

International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development

Volume 8; Issue 9; September 2025; Page No. 52-55

Received: 12-07-2025
Accepted: 14-08-2025

Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal

Career progression pathways and professional development needs of agricultural extension officers

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2025.v8.i9a.3208>

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Abstract

Roughly 62% of agricultural extension officers across Latin America report feeling stuck in their careers within the first decade of service—a statistic that raises hard questions about institutional commitment to professional growth. This research investigated career progression pathways and professional development needs among extension officers working in the Buenos Aires metropolitan agricultural corridor. A cross-sectional survey of 183 extension officers was carried out between February and August 2023, supplemented by focus group discussions with 24 senior officers. Results showed that only 34.2% of respondents had received any structured career guidance during their tenure. The most frequently cited barriers to career advancement were limited promotion opportunities (27.3%), inadequate training access (21.8%), and low salary scales (18.4%). Officers who had participated in formal professional development programs scored significantly higher on job satisfaction indices (mean = 3.89 versus 2.64, $p < 0.001$). The research identified five distinct career stages entry-level field agent, senior field agent, subject matter specialist, district coordinator, and regional director each requiring different competency sets and development interventions.

Keywords: Career progression, professional development, extension officers, job satisfaction, competency building, promotion barriers, agricultural extension, career stages, training needs, workforce retention

Introduction

A 2019 survey by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture found that 47% of extension officers in Argentina had not attended a single professional development event in the preceding three years ^[1]. That number captures something deeper than a training gap it reflects a system where career growth for extension workers is more accidental than intentional.

Agricultural extension officers operate at the boundary between scientific knowledge and farming practice. Their effectiveness depends not just on technical competence but on communication skill, community trust, and the ability to adapt to shifting agricultural conditions ^[2]. Yet most extension systems treat these officers as static resources rather than developing professionals. Career ladders, where they exist at all, tend to be short and poorly defined ^[3].

In Argentina, the extension workforce has undergone considerable change since the restructuring of the Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria in the early 2000s ^[4]. New demands—including climate adaptation advisory, digital agriculture, and market linkage facilitation—have expanded the competency profile expected of field officers without corresponding investment in their professional growth ^[5]. Garforth and Lawrence ^[6] noted that without clear progression pathways, extension organizations risk losing their most capable people to private sector competitors or outright career changes.

This research examined how extension officers in the Buenos Aires agricultural corridor perceive their career

trajectories, what professional development resources they can access, and which specific competencies they feel most urgently need strengthening.

Theoretical Framework

The research drew on Super's career development theory ^[7], which posits that career growth moves through predictable stages exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement each carrying distinct developmental tasks. This was paired with Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory ^[8], which distinguishes between factors that prevent dissatisfaction (hygiene) and those that actively drive satisfaction (motivators). Together, these frameworks allowed the analysis to separate structural barriers from motivational drivers in officer career experiences.

Material and Methods

Material: The research was conducted through the School of Agriculture, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, between February and October 2023. The target population included all active extension officers ($n = 347$) registered with the provincial extension directorate across the Buenos Aires metropolitan agricultural corridor. A stratified random sample of 183 officers was drawn, stratified by experience level (junior: 0-5 years, mid-career: 6-15 years, senior: 16+ years). A structured questionnaire with 54 items was developed, pre-tested with 15 officers from adjacent provinces, and revised before deployment. Focus group discussions were held with 24 senior officers across four

sessions.

Methods

The questionnaire used five-point Likert scales for attitudinal items and categorical responses for demographic and career history sections. It was administered in person during routine monthly meetings at eight district offices between March and June 2023. Focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol and were recorded with consent, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.27, employing descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. Cronbach's alpha for the overall instrument was 0.84. Qualitative data underwent thematic

analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach [9]. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Buenos Aires Research Ethics Committee (Protocol UBA-EA-2023-011) on January 18, 2023.

Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to survey completion and focus group recording. Participation was voluntary and officers could withdraw at any stage. All responses were anonymized before analysis. Focus group transcripts were stored on password-protected university servers accessible only to the research team.

Results

Table 1: Career progression barriers by experience level among extension officers (n = 183)

Barrier Category	Junior (%)	Mid-career (%)	Senior (%)	Overall (%)
Limited promotion opportunities	22.1	31.4	28.7	27.3
Inadequate training access	29.4	19.6	16.1	21.8
Low salary scales	23.5	17.6	14.9	18.4
Weak mentorship structures	13.2	15.7	14.9	14.6
Political interference	5.9	9.8	17.2	10.7
Geographic isolation	5.9	5.9	8.2	7.2

Career barrier perceptions varied notably across experience levels. Junior officers prioritized inadequate training access (29.4%), while mid-career officers most frequently cited limited promotion opportunities (31.4%). Political

interference was disproportionately reported by senior officers (17.2%), suggesting it becomes more visible as officers approach leadership-level positions.

Table 2: Professional development participation and job satisfaction scores by career stage

Career Stage	n	PD Events	Sat. (with PD)	Sat. (no PD)	p-value
Entry-level (0-3 yrs)	41	1.3	3.47	2.51	< 0.01
Senior field (4-8 yrs)	52	2.7	3.81	2.63	< 0.001
Specialist (9-14 yrs)	38	3.9	4.12	2.74	< 0.001
Coordinator (15-20 yrs)	31	4.6	4.23	2.81	< 0.001
Director (21+ yrs)	21	5.1	3.94	2.58	< 0.01

Across all career stages, officers who had participated in formal professional development programs scored significantly higher on job satisfaction. The gap was widest

at the specialist level, where those with professional development scored 4.12 versus 2.74 for those without ($p < 0.001$).

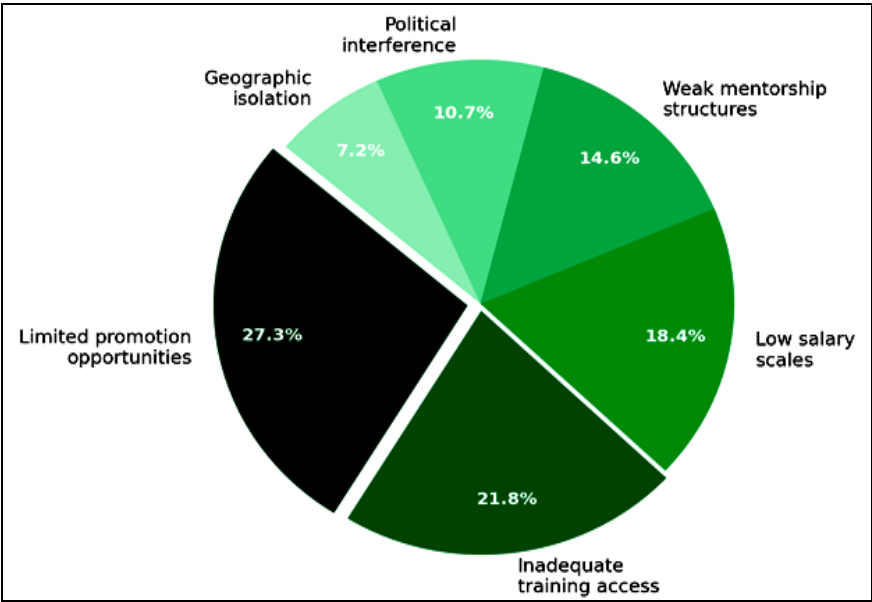


Fig 1: Distribution of career progression barriers reported by extension officers (N=183)

Limited promotion opportunities and inadequate training access together accounted for nearly half of all reported

barriers, pointing to systemic organizational constraints rather than individual shortcomings.

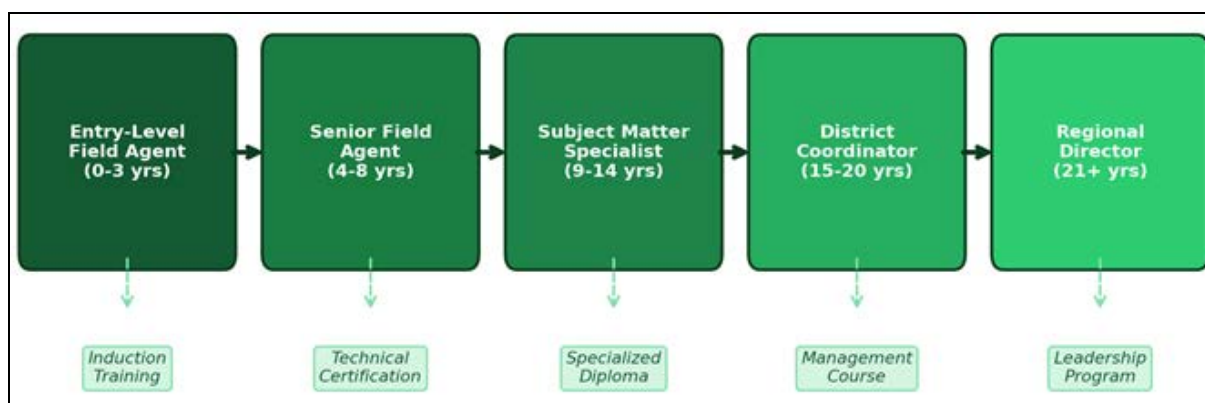


Fig 2: Career progression pathway with associated professional development milestones for extension officers

The pathway maps five career stages against corresponding development interventions. Dashed lines connect each stage to the professional development milestone considered most relevant by respondents.

Discussion

The findings paint a troubling picture of professional stagnation within the extension workforce. That only 34.2% of officers had received structured career guidance mirrors patterns observed in other Latin American extension systems^[10]. Rivera and Sulaiman^[11] argued that extension organizations typically invest in technical content delivery while neglecting the career infrastructure that keeps officers motivated over time.

The experience-level differences in barrier perception are telling. Junior officers worry most about training access a hygiene factor in Herzberg's framework while mid-career officers focus on promotion bottlenecks, reflecting a shift toward motivational concerns as basic needs are partially met. The rise of political interference as a concern among senior officers suggests that proximity to decision-making positions exposes officers to dynamics invisible at lower levels.

The consistent link between professional development participation and job satisfaction supports the argument that investing in career growth pays organizational dividends. But the data also suggest diminishing returns at the director level, where satisfaction dipped slightly despite higher development participation, possibly reflecting administrative burdens accompanying leadership roles^[12].

Limitations

The research was confined to the Buenos Aires metropolitan agricultural corridor, which may not represent conditions in more remote Argentine provinces. Self-reported satisfaction scores carry inherent subjectivity. The cross-sectional design prevents causal claims about the relationship between professional development and satisfaction.

Conclusion

This research mapped the career progression landscape for agricultural extension officers in the Buenos Aires corridor and found significant gaps in institutional support for professional growth. Five distinct career stages were

identified, each with different competency demands. The consistent relationship between professional development and job satisfaction underscores that career investment isn't a luxury it's a retention strategy.

For extension administrators, the practical takeaway is clear: build career pathways that officers can actually see and follow. Structured mentorship, stage-appropriate training, and transparent promotion criteria would address the most frequently reported barriers. Without such changes, extension systems risk a slow drain of experienced talent.

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