



## Building Your Extension Career: Strategies and Tips for Early Career Success

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### Introduction

A career in Extension offers a diverse and rewarding opportunity to make a difference in your community. This publication is based on a webinar with experienced Extension professionals who shared insights, tips, and encouragement for building a successful career in Extension. The information below is derived from that conversation and is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather a starting point for defining your strategies for success as you embark on your career. Finding your place in the diverse world of Extension takes time, relationships, conversations, and self-honesty. You have a network of colleagues cheering for your success!

### Building Relationships

As a new agent, the best place to start is by building relationships within your office and community. Get to know your co-workers; what their work entails, what they like to do when they're not working, and how they like to communicate. Eating lunch together in a breakroom or sharing in unit meetings is a great way to begin building those relationships.

Ask your co-workers to introduce you to key community influencers, including local government officials. Depending on your subject area, other important people to meet include volunteers, Extension Leadership Council members, producers, community organization leaders, school leaders, and other local leaders. Take or create opportunities to "shadow" other agents, especially those in your programming area.



Figure 1: AI-generated photograph of two people talking in an Extension office.

Relationships take time to build, and if you approach your community and coworkers with a curious, open mind, you'll find that most people will be happy to meet with you and discuss their work or community.

### Hot Tips

- Building relationships helps create a sense of belonging in the community and in Extension.
- Get involved in professional associations.

## Managing your Workload

Set realistic expectations for your workload. It takes time to develop strong relationships and strong programming, so don't compare yourself to more tenured agents. Your district director and mentor(s) can help you create a realistic plan of work for the first year of employment with Extension. It's expected that you will need help navigating various situations as an agent, so ask for help when you need it.

Remember, it's okay to say no. You should not be working every weekend and evening. Say yes to opportunities that align with your plan of work and goals. Focus on relationships that may lead to future collaborations or partnerships. Cultivate a strong volunteer base to extend your programmatic reach and impact.

### Hot tips

- Schedule an extra day after a vacation to catch up on email.
- When someone asks for your time, you don't have to answer them immediately. Give yourself time to process a request and determine whether it aligns with your programmatic priorities.
- Consider virtual programming when appropriate to balance your workload.

## Strategies for Tracking Promotion Progress

Extension agents typically have five years to be promoted. The promotion process requires documentation of your work, so take the time to set up a process that works for you. Read the promotion dossier guidelines so you know what to track and how to track it.

Some agents will need to complete their master's degree to be eligible for promotion. Be sure to start your degree early so that you have time to complete it, and your course load is manageable while working. Reach out to your academic advisor or academic program leader to strategize a plan that best suits you.

### Hot tips

- Set aside time every month to document your work.
- Attend district or state planning & reporting training to determine what and how you need to document your work.
- Start planning for additional educational requirements early in your career.

## Balancing Work, Family, and Life

As with any job, it can be challenging to balance your work, family, and life. Schedule well in advance for vacation and annual leave days around important life events to prevent conflicts and ensure programs are covered. Anticipate busy times of the year and utilize professional scheduling to balance long days and weeks, thereby preventing burnout.

### Hot tips

- Professional development is a crucial component of building your Extension program and advancing your career. Make it a goal to learn one new thing every year. This will help you select which professional development opportunities to attend, ensuring you do not get overwhelmed by the options.
- Take note of holiday weekends and consider taking additional leave to maximize your time off.
- Include your family in events when it's appropriate.

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