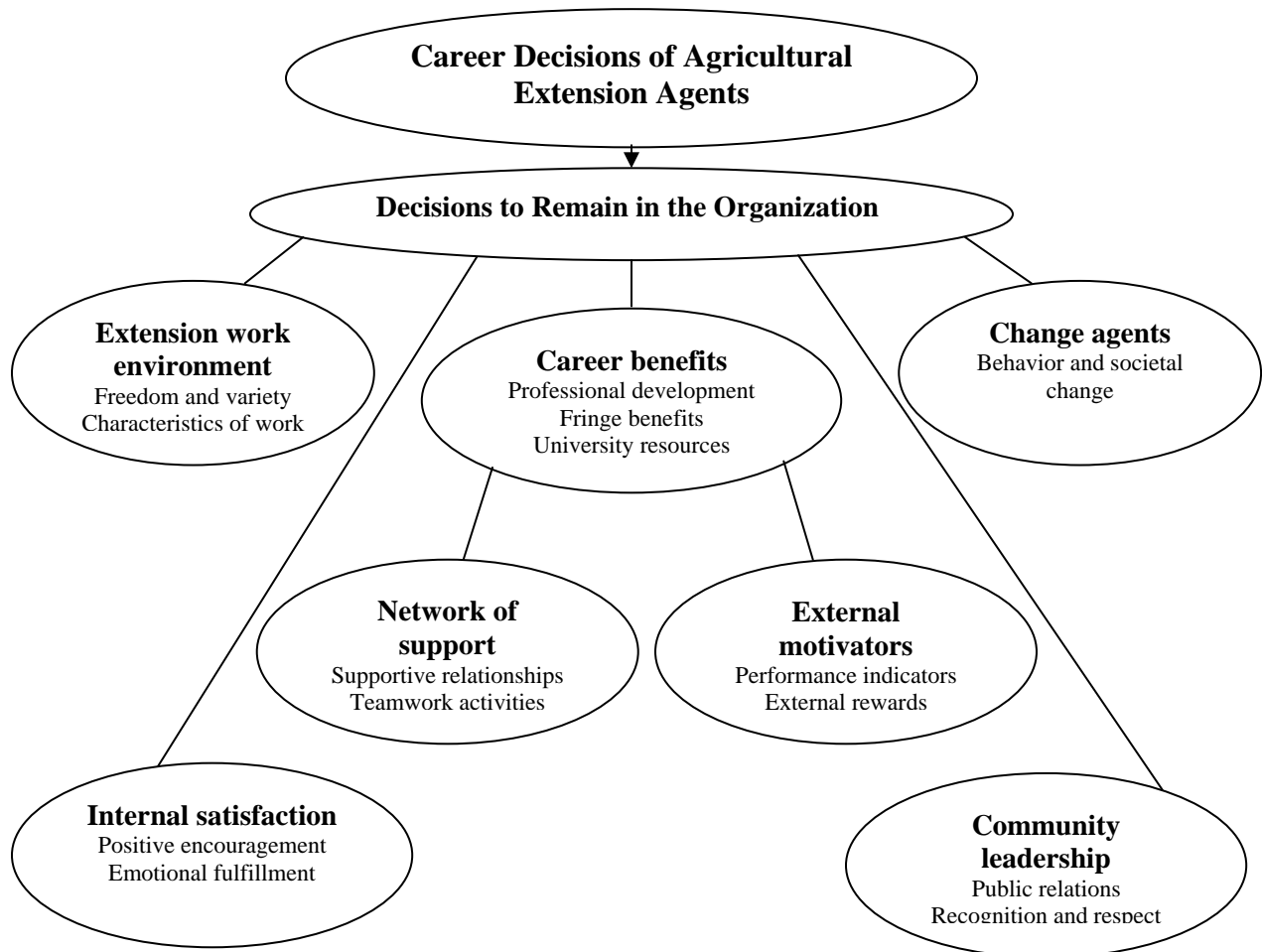


Figure 1. Grounded theory of the career decisions of Florida agricultural extension agents to remain in the extension organization.

**Recommendations**

Previous studies on job satisfaction and dissatisfaction tend to concentrate on people who have left extension rather than those who are currently employed. This study uncovered specific variables beneficial to understanding why Florida agricultural agents’ remain in extension. Future longitudinal studies must be conducted to examine career influences on current agents and how they develop through their career, so the organization can take a proactive approach to meet career needs.

Research on the retention, turnover, and organizational costs must be conducted on the Florida Cooperative Extension System and nationally by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Although retention of agents is commonly identified as a problem by

administrators, there is currently a lack of verifiable, rigorous 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.

Extension administrators must continually monitor the work environment within extension to address the factors affecting agents’ career decisions. Influential factors and experiences must first be identified and then serve as a starting point to assess the quality of the work atmosphere. These influences should be considered by county and district directors as essential elements for success. To improve career satisfaction and longevity, administrators and directors must ensure agents’ needs are being met in the workplace and achievements are being made in specific identified areas. This

can be accomplished through supervisor participation in programs, active involvement with agents' career development, and informal and formal evaluations.

Social relationships emerged as the primary factor that affected participants' decisions to remain in extension. Connections with extension agents and specialists, peers, mentors, clientele, administrators, and advisors were critical to career satisfaction and longevity. Positive encouragement and feedback served as the driving factors for internal satisfaction. Collaborative teams offered significant personal and professional assistance to accomplish work responsibilities. The importance of these networks must be recognized by administrators and incorporated into agents' professional growth plans.

### Discussion/Implications

Extension administrators must identify the needs of employees and provide the necessary career support. The organization should continue to provide supplemental resources, continuing education, financial incentives, and professional development for all agents. Agents must be recognized and rewarded for their work which will ultimately improve motivation. University professional development extension specialists should be assigned to design appropriate career growth opportunities,

maintain relationships with agents beyond orientation, and collaborate with agents in the field to improve career satisfaction. In addition, personal communication between university specialists and extension agents must remain a priority to disseminate timely research and solve clientele problems appropriately.

Career development models are valuable to gauge and evaluate the progress of employees. The information serves as an educational resource to create career development plans for agents within each stage. This could include a detailed guide of job expectations, annual goals, significant activities, strategic partnerships, and key experiences identified in this study necessary for all stages of agents. It can also be extended to include necessary individual and organizational support with a yearly checklist of accomplishments. This plan should be created by administrators and tested on its usefulness in assisting agents' career growth and satisfaction, as well as add to the general understanding their career needs. The motivators and organizational strategies of the career stages model, as well as findings from this study, offer a useful starting point for creating and staffing professional development programs. Results of this study indicate that if agents are motivated and offered suitable career development opportunities, then it may lead to greater job satisfaction and could potentially improve retention rates.

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

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