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Perceptions of Job Competencies and Mentoring Program Development for Extension Administrative Assistants: A Focus Group Study of Multiple Extension Employee Groups

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Extension workplace mentoring programs may produce increased Extension programming competence, organizational commitment, job satisfaction (Denny, 2016), and leadership effectiveness (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001). The study described in this article aimed to gather information for a proposed mentoring program for Extension administrative assistants. A total of 12 focus groups were conducted with 78 participants representing five employee groups: administrative assistants, Extension agents, county directors, state specialists, and department heads. Employee groups were separately interviewed. Findings indicated that respondents perceive the role of an administrative assistant as critically important, and major competencies required by the administrative assistant role are people skills/customer service, bookkeeping, technology, and a willingness to learn/adaptability to change. Respondents perceived that workplace mentoring is important, and it should be required of all newly-hired administrative assistants. Regarding incentives, administrative assistants felt that counting mentoring time as part of their University's annual professional learning requirement of 32 hours would encourage participation. Major recommendations include the establishment of an e-mentoring program that incorporates the administrative assistants' academic, career, and personal goals in addition to organizational policies and procedures.

Keywords: mentoring, administrative assistants, Cooperative Extension, onboarding

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Introduction

Adult and youth mentoring has been important in a number of Extension contexts including Extension professionals mentoring volunteers and childcare providers (Byington, 2010); Extension professionals and others mentoring community members (Dodge, 2015); and 4-H volunteer mentors guiding at-risk youth in 4-H technology programs (Toelle, Terry, Broaddus, Kent, & Barnett, 2015). Additionally, Extension workplace mentoring has contributed to organizational goals such as onboarding newly-hired county Extension educators (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Place & Bailey, 2010).

This study was motivated by the need to understand different Extension employee groups' perceptions regarding administrative assistants' job competencies and a potential mentoring program. In 2010, the University of Tennessee Extension (UT Extension) introduced a new strategic plan that included a number of action steps to strengthen employee engagement, including the goal to implement a mentoring program (University of Tennessee Extension, 2010). In response to this plan, a human resources study explored ways to promote healthy lifestyles for Extension employees (Donaldson & Franck, 2019). In the previous study, focus group interviews, planned discussions that help capture perceptions from a select group of people (Krueger & Casey, 2009), were employed. Focus groups are useful when researchers need to understand experiences, viewpoints, and/or impressions of a group of people and also aid in forming relationships between the researchers and the participants in the focus group (Mertens, 2010). For those reasons, focus groups were also used for the present study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Mentoring is a complex concept that has been defined as a learning partnership between mentor and mentee to guide the mentee's development toward personal, educational, or career goals (Cohen, 1995; Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007). Workplace mentoring involves an experienced employee (mentor) who helps a less experienced employee (mentee) to succeed in the workplace (Eby et al., 2007). Contemporary mentoring approaches emphasize that mentees have multiple mentors, that communication between mentor and mentee is primarily through electronic media, and that mentees seek different mentors during their careers to address their changing needs (Scandura & Pellegrini, 2007).

The mentor may serve in a number of roles for the mentee, including friend, role model, coach, guide, and teacher (Clement, 2011). According to Cohen (1995), the mentors' interpersonal behaviors are of utmost importance in guiding the mentees' achievement of career and educational goals. Cohen described these interpersonal behaviors as ranging from a relationship emphasis (to establish trust between the mentor and mentee) to a visioning emphasis (to encourage the mentee to achieve goals). Mentors and mentees have different perspectives on the mentoring experience. Mentors tend to focus on "tangible, work-related results" of the mentees, while mentees focus on the relationship and interpersonal aspects (Denny, 2016).

In a review of mentoring literature supporting the Cooperative Extension System as a learning organization, Denny (2016) found that mentoring programs for Extension employees may result in increased Extension programming competence, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Kutilek and Earnest (2001) assessed the leadership effectiveness of 30 Extension professionals participating in a workplace mentoring program, and results indicated that overall leadership effectiveness increased due to the experience.

What are the factors that make an Extension mentoring program successful? In an evaluative study of a new mentoring program among Extension professionals, Place and Bailey (2010) outlined several factors including the need for mentors and mentees to have similar personalities and geographic proximity, the need for a regional Extension director to make mentor-mentee selections, and the need for a handbook to outline task lists for both mentors and mentees.

Of the previous studies mentioned, none represented Extension administrative assistants. While a number of Extension mentoring programs are in force, such as in Kentucky (Farrell, 2017), Virginia (Virginia Cooperative Extension, n.d.), and North Carolina (McRae et al., 2017), none could be identified specifically for Extension administrative assistants. Little is known about this employee group, yet Extension administrative assistants are often the first contact for clients calling or visiting the local Extension office (Sneed, Elizer, Hastings, & Barry, 2016).

Purpose and Objectives

The overall purpose of this study was to understand perceptions of multiple Extension employee groups that could inform a potential mentoring program for administrative assistants, an initiative of the UT Extension strategic plan. The first objective was to describe Extension administrative assistant competencies as perceived by Extension administrative assistants, Extension agents, county Extension directors, state specialists, and department heads. The second objective was to collect specific ideas for an administrative assistant mentoring program.

Methods

This study involved focus group interviews, and all procedures, including recruitment, consent, and interview questions, were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK-IRB-16-02932-XP).

Participants

Participants were employees of the UT Extension organization. Participants were nominated by regional and state Extension directors who provided a list of 120 potential participants they perceived as knowledgeable about administrative assistants' job competencies and potential needs for mentoring. Invitations were sent via email to all of the nominated individuals asking them to participate in a two-hour focus group. Follow-up invitations were sent to those who did

not respond to the first invitation. A total of 12 focus groups were conducted throughout the state, with 78 participants (65% of those nominated). Three focus groups were conducted simultaneously in each of the three UT Extension regions (Central, Eastern, and Western), with separate focus groups for administrative assistants, agents, and county directors. In addition to the regional focus groups, three focus groups were conducted at the state level on University of Tennessee campus in Knoxville. This included one group of department heads, one group of state Extension specialists, and one group of administrative assistants. The number of groups and the number of participants by job position are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants by Extension Job Position (N = 78)

Job Position	Number of Groups	Number of Participants	Average Group Size
Agents	3	20	6.6
County directors	3	13	4.3
Administrative assistants	4	35	8.75
State specialists	1	7	7.0
Department heads	1	3	3.0

Procedures

Researchers wrote questions and pilot-tested questions with three retired Extension employees; two were retired state specialists, and one was a retired administrative assistant. The employees found that questions were aligned with the study objectives and that the interview topics (job competencies, staff development, and mentoring) flowed well. The same questions were used for every focus group. Example focus group questions were:

What would an effective mentoring program for administrative assistants look like?

Probes – Think about an effective employee mentoring program for Extension employees.

- a. How can we make this program beneficial?
- b. How can we make this program convenient?
- c. How can we encourage people to participate?

The researchers provided instruction to the same three retired Extension employees who served as focus group protocol reviewers to serve as moderators for the focus groups. The moderators received instruction in following the script and using digital recorders. In addition, the moderators completed the Institution's certification in human subjects research.

The focus groups lasted for an average of 103 minutes, with a range of 85 to 128 minutes. All focus group discussions were digitally recorded, and transcripts were made from the recordings. Each transcript was analyzed and coded. Researchers mined the data to create codes, in other

words, to “tag the data” based on common responses (Creswell, 1998). As a standard set of questions was used, each transcript was analyzed question by question consistent with Patton (2015). We used an open coding approach whereby the themes emerged from the participants. Open coding represents inductive analysis as opposed to using preconceived themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2015). Then the themes for the five employee groups (agents, county directors, administrative assistants, state specialists, and department heads) were aggregated within the five groups (Creswell, 1998). Finally, the researchers compared and contrasted the major themes across all five employee groups.

Regarding verification, an external audit was used (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The external auditor was a University administrator and researcher who was familiar with the Extension organization but did not conduct this study. The auditor examined all transcripts, themes, findings, and data analysis procedures. The auditor found that the study procedures and findings were credible. For additional verification, a graduate student performed a separate analysis of the focus groups, which showed the same themes identified by the researchers and external auditor (Kruger & Casey, 2015).

Results

Describe Extension Administrative Assistant Competencies

Table 2 provides a list of competencies named by employee groups. The competencies discussed across employee groups were (a) people skills/customer service, (b) computer/technology, (c) bookkeeping, and (d) willingness to learn/adaptability to change.

All employee groups shared that people skills, including customer service, was the paramount competency for Extension administrative assistants. One county director described the administrative assistants’ people skills as defining “the whole image of our office.” People skills were discussed both in terms of relating to Extension colleagues and serving Extension clients. Respondents expressed that people skills/customer service were antecedents to all other administrative assistant skills as it was challenging to teach excellent people skills/customer service skills, while all other aspects of the job could be learned “on the job.” As one administrative assistant explained:

I mean, you can teach someone to run an Excel program or to run an Outlook calendar but you can’t really teach someone how to interact with people in the way that we want that interaction. Especially out in the counties, the administrative person may be the only person in the office when someone walks in the door.

Participants discussed that using computers and technology were essential competencies. Specifically, participants mentioned using basic software and updating office websites and social media accounts. Participants shared that phone systems and other office equipment were

technologically advanced, and administrative assistants required skills in those for a functional Extension office. Also, respondents described how administrative assistants often instruct agents and other Extension professionals how to use a certain technology or software. Administrative assistants expressed that having strong computer competencies was extremely helpful for their jobs and minimized stress when administrative assistants were starting their jobs.

The technology discussion led most of the groups to a discussion of another competency: willingness to learn and adaptability to change. In Table 2, willingness to learn and adaptability to change are combined. This is because participants discussed willingness to learn and adaptability to change in tandem as illustrated by this representative comment from one administrative assistant:

Even if you come into the job knowing Excel, Word, and PowerPoint, other things that we use, and knowing IRIS and some of these other things. Odds are that in a year or two, these things will change, and you've got to. You better be flexible and willing to learn something new. And you better be willing to learn new technology. So flexibility is another aspect of it. They need to be flexible to change.

Respondents shared that to be effective, administrative assistants did not have to know every aspect of every technology, but they did have to be willing to learn to meet the needs of the office, as one participant stated: "willing, continuing to learn, [and] adaptability." In addition, the groups discussed the different aspects of change, such as personnel changes in the office and different work assignments based on the time of the year. As one county director explained: "I don't know how you identify it but willingness or ability to change and adapt. You know, based on either the time of year or new effort, or you know, many different things, always changing."

Participants discussed three major aspects of the fourth competency, bookkeeping: financial transactions, record keeping, and knowledge of University policy. Respondents also discussed how county-level administrative assistants had to follow bookkeeping policies from both the University and county government.

Table 2. Administrative Assistant Competencies

Competencies	Administrative Assistants	Agents	County Directors	State Specialists	Department Heads
Bookkeeping	•	•	•		•
Communication			•		
Computer/Technology	•	•	•		•
Multitasking	•				
People Skills/Customer Service	•	•	•	•	•
Problem Solving				•	
Proofreading		•			
Reliability	•				
Willingness to Learn/Adaptability to Change	•	•	•	•	

Staff Development Needs for Extension Administrative Assistants

Table 3 provides a list of staff development needs discussed across the employee groups. Whereas the groups were asked directly about suggestions for a proposed mentoring program for administrative assistants, every group stated that administrative assistants first needed staff development prior to a mentoring program. [While this was in addition to the original objectives to describe competencies and collect ideas for a mentoring program, it reflects the organic nature of needs assessment studies.] In all cases, participants discussed the general staff development needs of the newly hired Extension administrative assistants rather than staff development needed to introduce the mentoring program, such as roles and expectations.

The format and suggested platforms varied some from group to group, but participants largely focused on two needs: (a) the need for a handbook with important job information and (b) staff development online modules that cover specific topics important to administrative assistants. Participants shared that an online handbook that covered important policies and procedures would be valuable for newly-hired administrative assistants. This handbook would provide administrative assistants with answers to common questions. One administrative assistant shared: “I think the handbook would probably be the first source [rather] than the mentor because sometimes the mentor is not going to be available, and you’ll have the handbook to look at. You’ll have that to refer to.”

This handbook would also include information on the structure and organization of the state Extension organization. Participants also shared that online modules would be preferred over face-to-face staff development events due to increased convenience and timeliness and no required travel.

Table 3. Suggestions Regarding Administrative Assistant Staff Development

Staff Development Suggestions	Administrative Assistants	Agents	County Directors	State Specialists	Department Heads
Administrative Assistant Handbook			•	•	
Annual In-Person Conference		•			
Expert Contact List			•	•	
Introduction to UT Extension			•		
Online Modules (Preferred) and In-Person Courses/Events	•	•	•	•	
Monthly Webinars			•		
Staff Development Needed Prior to A Mentoring Program	•	•	•	•	•

Collect Specific Ideas for an Extension Administrative Assistants' Mentoring Program

Table 4 provides a list of mentoring program ideas discussed by employee groups. Respondents discussed how mentors and mentees should be matched so that they would be in close proximity to limit travel. The groups agreed that a mentoring experience should be required of all newly hired administrative assistants. Administrative assistants and department heads felt that mentors and mentees should form mutual relationships rather than being assigned by administrators. Participants explained that these mutual relationships (or naturally occurring, as discussed by Dougherty, Turban, & Haggard, 2007) would create better employee relationships because employees with similar personalities would naturally interact.

Respondents shared that program participation hinged on appropriate incentives, especially for mentors. Suggestions for these incentives included plaques or other extrinsic awards. However, some felt a worthy incentive would be the opportunity to receive staff development in how to be an effective mentor. Others felt that providing travel funds for all mentoring activities would be convenient and encourage participation. Also, administrative assistants shared that since University of Tennessee administrative assistants are required to complete 32 hours of professional development annually, it would be advantageous if they could count time spent in mentoring activities as part of this required professional development time.

Table 4. Suggestions Regarding Administrative Assistant Mentoring Program

Mentoring Program Suggestions	Administrative Assistants	Agents	County Directors	State Specialists	Department Heads
Accountability/Plan of Action	•				
Buy-In from Supervisors	•				
Convenient Timing	•	•	•		
Established Outcomes		•			•
Naturally Occurring Mentor/Mentee Relationships	•				•
Mentor Incentives	•	•	•		•
Mentor Job Description				•	•
Mentor/Mentee from Similar Counties		•			
Mentor/Mentee in Geographic Proximity	•	•			•
Multiple Mentors			•		
Required for All New Hires	•	•	•	•	
Travel Funds	•				•
Use of Video Conference	•		•		
Voluntary for Mentors	•				

Conclusions and Discussion

Participants identified the administrative assistant role as critically important due to administrative assistants being the “face of Extension” as the first person with whom Extension clients interact (Sneed et al., 2016). All employee groups identified people skills/customer service as the key competency for administrative assistants. Other major competencies were bookkeeping, technology, and a willingness to learn/adaptability to change. Regarding a willingness to learn/adaptability to change, participants discussed how administrative assistants needed to embrace both technology changes and personnel changes in the office.

Respondents perceived that mentoring is important, and it should be required of all newly-hired administrative assistants. It was even suggested that the expectation to serve as a mentor be part of every administrative assistant job description. It is interesting to note that every group identified staff development (especially online learning modules) that administrative assistants needed prior to a mentoring program. While the literature indicates that orientation is needed before a formal mentoring program (Bearman, Blake-Bear, Hunt, & Crosby, 2007), respondents discussed information aspects of the job (such as organizational policies and procedures) rather than the mentor/mentee relationship or the mentees’ career and educational goals.

While a number of incentives were discussed for encouraging mentoring program participation, administrative assistants viewed counting mentoring time as part of their required annual staff development time as a valuable incentive. In contrast to findings from Place and Bailey (2010), administrative assistants and department heads felt that administrators should not match mentors and mentees but rather allow the “naturally occurring” mentoring relationships, corresponding to Dougherty et al.’s (2007) recommendations. Naturally occurring mentoring relationships are developmental relationships in the workplace. A developmental relationship is one where a mentor is actively interested in contributing to a mentee’s personal and professional development (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Organizations may encourage these relationships by promoting opportunities for employees and managers to interact (Kram, 1985) and a reward system that encourages employees to provide mentoring (Aryee, Chay, & Chew, 1996).

Limitations

The moderators were former employees, and the participants were current employees of the same organization, which may have introduced social bias. For example, participants may have provided answers that were less accurate but more socially acceptable. However, like the Donaldson and Franck study (2019), care was taken in this study so that moderators were not conducting focus groups with individuals they had supervised. Another limitation is the social nature of focus groups. The ideas discussed were those participants felt comfortable discussing with their peers. However, different ideas may have been shared in individual surveys or other anonymous forms of research. When individuals are nominated for focus groups, a strong potential limitation is that the participants do not fully represent the population. In this study, regional and state Extension directors made nominations. To some extent, selection bias was controlled since a total of six individuals (three regional and three state Extension directors) made nominations. However, participants were not randomly selected, and the results cannot be generalized to the entire Extension organization, although they do represent a cross-section of the organization. Finally, the participants’ previous awareness and understanding regarding administrative assistants’ competencies and mentoring is unknown.

Recommendations

It is recommended that UT Extension establishes stronger professional learning for administrative assistants, including online instruction and a reference handbook. Likewise, it is recommended that the organization establishes a mentoring program, but care must be taken to ensure that the mentoring program supports trusting relationships as well as academic, career, and personal goals (Cohen, 1995) rather than just transmitting organizational policies and procedures. The need for mentors and mentees to have similar personalities was recommended by the administrative assistants and county directors, and this was also recommended by Place and Bailey (2007). Therefore, additional research is recommended to understand the phenomena

of personalities in mentoring relationships, including how personalities may be studied, and knowledge of personalities may be used to positively impact mentoring relationships.

Technology was a common theme in the discussion, and it was discussed as a key competency for administrative assistants, a way to provide staff development for newly hired administrative assistants, and a way to support effective mentoring with reduced travel costs. Consistent with Kinsey, Carleo, O'Neill, and Polanin (2010), it is recommended that a mentoring program utilize wikis and other technologies to improve collaboration and reduce travel costs. Therefore, e-mentoring (Scandura & Pellegrini, 2007) is recommended as an approach that could encourage administrative assistants to stay current with technology, be open and adaptable to change, and successfully pursue mentoring relationships.

Finally, since the administrative assistants did not necessarily have the same views on competencies and professional development when compared to other employee groups, it is recommended that Extension administrators strive to understand administrative assistants' job competencies and professional development needs from multiple viewpoints rather than only considering the perceptions of the administrative assistants' supervisors.

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