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Factors Influencing Job Choice Among Agricultural Economics Professionals

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Introduction

Each year, many agricultural economics graduates enter the job market. Upon graduation, these new professionals choose positions based on their goals, abilities, position availability, and preferences (e.g., opportunities for advancement, location, time for family, salary). Over a career, the set of factors influencing job choice may change, and in many cases, result in a job change among sectors. Information regarding individuals' preferences, current positions, and changes in preferences leading to employment changes, may illuminate relationships between factors influencing the job choices. Existing job choice studies on agricultural economists are limited. Furthermore, most studies are 10 to 25 years old (Cheney 2000; Schneider 1985). Although a few studies have examined working agricultural economics professionals (Marchant and Zepeda 1995; Thilmany 2000), the analyses have been primarily descriptive as opposed to modeling choice behavior.

Objective

The objective of this study is to identify factors influencing the choice between a position in either academia or government. The study includes sample data for both new and seasoned professionals.

Methods

An on-line survey sample consisted of 2,201 agricultural economics professionals employed in academic institutions (1,668) and USDA agencies (543). Summary statistics were computed, and chi-squared tests were used to test for homogeneity of the distributions of responses between men and women and between academic and government professionals. Based on a review of the literature and preliminary analyses of the survey data, a binary probit model was hypothesized as a function of 17 variables:

$Prob[y=academic\ employment] = f(\text{time for child care, partner's job opportunities, availability of workplace role models, supportive colleagues, advancement opportunities, good salary, desirable location, job responsibilities, lack of social isolation, lack of professional isolation, employer's perception of your potential, positive work environment, employer nondiscrimination, health benefits, pension, previously holding a non-gov/acad position, current sector preference})$.

Results

Of surveys sent, 392 (17.8%) were usable: 306 were from academics and 86 were from USDA employees. There were 88 female respondents, and 297 male (7 did not respond). While 351 (89.5%) held PhDs, 41 (10.5%) respondents held MA or MS degrees.

Overall, the top three most important job attributes were *job responsibilities*, *a positive work environment*, and *a good salary*. Men valued better health benefits and pension plans significantly ($\alpha=0.05$) more than women, and women valued supportive colleagues, employer nondiscrimination and partner's opportunities significantly more than men (figure 1). Government professionals valued good salaries, health benefits, and social interaction significantly more than academics (figure 2).

Results

The final job choice model consisted of 6 variables, represented by 7 parameters, of which 4 variables were significant ($\alpha=0.02$) (table 1).

$Prob[y=academic\ employment] = f(\text{current sector preference, previously holding a non-gov/acad position, advancement opportunities, good salary, desirable location, positive work environment})$

The coefficient estimates of government preference and academic preference were highly significant ($\alpha=0.01$) and had the first and second largest marginal effects, respectively, implying that personal preferences are of highest importance to the choice between government and academic positions. Of the 5 job attribute variables, the marginal effect of positive work environment had the greatest magnitude (-0.1386), indicating that those who highly valued workplace atmosphere were more likely to choose a government position. Advancement opportunities had the second greatest magnitude of these 5 (0.1232) and indicated that placing high value on advancement opportunities significantly increased the probability of being employed in an academic setting.

Conclusions

Results from this study may give employers valuable insight into enhancing workplace policies, benefits, or environment to attracting candidates or decreasing employee turnover. For example, positions in locations with fewer employment opportunities for significant others may be difficult to fill with female agricultural economics professionals. Conversely, workplaces with good reputations for supportive and nondiscriminatory cultures may be more attractive to women than men. The wisdom for job-seeking agricultural economics professionals, especially MS level graduates, currently in non-government/non-academic sectors is that government positions may be better fits than academic positions.

Three conclusions can be drawn from the model: job choice is based heavily on personal sector preference; highly valuing a positive workplace or previously working outside of academic/government sectors increases the likelihood of being employed in government; highly valuing advancement opportunities increases the likelihood of being in academia.

As with all research based on sampling, non-response bias is a concern and the results must be interpreted with that caveat. Some results, particularly those related to government professionals, should be reviewed with caution given the small sample size. Future research on job choice should aim to include agricultural economics professionals working in non-government, non-academic positions to create a clearer and broader interpretation of the job choice decision for agricultural economics professionals in all sectors.

Literature Cited

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Table 1. Probit Parameter Estimates and Marginal Effects

Modeling Prob[$y=academic$]		Coef. Estimates		Marginal Effects	
Variable	Level	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Constant		0.8372 ^a	0.2324		
Sector Preference	academic	1.2448 ^a	0.2688	0.3036 ^a	0.0721
Sector Preference	government	-2.4392 ^a	0.3574	-0.7406 ^a	0.0967
Previous Non-Gov/Acad Position	yes	-0.6926 ^b	0.2720	-0.1714 ^c	0.0811
Advancement Opportunities	very important	0.7283 ^b	0.3090	0.1232 ^a	0.0465
Good Salary	very important	-0.4766	0.3039	-0.1018	0.0715
Location	very important	0.3165	0.2522	0.0570	0.0436
Positive Work Environment	perfect match	-0.6527 ^b	0.2671	-0.1386 ^c	0.0619

^asignificant at $\alpha=0.01$; ^bsignificant at $\alpha=0.02$; ^csignificant at $\alpha=0.05$

N = 374

