



Understanding the Work-Life Balance in Extension

Carmen Lechtenberg, Zone 2 Director

For most of us who grew up in the Bread Basket of America have been taught from a young age to have a strong work ethic. We hear it in phrases like “you work until the job is done” or “find a job you love and you will never work a day in your life”.

The Mirriam-Webster dictionary defines work ethic as a belief in work as a moral good: a set of values centered on the importance of doing work and reflected especially in a desire or determination to work hard.

The work ethic of the Bread Basket actually makes us very marketable to companies in bigger cities and on either coast. But as many people find as we get older, we can spend so much time working at our paid jobs that we may lose sight of taking time for ourselves and our families.

I remember getting my first job out of college. When I was hired, I was given a salary that was actually based on a 50-hour work week. Growing up on a farm, I knew a 50-hour work week was nothing so I didn’t even flinch. I loved this job! I didn’t care that I worked nights, weekends, and at certain times of the year, I literally worked 24/7 at my job. I didn’t care that I ate my lunch at my desk everyday while I worked. When I got married and had kids, my night-time babysitter saw my kids as much as I did. Now you are probably wondering what kind of job I had that required so much of my time. It was being an Ag & Natural Resource Extension Educator in a small county of Kansas.

So why am I telling you all of this? Because as Extension Board Members, we need to recognize and support our staff. We need to make sure we understand that the individuals we employ in our county, district and state offices are just as dedicated to their jobs. Jobs that require scheduling meetings outside of “normal business hours” to reach their target audiences who also work. Jobs that require you to work 24/7 when you take kids to 4-H camp or on a Citizen Washington Focus trip. Jobs that require you to work on weekends so you can train childcare providers so they get their continued education hours to keep licenses.

As an educator and now as a board member, I have heard people complain that when they call the Extension Office, "So-and-so is never in the office". And they are probably fairly correct in that assessment. Our educators today are not limited to the one county they office in. They are part of teams that cover 2-6 counties, sometimes even the state. They travel to provide educational meetings because their specialty is animal science. They do cooperative research trials with the NRCS or the NRD to study nitrate levels in the water supply of communities. They travel from one end of the state to the other training county officials as part of the NACO team.

When we hear these comments, we need to respond with positive reinforcement about why our educators are not in their office 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Help the individual understand the business of Extension today. Encourage our stakeholders to leave a message or email the educator so they can respond when they get back into the office.

Another comment I have heard is that an educator is doing personal business during office hours. This addresses a concept known as flex time. Most of our constituents understand overtime and comp time. In the business industry, when an employee works more than 40 hours a week, they are paid time and a half or given an hour and a half extra leave to compensate of the overtime. However, in the world of Extension, budget constraints often do not allow for this form of compensation. Instead, Extension Educators and sometimes even staff are offered flex time. Flex time is when the individual is allowed to fluctuate their schedule to compensate for night and weekend events. This does not mean they use an hour for hour equivalent. They simply can take the time they need when they have worked nights or weekends to get personal stuff done like doctor's appointments or spending an extra hour at home to get caught up without having to use vacation time. Flex time recognizes that the employee is working hard above and beyond the 40-hour work week and so allows some flexibility of schedule.

As board members, we know from our Educators reports at board meetings how busy they have been. If somebody questions a schedule, we should again use positive reinforcement that our Educators and staff often work outside of regular office hours so they have the flexibility of schedule to do what they need to do.

Finally, we need to encourage our Educators and staff to use their vacation and flex time. Let them know we value their hard work and dedication, but we also want them to spend the time with their spouses and children like we do. Allow them to not only be the Extension Educator but also the 4-H parent at the county fair, club meeting or shooting sports practice. Help these individuals with strong work ethics know that we do not expect them to live in the office and visit their homes on occasion nor do we want that for them. Help them to understand that although we appreciate them getting up early to work on programs or logging back into their computers after they put the kids to bed, we also want them to walk away from the work. Promote a healthy work-life balance in our staff so we can maintain long working relationships instead of seeing them burnout and leave.

NACEB Director Spotlight: Ryan Ridenour

Ryan Ridenour has been a NACEB director representing Zone 2 since 2018 and a member of the Central Sandhills County Extension Board since 2015, and served two terms as the board president. Central Sandhills is made up of four counties Blaine, Thomas, Hooker, and Grant in the north central part of the state.

Ryan is a fifth-generation rancher in Cherry County and a partner with his brother on his grandfather's ranch that is just a few miles from his great-great grandfather's homestead along the North Loup River. His wife Shelby is an environmental biologist for Olsson an engineering consulting firm and they have a very strong willed three-year-old daughter Anna, who has him wrapped around her finger already.

My Extension Story:

The earliest memory of extension I have is watching my older sisters and brother along with some neighbor kids paint fifty-five-gallon drums for trash cans in the yard at the ranch as a 4-H project. Our ranch is located in Cherry County but we are in the Mullen School District with the school in Mullen located in Hooker County, so we did all our 4-H through the Central Sandhills.

You would think as cattlemen we would grow up showing livestock at the county fair, but due to a bad experience with a stocker calf and a shoulder injury my dad didn't have the desire for it by the time I got into 4-H. I did get to show a bucket calf once, Helen was an orphan by choice and her wild mom jumped four fences to get out of the corral system so she became my summer project. I still remember the judge looking at me and saying "usually bucket calf is for younger kids," yes, I was in junior high but I knew it was my only chance to get in the ring. I showed chickens, turkeys, Guinea fowl and once a cat but always wanted to show cattle. My daughter better get over her fear of cows because she is going to get a heavy dose of showing cattle in the future!

I spent a lot of my summers attending 4-H camps at the Halsey National Forrest and made many friends and had probably way too much fun. I became a counselor when I was in high school and spent almost the whole month of June there with different camps. While in college I actually worked a summer as staff at the camp. I was on a class through UNK and stopped to do the ropes course and climbing wall at the camp. The camp director didn't have to sell me too hard on returning and spending the summer there, at the time I was majoring in park and recreation management; plus the hayfield wasn't looking like that much fun. I was the only male staff member working at the camp that summer so I was assigned to the river many days, mainly when it came to loading and unloading canoes and singing very loudly on the bus trips back to the camp. The camp director also knew that heights wasn't my thing and I scared the kids more than helping them on the climbing and repelling wall. Those were very memorable days and I still don't know how I could remember names so well then and not even have a chance with them now.

After college I had the opportunity to return to Mullen and begin ranching with my older brother on the family ranch. This is when I learned that Nebraska Extension has so much more to offer than just 4-H. I started attending the open houses at the Gudmensun Research Center and reading the

vast amount of information put out in newsletters about different ranching philosophies and studies done through the University. When I was asked to join the Central Sandhills board and gladly accepted, the vastness of what is available through extension still amazed me. Now that I have been involved in NACEB I feel a greater responsibility of teaching and showing others how vital Nebraska Extension is in the Sandhills and across the state. Extension can be utilized by more people across Nebraska than currently is and hopefully with our commitments we can help bring Nebraska Extension to everyone.