

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES NEEDED BY EXTENSION AGENTS IN SOUTHERN THREE STATES OF NIGERIA

Asikadi, Edwin

Abstract

Possession of certain competencies or abilities by extension agents is necessary for effective job performance. The perception of these competencies by the extension agents has much to do with their job performance. For example, misperceived roles or misplaced role priorities would have adverse effect on their job performance and this would have obvious implications for their training and development needs. In this survey of 260 extension personnel which was conducted in 2002 in three states of southern Nigeria, it was found that an overwhelming majority of the extension agents were young males and most of them had relatively low education, had not had in-service training but had had over ten years job experience. Over 70% of the extension agents specialized in general agriculture and over 80% declared extension work as their area of responsibility. Majority of the extension agents perceived almost all the identified professional extension competencies as important. Also, most of the critical competencies were perceived as the most important competencies by the extension agents. However, some of the important competencies were perceived as being of low or least importance. In terms of the eleven extension competency categories examined, the most important one was surprisingly, youth service. This was followed by maintenance of professionalism, understanding human behaviour and communication. It is recommended that since extension agents differed in their perception of the priorities of extension competencies, the management of ADPs should prioritize these priorities periodically and regularly.

Introduction

In Nigeria, extension effort over several decades to avail farmers with beneficial research-based agricultural technology does not seem to have yielded the expected impact (Akinbode, 1982). The majorities of Nigerian rural farmers are still tradition - bound in their production methods and, therefore, continue to suffer as a result, from low productivity, low income and deprivation.

Quite often the farmers are totally blamed or considered to be change-resistant and therefore, responsible for the country's slow agricultural and industrial take-off. The technologies being introduced to the farmers are viewed as being blameless or taken for granted. So are the promoters of the technologies - the extension agents. However, the technologies which are considerably alien or based on alien principles and assumptions are often inappropriate for use by the farmers and the extension agent's promotional skills and competencies as well as commitment are generally questionable.

The study sought specifically to: (a) describe the personal and social characteristics of extension agents, and (b) identify and verify the professional competencies needed by extension agents as perceived by the extension agents.

It is well recognized through studies that for effective performance in extension work, extension agents need skills and competencies in a variety of areas in human knowledge (Onazi 1967; Gwary 1998). The term 'competency' refers to the ability of extension agents to undertake extension duties, effectively utilizing existing human capabilities acquired through training, experience and practice (Jibowo 1987; Gwary 1998). In extension, it covers the attitude, behaviour, skill and understanding of the extension agent at a specified level of performance (Weidemann, 1977). In this context, professional competencies refer to the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed by the extension workers. An important point to note is that a set of competencies needed by extension agencies in a particular social setting reflect the agricultural problems, clientele needs, the cultural circumstances and the technical changes in that setting.

The primary importance of the study indicate that there is need for the development and implementation of educational programmes that effectively provide for the training and developmental

need of extension personnel. This study provided data in the area of extension training and development which would form a basis for professional improvement of extension personnel. Intension agencies need (1) to understand the characteristics of the farmers that they are dealing with. (2) to provide newly hired extension agents with guidance in planning and conducting useful programmes based on those competencies that are of greatest importance, and (3) to establish and articulate programme for the pre-service, in-service and graduate needs of extension agents based on (he competencies identified.

Research Questions

- (1) What are the personal and social characteristics of extension workers?
- (2) What are the professional institutions attended by the extension agents?
- (3) What are the areas of specializations of these extension personnel?
- (4) What are the man-hour involvements by extension agents in the research area?.

Methodology

To collect the data for this study a questionnaire was developed using extension competencies lhal were identified and adapted from several studies (Beeman, et al. 1979; Gonzalez 1982; Gwary 1988; Jibowo 1978; Onazi 1973) and verified by officials of Agricultural Development Programmes (Ads). One hundred and twenty professional competencies were included in the questionnaire under eleven categories: primary technical matter, assessment of community needs, administration, programme planning, programme execution, teaching, communication, understanding of human behaviour, maintaining professionalism, evaluation, and youth services.

A 5-point Likert-type scale was used for rating of each competency statement, with live (5) being highest in measuring the need for the competency. Also, questions on the personal socio-economic characteristics of the extension agents were included in the questionnaire and used to gain ;in indepth view of the participants. The socio-economic data included; age, years in extension, specialization, area of responsibility, percentage of time on extension work, educational level, and in-service courses attended.

The various ranks or categories of extension personnel ranging from the project manager to the village extension worker (VEW) and the number of personnel in each group were obtained from each state ADP Respondents were proportionately selected from the list. The questionnaire was distributed to zonal coordinators for onward administration respondents, at the Monthly Technology review Meetings (MTRMs) of each state in Ma/June 1988.

A total of 400 questionnaire was administered while 260 questionnaire were returned, giving a return rate of about 66%. The distribution of copies of the questionnaire to states was as follows. DELTA STATE - 200, EDO STATE 100 and ANAMBRA - 100. The return rates were Delta State 140, Edo state - 60 and Anambra 60:

Result

Research question one: What are the personal and social characteristics of extension workers?

Table 1. Age

Age	No of Respondent	Percentage
21-30 year	130	50
31-40 years	78	30
41-45 years	39	15
45 and above	13	5

Table 1, shows that almost half of the extension agent were found to be in the age bracket of 21 to 30 years and about 30% were found to be between the age of 31 to 40. This indicates that 80% young energize men were found between the age bracket of 21-40 years.

Research Question Two: What are the professional institutions attended by the extension agents?

Table 2: Institution Attended

Institution Attended	No of Respondent	Percentage
Farm training course	52	20
Secondary, Teacher / Technical Education	91	35
Ordinary National Diploma (OND)	78	30
HND/University 1 st Degree-	28	11
Post Graduate M.Sc/Ph.D.	7	3

The Table shows that, 20% of the extension agents attended farm centre train course after their primary school. This number was followed by about 30% of those with Ordinary National Diploma (OND). This indicates that about 50% of the extension agents had not attended any in-service training and only 11% were HND/University graduate.

Research Question Three: What are the areas of specializations of these extension personnel?

Table 3 Area of specialization

Area of Specialization	No of Respondent	Percentage
General Agric	178	65
Animal Science	26	10
Crop Science	39	15
Soil Science	13	5
Others e.g. Fisheries	5	2

Table 3, shows that 68% of the extension agents had General Agriculture as their area of specialization. 15% of the extension personnel read crop science while 10% specialized on Animal Science. This indicates that most of the extension workers had knowledge in General agriculture.

Research Question IV: What are the man-hour involvements by extension agents in the research area?

Table 4: Man-hour spent on duty

Hour spent on duties	No of Respondent	Percentage
70- 100% of the time	39	15
69-51% of the time	91	35
50-40% of the time	130	50
Less than 39% of the time	26	10

Table IV, shows that about 15% of the extension agent spent on average of between 70-100 percent of their time doing extension work whereas 35% of them spent an average of 59-51% of their time on extension work. A also indicate that about 50% of the respondents spent more than 50 percent of their time on extension work.

Table 5: Level of Experience

Level of Experience	No of Respondent	Percentage
Less than 5 years	78	30
6 - 10 years	78	30
11-15 years	52	25
16 -30 years	46	18
30 years and above.	05	2

That table, shows that about 30 percent of the respondents had put in only 5 years or less in extension work. About 20 percent had spent between 31-15 years of extension service and 30 percent had 6 to 10 years. This indicates that more than 60% of the workers had less than 10 years experience meaning that they have more years to put in their establishment.

Discussion

Despite the generally low interaction density between men and women in the study area, only seven percent of extension workers were females. In this situation, it is obvious that women farmers had very little extension contact, if any.

Also, the educational qualifications of the extension agents were found to be generally low. Most of them were those with primary school education who had attended, in addition, a one-year Farm Training Course. Only very few of them had University degrees and a relatively few had Higher National Diplomas. In addition, majority of the staff had not had the opportunity to attend a single in-service training course. In this case, extension work could be considered to have been limited in its impact by the low quality of the extension staff particularly those that are in direct contact with the farmers at the village level.

Very few members of staff had their specialization in soil reflection of the fact that, in school, not many students go into these specializations compared to the numbers that go into specialty areas of general agriculture, home economics and farm management.

Just a little over one-third of the staff spent seventy percent or more of their time doing extension work even though the major responsibility of over ninety-six percent of them indicated that their major responsibility was in extension work. Many of the extension staff spent part of their time performing non-extension activities, perhaps officially and unofficially.

Majority of the extension agents perceived almost all the identified professional extension competencies as important. Almost, most of the critical competencies were perceived as the most important competencies by the extension agents. However, some of the important competencies were perceived as being of low or least importance. These include soliciting and assessing public views, as an aspect of assessing community needs; organizing and using advisory committee and preparing long-term program of work, as aspects of program planning developing rapport with clientele, as an aspect of program execution; reviewing source materials, as aspects of teaching, communication and maintaining professionalism; and developing youth leaders and career guidance, as aspects of youth services.

In terms of the eleven extension competency categories examined, the most important one was, surprisingly, youth services followed by maintenance of professionalism and understanding human behaviour. It is not likely that extension agents consider youth services as the most important competency category. Indeed, they could consider it as the least important given the fact that it "is an extension program that is not emphasized in the extension programs of ADPs. The fact of the matter is that there were few but well selected items under youth services category which easily gave a high total score of responses. This most likely explains how this category of extension competencies came up as the most important competency category.

Recommendation

However, based on the findings and discussion of this study the following recommendations can be drawn.

1. A serious shortage of female extension agents was found in the area. Therefore ADPs should address this problem by recruiting and training large numbers of female extension workers who would serve female agriculturalist with extension messages and agricultural knowledge and skills.
2. The general problem of low educational qualifications of extension agents needs to be tackled seriously and urgently. Ordinary National Diploma or its equivalent should be considered the minimum qualification of extension workers at the block or sub-district level. Therefore efforts should be

- made to step up the educational qualifications and skills of staff at all levels through recruiting qualified candidates and sending staff out for in-service courses and training programs regularly.
3. More subject-matter specialists in the area of soil conservation and agricultural engineering are required. This is in consideration of their fewness and their potential usefulness considering the continuous ecological damage by forces of soil degradation in the area and the increasing usage of agricultural machinery such as tractors, pumps and processing machines.
 4. There should be constant and serious supervision at various levels to ensure that extension agents spend the World Bank prescribed eighty percent of their working time doing extension work rather than non-extension activities.
 5. Extension agents have a good understanding of the wide range of specific extension competencies required of them. However, they differed somewhat in their perception of the priorities of these competencies. The management of ADPs therefore should prioritize these competencies for the extension agents and review such priorities periodically and regularly.

Conclusion

Maintaining professionalism, understanding human behaviour and communication were three of the most highly rated extension competency categories after youth services. There were followed by program execution, evaluation and primary technical matter competency categories. Extension management and training units of the ADPs should therefore, pay particular attention to these vital competency categories, as this would enhance the effectiveness and impact of extension work.

References

- Akinbode, Adefolu (1982). A critical analysis of the management of agricultural extension in Nigeria. *Agricultural Administration* 10:45-60.
- Mala, S.P, Abdullah!, Y. A. and Shebeyan, (1993). J.A. Professional competencies needed by extension agents in three northern slate of Nigeria. *The Nigerian Journal of Rural Extension and Development*
- Heeman, Carl E. et al (1979). *Professional competencies needed by extension agents in (he Florida cooperative extension service*. Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida.
- Owary, M.M. (1988). Identification of skills and competencies needed by extension agents in Homo State. Unpublished M. Sc. Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Gonzalez, Ismael Miley (1982). The professional competencies needed by extension agents in the Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension Service, Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, The Pennsylvania State University.
- Jibowo, A. A. (1978). Facilitating effectiveness in livestock extension work. Paper presented at a workshop organized by the National Livestock Projects Department, Ogere-Remo, Ogun State.
- Onazi, O. C-, (1973). A study of primary responsibilities of extension, workers and the major problems of agricultural extension in Northern Nigeria. *Extension studies Bulletin, Cooperative Extension service, Manhattan, Kansas, No. 8*
- Weidemann, C.J. (1977). *Planning Home Economics Curriculum for Social and Economic Development*, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Lagos.