Methods

We asked U.S. agricultural-industry communications experts — those who hire and fire communications professionals — what knowledge, experience, and skills graduates need.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to determine the knowledge, experiences, and skills required of an agricultural communications professional according to representatives of the agricultural communications industry.

Objectives

1. Determine the knowledge required of an entry-level agricultural communications professional.
2. Determine the experiences required of an entry-level agricultural communications professional.
3. Determine the skills required of an entry-level agricultural communications professional.
4. Determine naturally occurring categories for the cumulative list of knowledge, experiences, and skills required of an entry-level agricultural communications professional.

Relevance

We know this topic isn’t new. Many researchers have evaluated agricultural communications curriculum offerings and needs. However:

- Agricultural communications curriculum and skills be reassessed every two to five years.
- No recent study used a national population of employers to determine the knowledge, experiences, and skills specific to an entry-level agricultural communications professional.

This study addresses those gaps.

Human Capital Theory

- Suggests humans are valued based on their competencies: knowledge, experience, and skills.
- As a person’s human capital develops, the more likely he or she will become employed.

Footnotes

1 (Simons et al., 2004; Smith, 2010; 232 Guhade & Crowe, 2004; Ramsey, 2006)
2 (Decker and Rideout, 2020)
3 (Fuchs et al., 2018; Heslin, 2017; Heslin & Mauwandy, 2018; Schur, 1991)
4 (Decker, 1994)
5 (Burka and Senn, 1989)
6 (Simons et al., 2004; Smith, 2010; 232 Guhade & Crowe, 2004; Ramsey, 2006)

What does this really mean (and what do we recommend)?

More than half (64 of 109) of the competencies identified by our panel address new or advanced curriculum needs beyond what was found in earlier research.

- The remaining 45 competencies were included in earlier research, but they took a new form in 2018. Specifically, only five of our nine naturally occurring categories mirror categories found in the Terry et al. seminal curriculum study in 1995.
- We attribute this shift primarily to changes in technology. Competencies and categories into which they fall will continue to ebb and flow as technology and the needs of stakeholders continue to change.

Understanding ethics in communications was more important as a knowledge-related competency to our panel than found in previous studies.

- Students today must be equipped with a general understanding of the importance of maintaining ethical standards in agricultural communications.
- Researchers should consider lines of questioning pertaining to ethics.

Have an internship experience was the only experience-related competency identified by our panel.

- University faculty should work to ensure all students complete one or more supervised internships.
- Internships in agricultural communications are a fertile area of inquiry.

The quantity and diversity of skill-related competencies (81 specific skills across nine categories) required of an entry-level agricultural communications professional is daunting.

- We highlight three skills for which our panelists unanimously rated “Strongly Agree” as vitally important: operate Microsoft Word; write well (i.e., without grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors), and portray a professional image on social media.

Although our panelists likely had no prior knowledge of the key career-readiness competencies recommended by the National Association of Career Excellence the skills they identified closely mirror NACE’s findings.

Additional takeaways for faculty

- Faculty within existing undergraduate agricultural communications programs across the United States consider the 109 competencies we found in the development and re-evaluation of their curriculum.
- Faculty should consider how the knowledge, experiences, and skills their programs provide to students will continue to evolve and change.
- New undergraduate agricultural communications programs should use these findings as a guide to develop their curriculum as well as seek assistance from established programs that have implemented these 109 identified knowledge, experience, and skills items.

Footnotes

1. Decker and Rideout, 2020
2. Fuchs et al., 2018
3. Heslin, 2017
4. Heslin & Mauwandy, 2018
5. Schur, 1991
6. Decker, 1994
7. Burka and Senn, 1989
8. Simons et al., 2004; Smith, 2010; 232 Guhade & Crowe, 2004; Ramsey, 2006