

Agent-Related Factors Affecting the Performance of Agricultural Extension Staff in Abia State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT This study investigated agent-related factors that influence extension agents' field performance. Questionnaire and interview schedule were administered to 45 Block Extension Supervisors (BES) and 200 frontline Extension Agents (EAs). Statistical tools employed in data analysis include means, percentages and Pearson's correlation coefficient. Findings show that all the 20 affective work competencies identified were perceived as important for field performance by the Supervisors; and that the EAs in Abia State possessed most of the attributes. Agents personal characteristics that positively and significantly correlated with job performance were formal education ($r=0.32$), previous job experience ($r=0.21$), reason for joining extension service ($r=0.19$), childhood experience ($r=0.15$) and age ($r=0.17$). Sex ($r=-0.01$) and Marital status ($r=-0.02$) correlated negatively with performance. The paper recommends training and re-training of extension agents not only on technical agriculture, but also on educational psychology and communication techniques. They should, in addition, be adequately motivated through prompt payment of salaries, provision of work facilities and making their prospect for advancement on the job more certain.

INTRODUCTION

Whereas agricultural research primarily generates or develops new and appropriate agricultural technologies and management practices, extension introduces these agricultural innovations to as many farmers as is practicable, and facilitates adoption of same, with a view to increasing agricultural productivity, as well as, social and economic progress.

To achieve this, the extension organization seeks for employees who are competent in, at least, five different areas (Chauldry and Al-Haj 1985), namely, technical competency or level of knowledge and understanding which an extension worker must possess relevant to the crops and livestock the farmer produces; economic competency, or the ability to weigh alternative productive input and output strategies to determine whether the adoption of the new idea is advantageous; science competency or an understanding of the philosophy of science and the ability to conduct simple field experiments to test an innovation and assess results objectively. Others are farming competency or the willingness and skills to perform physical tasks involved in producing a specific crop or animal using an innovation and communication competency, or the ability to specify and coordinate specific behavioural objectives for the relevant clientele whose behaviour is to be changed.

The Training and Visit (T and V) extension management system (Benor and Harrison 1984)

in Nigeria ensures that extension agents receive training, and visit farmers regularly to transmit messages that are relevant to farmers production, processing, storage, as well as home management. The system is such that the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) in the various States of the federation collaborate and share responsibilities with universities, research institutes and private sector input agencies, adopting the following procedures and activities/ strategies: Farming Systems Research and Extension (FSRE), On-farm Adaptive Research (OFAR), Small Plot Adaptive Trials (SPAT) and Research-Extension-Farmer-Input/Marketing-Linkage System (REFILS). Private agencies such as the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) Nigerian Tobacco Company (NTC) and religious organizations also embarked on extension work.

The Problem

The single most important factor in the planning and implementation of extension tasks is the extension worker or change agent. As the nerve centre of the extension organization, his success or performance is influenced by numerous factors which are either related to the agent himself, his clients or the socio-cultural environment. A number of problems stem from the change agents.

Firstly, most extension agents serving in Abia State are youths. The advantage is that young

and middle-aged men have the physical stamina and capacity to perform extension tasks (Unamama 2004). However, prior to their engagement, most youths in secondary schools are averse to science subjects, including agricultural science (Nkpa and Olatunji 1996; Olatunji 2005). This negative attitude, to a large extent, affects their career choices in higher institutions because some of them fall back to agriculture, following their failure to secure admission into preferred programmes.

As observed by Anders and Berg (2005), the attitude of a student towards a subject or course influences the amount of content materials he/she internalizes and the acquisition of the appropriate skills for the subject. By inference, the determinant of the choice of agriculture by students affects their performance in the school and efficiency or academic achievement after completing their course of study (Adegboye and Jonah 2008). The performance of extension services has been, generally, unsatisfactory because of the way staff carry out their supervisory roles (Madukwe 1996).

Secondly, a good number of formal training institutions from where extension agents working in Abia State graduate lack the modern training facilities for inculcating technical, economic, science, farming and communication skills; and insufficiently qualified, inexperienced and poorly-trained staff cannot be expected to do a first-rate training job or to be committed to organizational goals.

Agbamu (2005) decried the sub-standard quality of EAs as part of the problems of the T and V system. Obviously, not much can be expected from formal training institutions which do not have the competence or necessary facilities.

Thirdly, the negative image of the agents serving in Abia State, regarding their ability, is reinforced by lack of motivation to perform their job. Agents will not function effectively unless their personal and collective needs are met. As explained by Majoyinola (2000), the determinants to one's action (motivation) predict one's ability. These determinants include one's ability and motivation which lead to attainment of personal goal aspiration.

Agents motivational intensity has to be high and sustained and not erratic or fluctuating. The incessant labour union and government disputes in the country are worrisome. The need to as-

certain the extent to which Abia State extension workers' needs and aspirations are met, and the extent to which they possess the desirable knowledge and other personal qualities which guarantee high level of performance prompted this study.

METHODOLOGY

Data for the study were collected with both questionnaire and interview schedule, and data analysis involved percentage and weighted mean computation, as well as correlation analysis. The questionnaire, administered to 45 randomly selected Block Extension Supervisors (BES), was in two parts. Section A contained twenty affective work competency clusters identified by the researcher, while section B was a rating scale.

The BES were requested to indicate the level of importance (low, medium, high) they attached to each of the twenty competencies as necessary attributes for effective field performance by extension agents. Attributes with mean scores of 2.00 and above were confirmed as being important for effective field performance. Each BES was also asked to rate the field extension agents in his/her area of jurisdiction and immediate supervision by selecting from the options (low, average, high) one which most nearly represents the agents' attitude to work and level of performance. Similarly, a performance index was calculated with the following numerical values: low (1.0-2.0), average (2.01-2.50) and high (2.51-3.00). The third phase involved getting information on the personal characteristics of 200 extension agents (including age, sex, marital status, level of professional training and previous job experience etc), and using Pearson correlation (r) analysis to test the relationship between these variables and job performance.

The correlation equation is

$$r = \frac{\sum xy - (\sum x)(\sum y)}{\sqrt{(\sum x^2 - \frac{(\sum x)^2}{N})(\sum y^2 - \frac{(\sum y)^2}{N})}}$$

Where Y = Performance of extension agents.

N = No. of paired observations (subjects measured on both variables)

X₁ = Age

X₂ = Sex

X₃ = Marital status

X₄ = Level of formal education

X₅ = Previous job experience

X₆ = Childhood experience

X₇ = Reason for joining extension service

This was done with the understanding that those that correlate positively with performance

could be used to predict success in extension work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study shows that all the 20 work competencies were confirmed as being vital for effective job performance (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of BES by perceived essential qualities for effective performance and agents' performance

		Importance level ($\bar{x}$)	Performance ($\bar{x}$)
1.	Accuracy	2.11	2.09
2.	Ambition	2.27	2.17
3.	Carefulness	2.20	2.13
4.	Cheerfulness	2.04	2.23
5.	Cooperation	2.29	2.19
6.	Courtesy	2.27	2.23
7.	Dedication	2.27	2.14
8.	Efficiency	2.40	2.09
9.	Emotional stability	2.11	2.10
10.	Good health	2.38	2.28
11.	Independence	2.22	2.09
12.	Leadership qualities	2.49	2.09
13.	Orderliness	2.18	2.06
14.	Patience	2.33	2.19
15.	Positive attitude to work	2.31	2.11
16.	Punctuality	2.53	2.06
17.	Reliability	2.49	2.16
18.	Responsiveness	2.18	2.05
19.	Resourcefulness	2.40	2.11
20.	Technical competence	2.33	2.17

Punctuality received the highest mean score ($\bar{X}=2.53$). Other attributes that were highly rated include good leadership qualities ($\bar{X}=2.49$), reliability ($\bar{X}=2.49$) and efficiency ($\bar{X}=2.40$). Rela-

tively low scores were recorded for courtesy ($\bar{X}=2.27$), dedication to duty ($\bar{X}=2.27$) and ambition ($\bar{X}=2.27$). In terms of performance, the extension agents were fairly rated by the supervisors. The highest mean score was given for the agents good health, while the lowest was recorded for the responsiveness ($\bar{X}=2.05$).

The results of the Pearson's correlation analysis show that, age ($r=0.17$), formal education ($r=0.32$), previous job experience ($r=0.21$), rural upbringing (0.10), and reason for joining extension service ($r=0.11$) correlated positively with field performance. The relationship was significant at 0.01 level (Table 2).

This shows that of all the variables investigated, the single best predictor of success in extension work was the level of formal education attained by the extension agents, followed by previous job experience. This corroborates the findings of Ekumankama and Anyanwu (2007) that level of formal education was a strong predictor of job performance by extension agents in Abia State. Sex ($r=-0.01$) and marital status ($r=-0.02$) were negatively correlated with job performance.

CONCLUSION

The study has established the fact that certain personal attributes are very crucial for effective field performance. These good qualities can be acquired if the agents are given sound training in, among other areas, technical agricultural, educational psychology and teaching methods. The National Universities Commission and other Supervisory Agency for tertiary

Table 2: Correlation matrix showing the relationship between agents' personal characteristics and job performance

Variables	X_1	X_2	X_3	X_4	X_5	X_6	X_7	X_8
X_1	1	-0.6	0.12	0.22	0.15	-0.11	0.24	0.17
X_2	-0.6	1	-0.11	0.31	0.04	-0.20	-0.30	-0.01
X_3	0.12	-0.11	1	-0.23	0.09	0.17	-1.2	-0.02
X_4	0.22	0.31	-0.23	1	-0.4	0.23	0.4	0.32
X_5	0.15	0.04	0.09	-0.4	1	0.11	0.6	0.21
X_6	-0.11	-0.20	0.17	0.23	0.15	1	0.13	0.15
X_7	0.24	-0.03	-1.2	0.4	0.6	0.13	1	0.19

* Significant and positively correlated at $P<0.01$

X_1 = Age

X_2 = Sex

X_3 = Marital status

X_4 = Level of formal education

X_5 = Previous job experiences

X_6 = Childhood experience

X_7 = Reason for joining extension work

Y = Performance of extension agents

institutions have an important role to play in this regard.

The extension agents currently working in Abia State possess much of what is required to maintain an efficient extension service. Although there was a consensus among the Supervisors that punctuality is an essential condition for effective field performance, the level of punctuality among the Extension Agents studied, which was low, should be a matter of concern for the Abia State extension service. This is because the T and V system that is operational in the state requires regular contact with the farmers. If after receiving their bi-monthly training, the agents default in visiting their clients, the purpose of the training is defeated. If on the other hand, they are not there on schedule, their clients will quickly lose interest. Punctuality is sometimes limited by lack of facility for mobility or unfavourable Extension Agent to farmer ratio. Effort should however be made to ensure that any form of misconduct is dealt with under appropriate federal or state guidelines.

Several personal factors which positively correlated with performance have been identified. The level of formal education attained has been seen as having the greatest influence on performance. This underscores the need for high academic standards to be maintained in the institutions where extension agents are trained. Between 1987 and 1991, the FAO, United Nations Development Programme and Federal Government of Nigeria jointly sponsored a training project on strengthening agricultural extension in Nigeria for frontline extension workers. Any encouragement given to the agent to attain greater proficiency on the job will be on the interest of the Abia State Extension Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The welfare of the extension agents in Abia State needs serious attention. Good extension programmes do not yield positive results unless they are executed by a good number of energetic and motivated staff. When hard and conscientious workers are encouraged, and when promotion prospects are reviewed positively, a congenial atmosphere for good performance would be created. Employees also need to be

assured that they have a permanent job which they will only lose if they perform below expectations. The role of the labour force and trade unions in enhancing productivity is widely recognized.

In summary, it has to be understood that effective performance by extension agents hinges not only on the training given them before and immediately after employment, but also on how far they are motivated. If these guidelines are applied, the Abia extension service will be greatly revamped and rapid rural development would be achieved.

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