

Educators' Perceptions of Job-Related Competencies Needed by Entry-Level International Development Agents

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Abstract

According to the United States General Accounting Office (2003), since 1992 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) staff has decreased substantially. As a result, USAID increased its reliance on contractor staff to manage its day-to-day overseas activities. This shift in staffing has pushed many non-governmental agencies (NGOs) to become involved in implementing aid-supported development. Historically, (USAID) and the United States Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service (USDA, FAS) have looked to American universities as its source for preparing future consultants. More specifically, they have looked to land-grant universities and Extension (Duffy, Toness, & Christiansen, 1998; Finley & Price, 1994). Recent college graduates with an interest in international agriculture and extension education fill these expanding job opportunities. Colleges and universities are charged with effectively designing curricula that enable students to acquire the needed competencies and better prepare individuals to live and work successfully in other cultures (Irigoin, M., Whitacre, P., Faulkner, D., & Coe, G., 2002).

The purpose of this study was to describe educators (AIAEE members) perceptions of job-related competencies for entry-level international development agents. Nine constructs were garnered from the research: conflict management and resolution, cultural diversity, management responsibility, personal and professional development, personal skills, program planning and evaluation, public relations, staff relations, and work habits. An online questionnaire was used to collect data and 88 responded, however, 28 were eliminated from the study because of no academic affiliation of incomplete. Educators rated all nine constructs as somewhat important or important. When asked to rank the constructs in order of importance, participants ranked program planning and evaluation as the most important followed by cultural diversity, and work habits.

Type of research: (Quantitative) RPA: (Extension Education)

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Introduction

World issues are becoming an important element at all levels of education – and especially in agriculture and rural development (Beavers, 1985; Jackson & Boateng, 2006; Toness, 2001). Young people must be globally minded to succeed in the job market and they need to be prepared to work throughout the world. According to the United States General Accounting Office (2003), since 1992 United States Agency for International Development (USAID) staff size has *decreased* by 37 percent, while USAID's funding has *increased* by 57 percent. In order to cope with this discrepancy, USAID has increased its reliance on contractor staff to manage its day-to-day activities in many overseas locations. This shift has resulted in many non-governmental agencies (NGOs) becoming involved in implementing aid-supported development.

Historically, (USAID) and the United States Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service (USDA, FAS) have looked to American universities as its source for preparing future employees and more recently future consultants. More specifically, they have looked to land-grant universities and Extension (Duffy, Toness, & Christiansen, 1998; Finley & Price, 1994) to provide the human capital for many international development projects. Both agencies observe similarities between the role of international development agents and Cooperative Extension Service Extension Educators. Because the amount of financial and human resources being invested in international development has increased so dramatically, it is important to understand the competencies needed by agents working in international development.

One of the responsibilities colleges and universities have is to effectively design educational programs that will enable students to acquire the needed competencies and to better prepare individuals to live and work successfully in other cultures (Irigoin, M., Whitacre, P., Faulkner, D., & Coe, G., 2002; Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe, & Macdonald, 2001). According to the United States Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2007), if students are better prepared for the positions they seek, greater job satisfaction and advancement will follow.

Miller (2004) posits that agencies that hire recent college graduates often have a focus different from that of preparatory educational institutions. Are institutions teaching the needed competencies for development? That is unclear. Cooper and Graham (2001) identified seven competency constructs for Extension faculty working in the United States, which included 1) program planning, implementation, and evaluation; 2) public relations; 3) personal and professional development; 4) staff relations; 5) personal skills; 6) management responsibility; and 7) work habits. Those researchers concluded Extension Agents who encompassed those seven competency areas were better prepared to meet the needs of the clientele and possibly more effective in their jobs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was grounded in the human capital theory. The theory specifies as people expand their knowledge through formal education or training programs, so does their capacity to be successful (Becker, 1993). Students come to universities to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to be competitive in the job market. Education embraces the human capital theory; schooling enhances students in economic and socially productive ways (Reed and Wolniak, 2005). According to those researchers; theorists may question if people truly get ahead through education, but few principles are more accepted in American culture than the relationship between education and economic advancement of employees or companies by way of human capital (Reed and Wolniak, 2005). It is important therefore, for educational institutions to know what is needed in the job market in order to effectively prepare students for careers after graduation (Becker, 1993; Quiggin, 2000 and, Shultz, 1961).

Human capital fosters the idea that success is directly correlated to education, the more education or training that is received the probability to be successful increases. Providing educational courses that align with the needs of the industry enhances the preparedness of the employee. It gives the future employees a competitive advantage in the job market and provides employers with competent and capable employees to perform the work without much need for additional training before being sent to the field.

Schultz (1961) points out that education is linked to the productivity and adaptability of employees. Therefore, human capital was defined as competencies needed by college graduates who aspire to work as international consultants and/or agents of development in international settings, and knowledge of those competencies for college or university faculty who teach courses in development. One could conclude, as better prepared college graduates enter the international development sector, they and their employers would benefit. Accordingly, it is posited that describing the perceptions of faculty charged with providing relevant coursework would better inform future decisions about course offerings and structured learning experiences. Reed and Wolniak (2005) suggested that by making schooling responsible for economic or physical productivity employees bring to the labor market, human capital theory encompasses investment in education, labor market potential of students, and the process of classroom learning. This assumption thrusts the theory directly in the center of the education process.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe the competencies needed for entry-level international agents. Specifically, this study investigated job-related competencies as perceived by university faculty who are members of an international agriculture and Extension education association (AIAEE). Two objectives were developed.

1. To describe the perceptions of academic members of the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) who prepare students for careers in international development regarding the importance of selected job-related competencies.
2. To describe the relationship of age and years of work experience in a foreign country with the ranking of the nine constructs.

Population

The population for this study was the membership of the 2009-10 membership of the Association of International Agriculture and Extension Education (AIAEE) organization. Membership in AIAEE consisted of 178 faculty, emeriti faculty, graduate students and NGO/Governmental employees. Individual membership affiliation was unknown to the researchers at the beginning of the study and only determined later when members self-identified that they held an academic appointment. Of the AIAEE members who participated in the study, all members except for those identified as employees of government agencies or employees of NGOs were included in the study. The researcher deemed that as those two subgroups, who did not hold academic appointments, had limited impact on educator's perceptions of needed competencies. Data was collected during the months of December 2009 and January 2010. To ensure a high participation rate, Dillman's (2000) five-step survey method was implemented.

Eighty-eight AIAEE members responded to the questionnaire and who participated in the study. Of those 88, 16 identified themselves as employees of NGOs and 12 instruments were completed incompletely and discarded. Sixty completed instruments were included in this study. Therefore, the researchers cannot generalize to all AIAEE members, but only to those respondents. The issue of non-response could not be addressed due to the design of this study. The researchers could not know the affiliation of the non-respondents and how many of the remaining population was NGO/governmental employees who would have been disregarding from the study.

To address the international logistics of some participants, an electronic questionnaire was designed and implemented. Creswell (2005) stated, "With the increased use of the websites and the Internet, electronic questionnaires are becoming popular" (p. 361). Web-based surveys have yielded a higher response, cost less, and are returned more rapidly than postal mail surveys (Griffis, Goldsby & Cooper, 2003). However research conducted by Shih, and Fan (2008) indicated that response rates were at times lower than paper surveys. The instrument used in this study contained a self-coding mechanism that allowed the researchers to group the responses.

Methods/Procedures

The methodology used in this study was a criterion group survey research design. To achieve the research objectives, the researcher modified a preexisting Internet-based instrument designed by Cooper and Graham (2001) which used a five point, summated scale on competencies needed by Extension educators in the United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service. Descriptive and correlation statistics were used to determine the importance of competencies needed for success.

In addition to the constructs identified by Cooper and Graham, Two additional constructs were deemed important conflict management/resolution and cultural diversity. Ilvento (1996), Langone (1992), and Moore and Rudd (2004) suggested that working with people in areas of community or agricultural development invited conflict. Mauro and Hardison (2002), and the United Nations (2005) suggested cultural diversity enables people to look for different ways to address community and company needs (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Competency Constructs

Cooper and Graham (2001) Constructs	Revised Instrument Constructs
Program planning	Program planning and evaluation
Public relations	Public relations
Personal and professional development	Personal and professional development
Faculty and staff relations	Staff relations
Personal skills	Personal skills
Management responsibility	Management responsibility
Work habits	Work habits
	Cultural diversity
	Conflict management and resolution

The construct validity of the instrument was determined by logical analysis during the pilot test; answers from the pilot were compared for differences. The answers followed the theoretical ideas of the researcher, thus allowing this researcher to conclude the pilot group perceived the instrument in a similar manner. According to Wiersma and Jurs (1990), comparing the scores for differences to see if the research expectations are confirmed by data is another means of testing to see if the instrument is measuring what was intended.

The instrument reliability co-efficients indicated in the Cooper and Graham study are reported in Table 2. The two constructs deemed from research, conflict management and resolution as well as cultural diversity, were tested for reliability. To ensure reliability co-efficients for the instrument used in this study, an independent pilot test of the instrument was implemented with two NGOs and university faculty not affiliated with the original participants in this study. Table 2 indicates the reliability co-efficients for the instrument used by Cooper and Graham study and AIAEE members that participated in this study. Garson (2010) suggested that a cutoff as low as .60 is not uncommon for exploratory research, therefore all were included for this study.

Table 2

Reliability Co-efficients for Both Studies

Constructs	Cooper/Graham	AIAEE
Conflict management		.82
Cultural diversity		.86
Management responsibility	.85	.85
Personal skills	.85	.78
Program planning	.90	.77
Professional development	.91	.70
Public relations	.88	.86
Staff relations	.59	.83
Work habits	.69	.86

Results/Findings

Data revealed the respondents perceived all nine constructs to be *important* with mean scores ranging from 4.077 to 4.454. However, none were perceived as being *very important*. To classify the rating of each construct, data were interpreted using the scale of 1.00-1.49 = Not Important, 1.50-2.49 = Low Importance, 2.50-3.49 = Somewhat Important, 3.50-4.49 = Important, and 4.50-5.00 = Very Important. The lowest score for any construct was also personal skills and the highest score was work habits (see Table 3).

Table 3
AIAEE Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Constructs

Constructs	N = 60		Rating
	μ	α	
Work habits	4.45	0.75	Important
Conflict management	4.37	0.83	Important
Cultural diversity	4.33	0.85	Important
Mgmt responsibility	4.23	0.85	Important
Program planning	4.23	0.73	Important
Pers/prof development	4.23	0.82	Important
Staff relations	4.16	0.82	Important
Public relations	4.13	0.82	Important
Personal skills	4.08	0.87	Important

To generate a deeper understanding of perceptions, participants were then asked to rank the nine constructs from most important to least important. AIAEE members ranked *program planning* as the most important followed by *cultural diversity* and *personal skills*. The least important constructs perceived were staff relations, personal and professional development, and public relations.

The researcher then divided the AIAEE population into two distinct subpopulations: faculty and graduate students. The faculty rated all the constructs important, rating personal skills the lowest and program planning and evaluation the most important. Students perceived five constructs (conflict management, management responsibility, public relations, staff relations and work habits) slightly more important than faculty; student's perceived program planning to be of least importance (see Table 4).

Table 4
AIAEE Subpopulations Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Constructs

Constructs	Faculty N = 50		Graduate Students N = 10		Difference
	μ	α	μ	α	
Personal skills	4.10	0.84	4.04	0.90	0.06
Public relations	4.11	0.80	4.27	0.76	(0.16)
Staff relations	4.12	0.83	4.43	0.56	(0.22)
Mgmt responsibility	4.23	0.79	4.26	0.93	(0.03)
Pers/prof development	4.25	0.79	4.12	0.91	0.13

Program planning	4.29	0.65	3.94	0.97	0.26
Conflict management	4.36	0.82	4.50	0.65	(0.14)
Cultural diversity	4.39	0.80	4.12	0.92	(0.27)
Work habits	4.44	0.73	4.54	0.64	(0.10)

Note: 1.00-1.49 = not important, 4.50-5.00 = very important.

To deepen the understanding of the AIAEE population’s perception of the constructs, the researchers investigated the length of time participants spent working in countries other than the country in which they hold citizenship. Data indicated participants with five or less years rated all constructs important. Those with more than five years of experience in a foreign country perceived constructs “personal skills” and “staff relations” as being somewhat important and the remaining constructs as important. The respondents perceived all nine constructs as being important and ranked program planning, cultural diversity and conflict management the highest (see Table 5). This finding supports the research of the United Nations (2005) who postulated that program planning and understanding the decision making process are important in development. Working with others from foreign countries does increase cultural diversity.

Table 5
AIAEE Number of Years Working in Foreign Country Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Constructs

Constructs	>5 Years N = 45		<5 Years N = 15		Difference
	μ	α	μ	α	
Personal skills	4.13	0.75	3.91	1.10	0.22
Program planning	4.15	0.72	4.44	0.67	(0.30)
Public relations	4.16	0.69	4.06	1.08	0.11
Pers/prof development	4.20	0.78	4.27	0.93	(0.07)
Staff relations	4.24	0.67	3.89	1.10	0.36
Mgmt responsibility	4.30	0.70	4.04	1.11	0.26
Cultural diversity	4.40	0.70	4.12	1.11	0.28
Conflict management	4.49	0.59	4.02	1.20	0.47
Work habits	4.51	0.58	4.27	1.04	0.24

Note: 1.00-1.49 = not important, 4.50-5.00 = very important.

Another important aspect of the findings suggested the majority of AIAEE members have taught one or less courses that prepare graduate students for entry-level opportunities for international development, only seven have taught three or more courses (see Table 6).

Table 6
Graduate Courses Taught Preparing Students for International Development

Courses	AIAEE Member N = 50	
	f	(P)
None	21	(42.0)
One	13	(26.0)
Two	9	(18.0)

Three	4	(8.0)
Four or more	3	(6.0)
Total	50	(100)

No graduate students indicated they taught a graduate course; therefore only the fifty respondents answered that question. Of the respondents for this question, 21 (42.0%) had taught none, 13 (26.0%) had taught one class, 9 (18.0%) taught at least two courses, 4 (8.0%) had taught three, and 3 (6.0%) had taught four or more courses designed to prepare students for international development.

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

The sample of respondents of the AIAEE believed all nine constructs were important and ranked program planning, cultural diversity and conflict management highest. This supports the research of Hassel (2004), Mauro and Hardison (2002), and the United Nations (2005), who advocated that indigenous people should be involved in the planning and decision making process. The United Nations (1995) stated working with others increases cultural diversity, thus allowing for greater understanding of development issues. It was also evident that the majority of AIAEE members sampled spent less than five years living in foreign countries and taught one or less courses relating to international development, thus possibly lacking their own experiences for understanding what competencies are needed in the international sector. According to Irigoien, et al., (2002) experiences play an important role in the development of competencies, it allows for greater understanding of the issues entry-level employees may face in the field.

As developed countries continue to extend aid (human or financial) to developing countries, the need for properly trained development agents will remain. Picket (1998) suggested identifying competencies provides for organizational growth and assists the organization to meet future demands. Academic courses designed to prepare students for international jobs could contain some aspect of the nine competencies listed in this study.

Schultz (1961) indicated knowledge acquisition is an important form of capital and this knowledge was the key in the development and advancement of western societies. If institutions have a greater understanding of the competencies needed for entry-level employees, industry may reduce employee turnover and foster a stronger company performance (Black and Lynch, 2001; Coleman, 1998; Lepak and Snell, 1999; Picket, 1998; and, Quinn, 1992). This understanding would also benefit the educational sector in the preparation of students for positions in the job market (Becker, 1993). Courses containing components of cultural diversity, conflict management, and communication skills could be advantageous to student development. As the economy becomes more global, enhancing students' understanding of different cultures, conflict management and resolution, and people skills allows students a broader platform when seeking employment and could make them better global citizens.

Based on the findings of the study, perhaps curriculum and course work include conflict management, cultural diversity and work habits. Research conducted by Cooper and Graham (2001), Hassel (2004), Vulpe et al. (2001) and the United Nations (2005) who's research support this idea. Understanding what competencies are needed in the field could help educators design courses that may better prepare students for careers in international settings (Kock, T. and

Weeks, W., 2012). Educational institutions are on the front-line, they educate students who possibly aspire to work internationally. It may be beneficial for academic institutions be proactive and seek to understand competencies needed to facilitate that outcome. Acker and Grieshop (2004) explained it best “we cannot afford to move into the future using only our rear view mirror” (p. 60). This research has highlighted the view looking out the windshield, possibly giving academia a broader picture of the road ahead.

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