How millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States

by

Katie Brenny

B.S., University of Wisconsin – River Falls, 2009
M.S., Iowa State University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Education
College of Educational Leadership

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2025

Abstract

Millennial career decisions in agronomy retail reflect a dynamic mix of developmental, motivational, and contextual factors. This study investigates why millennials in the Midwest are leaving careers in this sector, focusing on how personal values, life stages, and workplace practices shape professional satisfaction and transitions. As rural agribusinesses face challenges in retaining younger talent, understanding these decisions is vital for sustaining the agricultural workforce. Grounded in Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the research combines developmental and psychological lenses to frame millennial career behavior. The study uses a qualitative design, with purposive sampling of 12 former agronomy retail employees in the Midwest. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, concept maps, and analytic memos, then analyzed using an *a priori* coding strategy informed by existing literature. Findings reveal that work-life balance, limited growth, misaligned culture, and shifting personal priorities drove participants' exits from the sector. These insights challenge assumptions about generational loyalty in rural industries and underscore the need for agronomy retail to evolve alongside workforce expectations. This study contributes to theory and practice by clarifying how identity, motivation, and environment intersect in career decisions, laying the groundwork for more responsive and sustainable retention strategies in agriculture.

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Major Professor
Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki

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Dedication

To my daughter, Ivy Lee, whose light and joy inspire me every day to keep striving for more. May this work remind you that with perseverance and love, anything is possible.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Agronomy retail plays a vital role in supporting farmers and ranchers while navigating the challenges of workforce retention and evolving career motivations. Agriculture, which produces food, fiber, and fuel essential to daily life (American Farm Bureau Federation, n.d.), relies heavily on agronomy retail businesses and agriculture cooperatives to provide the products, services, and expertise needed to sustain productive farming operations, particularly in rural areas. These businesses act as the link between agricultural innovation and the practical application of new tools and practices on the farm. As a key sector within agriculture cooperatives, agronomy retail supplies crop essentials, including seeds, fertilizers, crop protection products, and precision agriculture tools, while also offering agronomic expertise such as field scouting, soil analysis, and crop management recommendations to help farmers enhance productivity and sustainability (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). These inputs and services are essential to ensuring crop health, managing pests and disease, and adapting to variable weather and environmental conditions.

Beyond product distribution, agronomy retailers provide tailor recommendations and ongoing consultation to producers, developing close relationships with their customers built on trust, performance, and local knowledge. These cooperatives serve as vital hubs where farmers and ranchers access the tools and guidance necessary to optimize their operations (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). The cooperative model also allows producers to benefit from shared ownership and profits, fostering a sense of community investment and long-term stability.

However, the agronomy retail sector faces significant challenges in retaining workers, as demographic shifts and evolving career motivations have affected workforce stability (Adrian & Green, 2001a). The departure of experienced employees and difficulty in attracting and retaining

younger workers have disrupted continuity in customer relationships and threatened the transfer of institutional knowledge. These labor shortages "not have only placed" increased pressure on remaining employees but also have threatened the long-term viability of rural agronomy support systems critical to the nation's food production infrastructure (J. Vogel, 2019).

The Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1980), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b) provide a framework for examining workforce issues and understanding career decisions across different life stages. By investigating how these theories apply to millennial workers leaving agronomy retail, the research seeks to uncover reasons contributing to employee turnover and identify strategies for retention. This research highlights the intersection of rural agriculture, cooperative business structures, and the career motivations of millennial workers, aiming to provide insights that can strengthen workforce sustainability and the future of agronomy retail.

Background

Recently, there has been a noticeable trend of millennials leaving their careers in agronomy retail, creating a pressing need to understand the underlying causes and develop practical solutions (Brenny & Yelich-Biniecki, 2024). Employee turnover in this sector threatens workforce stability, which is essential for ensuring farmers have reliable partners to support them in making informed decisions about raising crops, adopting new technologies, and managing their operations efficiently (Lund & Tan, 2020; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2022; Warner, 2019). Addressing this issue is critical for the leadership of agronomy retail, as continued workforce attrition could jeopardize the continuity and effectiveness of farmer-agronomist relationships, ultimately impacting rural agricultural productivity and

sustainability (Adrian & Green, 2001b; Brown et al., 2013a; International Cooperative Alliance, n.d.; Irwin et al., 2010; USDA Rural Development, 2022a).

The United States agriculture industry is also experiencing a broader workforce shortage due to an aging labor force, with the average worker age at 60 and a decline in new entrants (Morris Bixby, 2021). Several reasons contribute to this issue, including a lack of interest in labor-intensive jobs, as many Americans are unwilling to take on physically demanding roles like planting, harvesting, and working with livestock (USDA, 2022). Additionally, the decline in immigrant labor has worsened the problem, reducing the availability of workers in critical agricultural positions. Financial constraints also play a significant role, with student loan debt leading agricultural graduates to seek higher-paying jobs, leaving essential lower-level positions unfilled. Furthermore, high initial investment costs, including land, equipment, wages, and technology, as well as volatile commodity prices, unpredictable weather, and work-life balance concerns, discourage younger generations from entering the industry. Despite these challenges, agriculture remains vital to the economy, employing over 2.3 million people and contributing significantly to the nation's GDP. Addressing these workforce shortages is crucial to maintaining the strength and sustainability of the industry (Morris Bixby, 2021).

This research is urgently needed because agriculture faces mounting challenges, including feeding a growing global population, adapting to climate change, and navigating advancements in agricultural technology (Carlisle et al., 2019b; Griffin et al., 2019). These challenges require a stable and skilled workforce to ensure agronomy retail businesses can continue to support farmers effectively. The departure of millennials from these roles threatens both the continuity of knowledge and expertise within the industry and the potential for innovation and growth (Brenny & Yelich-Biniecki, 2024). Without understanding and addressing

the root causes of this workforce turnover, the agronomy retail sector risks disruptions in the supply chain and a diminished capacity to meet global demands for food, fiber, and fuel (Murphy, 2011). By identifying solutions to retain millennials, this research can help ensure the long-term sustainability of the agronomy retail sector and the broader agriculture industry.

Rural Agriculture

Agriculture is often the primary business in rural areas (National Geographic Society, n.d.). Rural agriculture encompasses the production of food, fiber, and fuel through farming and livestock raising in non-urban regions (American Farm Bureau Federation, n.d.). It serves as the backbone of food production, involving the planting and harvesting of crops like corn and soybeans and caring for livestock such as cattle, sheep, and swine. Geography, climate, cultural practices, and government regulations influence the methods and timing of agricultural production. Farmers and ranchers, who make up less than 2% of the United States population, are responsible for producing the food and resources that sustain communities domestically and globally (American Farm Bureau Federation, n.d.). In rural communities, agriculture accounts for nearly 17% of employment and is a significant employer, further reinforcing its economic importance (Center for American Progress, n.d.).

The United States has approximately 1.9 million farms, an average of 463 acres (National Agriculture Statistics Services, 2024). The nation's economy is strongly supported by top agricultural products such as cattle, corn, and soybeans, which serve as major contributors to overall growth. A single farmer or rancher produces enough food to feed an estimated 166 people, highlighting the critical role of rural agriculture in meeting global food demands (American Farm Bureau Federation, n.d.). As the world population rises, agricultural production must increase by over 70% to sustain future food availability. As defined by the USDA, rural

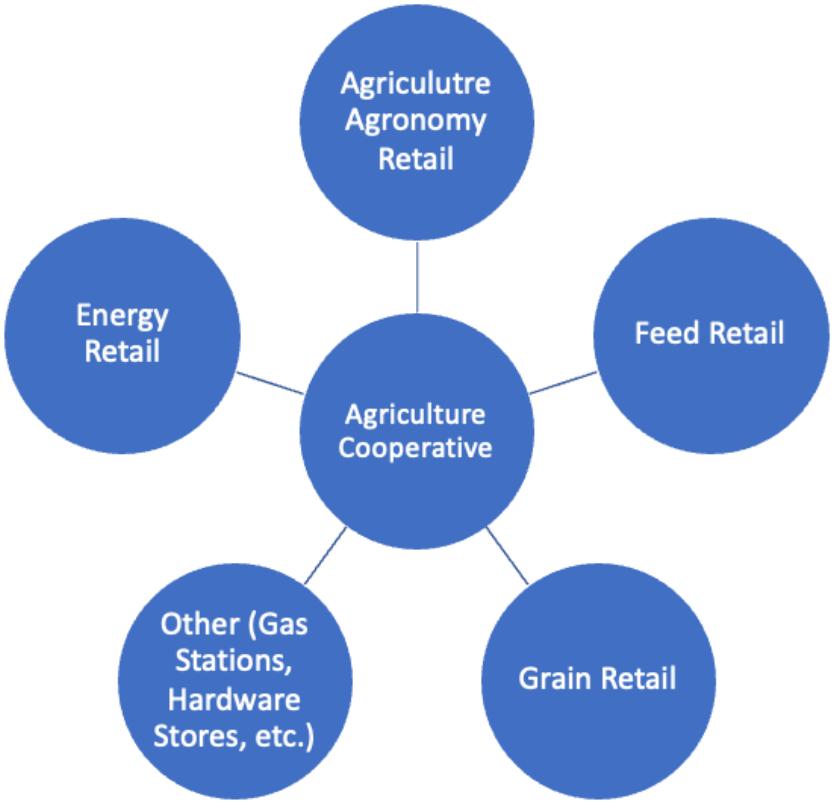
areas have fewer than 2,000 housing units and populations under 5,000 people, making agriculture the dominant industry in these regions (USDA Economic Research Service, 2025).

Agronomy Retailers

Agronomy retail is vital in supporting farmers in rural areas, serving as a critical component of agriculture cooperatives. The shared goal of rural agronomy retail is to ensure food production and provide essential consumer goods. These retailers specialize in agronomy for crop farmers, offering products, services, and expertise to optimize crop production. According to the American Society of Agronomy (n.d.), "Agronomy looks at agriculture from an integrated, holistic perspective. Agronomists are specialists in crop and soil science…" (para. 1). Agronomy teams within these retailers assist farmers by advising on nutrient application, fertilizer use, and crop protection strategies. Their responsibilities extend to monitoring crop growth, managing pests and weeds, and ensuring efficient and profitable harvests through science-based recommendations (American Society of Agronomy, n.d.).

Collaboration is key within agronomy retail, as various roles work together to share knowledge and provide comprehensive support to farmers Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). These roles include agronomy managers, sales agronomists, digital specialists, and applicators, all of which work together and serve as consultants to the farmer, ensuring they receive expert guidance to maximize productivity. Agronomy managers oversee operations and report to a general manager and a board of directors, leading teams that include sales agronomists, digital specialists, applicators, and operational staff (Agriculture Retailer Association, n.d.). Together, these roles form a network of expertise that enhances agricultural efficiency and sustainability. Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation to show the basic layout of an agriculture cooperative and where agronomy retail fits within the structure.

Figure 1.1. Visual of a Basic Layout and Structure of an Agriculture Cooperative



Note. As the researcher, I developed this visual to assist with the definition of an agriculture cooperative and how agronomy retail fits into the business.

Retention of Workers

In today's workforce, five generations work side by side (Shaw, 2023a). A generation is "a group of people with some experience, belief, attitude, etc. in common" (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 29). Individuals are grouped by birth year (Urick et al., 2017), social identity, and the impact of events on their lives (Mannheim, 1952). As generational dynamics shift within the workforce, organizations must understand what job satisfaction means to each generation as each group approaches the work environment differently. Each generation's unique characteristics shape their standards for job satisfaction (Johnson, 2020). For instance, the baby boomer

generation (with an approximate age range of 65 to 82 years old) is in the process of retiring from the full-time workforce, while Generation X leaders, known for a less formal approach, are taking on leadership roles (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Millennials, who prefer team-based work and meaningful projects (Kaifi et al., 2012), are projected to make up 75% of the workforce by 2030 (Ngotngamwong, 2020). When employees, regardless of generation, are not achieving job satisfaction, they often seek positions that promise fulfillment. In rural areas, labor is shifting from baby boomers to millennials, who now represent the largest and most diverse generation in the workforce (Fry, 2018).

Millennials in Agriculture and the Leadership Gap

The United States agriculture sector faces a significant leadership talent shortage, primarily due to an aging workforce and a lack of qualified successors (Morris Bixby, 2021; Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). This gap threatens the industry's future productivity and innovation. Millennials, often defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1994, bring unique characteristics and challenges to the workforce (Twenge, 2023), particularly in sectors like agriculture, agronomy, and retail. Smith and Nichols (2015) note that millennials are characterized by their closeness to the new millennium and their expertise in the digital age (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Although generational work is sometimes criticized for over-generalization, millennials are the first generation to integrate digital technology into all aspects of their lives (J. Vogel, 2019). They are open to change, seeking challenges, and value collaboration (Shaw, 2023a). Understanding how to effectively engage millennials in rural communities, particularly within agronomy retail, presents a unique challenge (Lee, 2020).

Organizations like Vivayic (n.d.) are developing tailored training and educational programs to address the leadership gap in agriculture and cultivate new leaders. Their initiatives

focus on enhancing performance, amplifying impact, and improving education within the agricultural sector. By investing in leadership development, agronomy retail businesses can better prepare millennials to transition into key roles, ensuring the industry's sustainability and continued growth.

Problem Statement

Baby Boomers are retiring in agronomy retail (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.), leading to a significant workforce drain in leadership roles. The agronomy retail sector is experiencing a major demographic shift, with an increasing need for younger workers to step into leadership positions. As the current workforce ages and retires, this creates a leadership vacuum that younger generations must fill to ensure the industry's sustainability. However, a concerning trend has emerged that millennials are leaving the field of agronomy retail. According to a 2021 Farm Journal labor survey, 91% of agronomy retailers reported finding it harder to fill positions, indicating a substantial workforce shortage in the sector (Farm Journal, 2021). This exodus of younger professionals exacerbates the leadership gap, posing challenges for the future of agronomy retail.

Misconceptions about agricultural careers further contribute to this workforce shortage. A nationally representative survey conducted by Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), on behalf of Land O'Lakes, Inc. (2016) revealed a startling lack of young people planning to work in agriculture. Only 3% of college graduates and 9% of millennials surveyed have or would consider a career in agriculture, making it the least attractive industry compared to healthcare and technology (21%), education (20%), and marketing, sales, finance, manufacturing, and engineering (each at 12%) (Land O'Lakes, Inc., 2016). These findings highlight a significant challenge in attracting younger generations to the field. Despite this, the USDA reports over

20,000 agriculture jobs go unfilled each year, contradicting the perception that it is difficult to secure employment in agriculture. "We will need to produce more food in the next 40 or 50 years than in the previous 500 years combined," said Lydia Botham, executive director of the Land O'Lakes Foundation. "Our priorities are clear – we must focus on attracting the next generation of Ag workers to the highly skilled, well-paid career opportunities. Failing to do so may lead to severe consequences" (Land O'Lakes, Inc., 2016).

According to the Land O'Lakes survey, 76% of respondents do not think or are unsure if agricultural careers pay well, with this misperception being particularly prevalent in the Northeast (85%) and the West (82%), compared to 71% in the Midwest and South. However, 35% of millennials, significantly more than any other generation, believe agriculture careers pay well, compared to 21% of generation X and 17% of baby boomers. This optimism among millennials presents an opportunity to reshape perceptions and attract more young professionals to the field (Land O'Lakes, Inc., 2016). "People still think you have to wear boots and overalls to work in ag," said Botham. "But modern agriculture has evolved to become one of the most vital and technologically advanced fields there is today. And the career choices are as dynamic as the industry itself from seed geneticists and soil conservationists to supply chain analysts and economists" (Land O'Lakes, Inc., 2016).

The agriculture industry has been and will continue to see high turnover in millennials, which costs time and money to agronomy retailers (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). There is limited research investigating why millennials are leaving the agriculture industry. Super's (1953) theory of life stage development has also not been used to understand their decision-making process when choosing to leave their careers in agronomy retail. There remains

a lack of empirical research on the millennial workforce drain and its impact on the agronomy retail industry.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the decision-making process of why millennials in the Midwest region of the United States choose to leave their careers in agronomy retail.

Research Question

How do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States?

Theoretical Framework

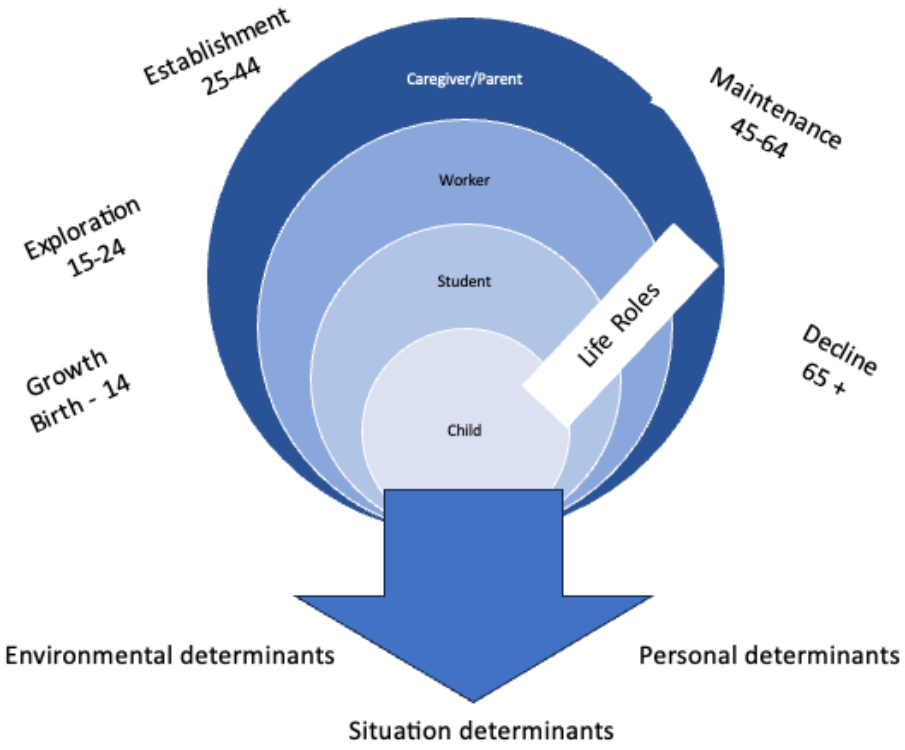
The Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) provided a framework for examining workforce issues and understanding career decisions across different life stages. By applying these theories to the millennial workforce in agronomy retail, the study explored the intersection of rural agriculture, cooperative business models, and generational career motivations. This analysis connected findings to existing literature and industry trends, offering valuable insights into workforce sustainability and the future of agronomy retail.

Super's Life-Span Life-Space Career Theory

Donald Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (1953) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals develop and make career decisions across their lifetime. Introduced in 1953 and further expanded in 1980, the theory emphasizes that career development is a lifelong process shaped by a person's self-concept and life roles. Super identified five major life stages: (a) growth, (b) exploration, (c) establishment, (d) maintenance,

and (e) disengagement, each associated with specific developmental tasks and career goals. He also introduced the concept of life roles (e.g., student, worker, parent, citizen) across various "life spaces," recognizing that career decisions are influenced by the interplay of personal experiences, social contexts, and evolving identities. For the purpose of this study, Figure 1.2 consolidates key elements of Super's theories into a single explanatory model. This theory is particularly relevant when examining career transitions, as it helps explain how individuals like millennials reassess their work identities and goals in light of changing values, roles, and life circumstances.

Figure 1.2. Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Adopted from Super, 1980)



Note. As the researcher, I developed this figure and included categories and indicators to examine how Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), looks visually across the different stages of life by adopting Super's (1980) Life Career Rainbow and Life-Span, Life-Space Theory of Career Theory (Super, 1953).The black box is the age range of millennials in the purpose of this study.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000a), explains human motivation through three core psychological needs: (a) autonomy, (b) competence, and (c) relatedness. These intrinsic motivators were key to understanding millennial career choices, as they prioritized personal growth and meaningful work over external rewards like job stability or salary (Bateman, 2014; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In agronomy retail, recognizing and addressing these needs is essential for fostering employee engagement and retention.

Deci and Ryan (2000a) define autonomy as the desire for control over one's work, a factor that was particularly important to millennials, who seek independence and ownership in their roles. Competence drives millennials to pursue learning opportunities and skill development, ensuring they feel capable and effective in their careers (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Relatedness, the need for meaningful connections, encourages millennials to value collaboration and a sense of belonging in the workplace (A. Brown & Smith, 2017). Aligning workplace practices with these psychological drivers enhances job satisfaction and long-term workforce stability in agronomy retail.

By emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) provides valuable insight into millennial career decision-making. Understanding these motivators allows agronomy retail employers to create work environments that are aligned with millennial values, ultimately improving job satisfaction and retention in this critical workforce segment.

Theories Working Together

The Life-Span, Life-Space Career Development Theory (Super, 1953) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) work together to offer a clear lens through which to view the reasons why millennials may choose to leave careers in agronomy retail. As millennials reach the establishment stage in Super's (1953) model, they seek stability, skill development, and growth (Super, 1980). Self-Determination Theory further explains their emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, reflecting a desire for control, meaningful work, and strong workplace connections. By understanding these combined influences, organizations in agronomy retail may choose to design environments that meet millennials' intrinsic needs, potentially enhancing retention and job satisifcation.

Research Design

This study used a basic qualitative research design, a widely recognized methodology in adult education and social sciences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative study was suited for the research as it sought to explore how individuals constructed meaning from their experiences and interpreted their world through personal perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach aligns well with the purpose of the study, which aims to understand how millennials who left careers in agronomy retail described their decision-making process and career transitions.

This design is particularly useful as the goal was not to generate theories (as in grounded theory) or deeply explore cultural contexts (as in ethnography) but rather to describe, interpret, and apply findings to real-world settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It enabled the researcher to identify themes, patterns, and attributes among a population, providing insights that could be practically applied within agronomy retail to improve workforce retention strategies.

Additionally, this design was participant-centered, allowing individuals to articulate their experiences in their own words, leading to a richer understanding of why millennials left the field and how their experiences shaped their career choices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants

Participants were self-identifying millennials from the Midwest who had left roles in agronomy retail within the agriculture cooperative, including positions such as agronomy sales managers, sales agronomists, or digital specialists. Due to the small sample size and the millennial age range, there was no limit on time since leaving these roles. A purposeful sampling approach was used to identify potential participants, with snowball sampling employed to locate additional participants due to the small population available for selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study included 12 participants, aligning with purposive sampling principles to ensure rich, in-depth insights (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Guest et al., 2006). The participant range was appropriate for reaching data saturation, where no new themes emerged (Hennink et al., 2017). Participants were contacted via phone calls, with future communication managed through emails. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Data Collection

Data was collected in this basic qualitative study through semi-structured interviews, and researcher journal notes. See Figure 1.3 for the process of data collection. These tools allow for reliable and credible data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were recorded using virtual video conferencing tools, which offered time efficiency and digital recording capabilities (Levitt et al., 2017).

The digital transcriptions were reviewed by playing back audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Notes were taken to begin *a priori* coding and identify themes. After each interview, the researcher completed journal entries and concept maps, then sent a member check summary to each participant to verify the interview's interpretation.

Figure 1.3. How Data was Collected and Analyzed

Data Analysis

Managing qualitative data requires selecting methods and tools aligned with the research objectives and data type (Bazeley, 2021). Data were systematically organized and analyzed to uncover patterns and insights that addressed the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This process involved interpreting beyond surface-level observations to reveal deeper meanings and relationships (Creswell, 2013).

This study employed deductive analysis, a structured, theory-driven approach that organizes data into predefined categories based on established theories (Fife & Gossner, 2024; Gilgun, 2019). By using *a priori* coding and a systematic framework, deductive analysis tested and refined the researcher's existing theories while ensuring findings remained aligned with theoretical constructs. This approach enhanced reliability and minimized bias by maintaining a structured process for data interpretation (Casula et al., 2020; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Comparing millennials who left agronomy retail with the broader generational career trends allowed the researcher to assess how well-established theories explained career decision-making

in this sector. The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and then verified for accuracy. I first developed handwritten concept maps and subsequently created digital versions, which facilitated the coding process from codes to categories to themes. Additionally, insights from my researcher's journal further contributed to identifying and validating the emerging themes in this study.

Acritical intelligence (AI) tools were incorporated responsibly in this research, serving only as aids for enhancing clarity, organization, and readability. The core ideas, interpretations, and conclusions presented remain entirely those of the researcher. The use of AI supported the refinement process while ensuring that the authentic voice and perspective of the researcher were preserved throughout the dissertation.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that could have influenced the depth, transferability, and overall interpretation of its findings. First, the use of a small, purposively selected sample of former agronomy retail employees in the Midwest inherently limited the study's breadth. Although purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative inquiry focused on lived experiences, the small sample size restricts the extent to which findings can be generalized to broader populations, including other age groups, regions, or sectors of agriculture. The unique socioeconomic and cultural context of the Midwest, where agriculture is a dominant industry, may also differ significantly from other U.S. regions, further narrowing the applicability of the study's results to other contexts.

Second, participant recall bias presented a potential limitation to data accuracy. Since participants were asked to reflect on their personal experiences and decision-making processes surrounding their departure from agronomy retail, some memories may have been incomplete,

selectively remembered, or reinterpreted over time. Emotional distance from the events discussed could have either diluted or exaggerated the factors participants believed influenced their decisions.

Third, data collection via virtual interviews may have impacted the quality of dialogue and the ability to build strong rapport. Although digital platforms allow for greater flexibility and access to participants across a wide geographic area, they may have limited the researcher's ability to observe nonverbal cues or foster the level of interpersonal trust sometimes achieved during in-person interviews. Technical issues, distractions, or the lack of physical presence could also have constrained the richness of participant responses.

Finally, my positionality of the researcher, being a millennial with a professional background in agronomy retail posed a potential source of unintended bias. While this insider status provided valuable contextual understanding and may have encouraged openness among participants, it also carried the risk of interpretive bias. Despite employing reflexive journaling and member checking to reduce subjectivity, the researcher's existing knowledge, beliefs, and emotional investment in the topic could have shaped data interpretation or the framing of interview questions. Maintaining self-awareness and adhering to rigorous qualitative protocols were essential to mitigating this influence.

Delimitations

This study was intentionally delimited to examine a specific population and context in order to provide in-depth, focused insight into the career decision-making processes of millennials who exited careers in agronomy retail. Millennials were defined for this research as individuals born between 1981 and 1994, a generational cohort commonly studied for its distinct workplace expectations and behaviors. Limiting the study to this age group allowed for a more

precise exploration of generational motivations and values, particularly in relation to autonomy, meaningful work, and work-life balance, which are often cited as key drivers in millennial career decisions.

Geographically, the research was confined to the 12-state Midwest region as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, comprising Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. This area was selected due to its central role in U.S. crop production and its strong representation of agronomy retail operations embedded within rural agricultural economies. By focusing on this region, the study ensured relevance to the specific agricultural practices and employment structures common to agronomy retail in rural cooperative settings.

The study was further delimited to participants who held professional roles within agricultural cooperatives, including sales agronomists, agronomy managers, and digital specialists. These roles were selected because they are commonly found in agronomy retail and directly support crop input recommendations, technology adoption, and customer relations, functions that are critical to agronomic service delivery and heavily impacted by workforce turnover.

In addition, the study intentionally excluded participants working in other agricultural sectors such as livestock production, horticulture, or food processing, as well as generational cohorts other than millennials (e.g., Gen Z, Gen X, or Baby Boomers). These exclusions allowed the study to maintain a sharp focus on the experiences of one generation within one specific segment of the agriculture industry. As a result, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all agricultural professionals but rather to offer insight into a targeted and strategically significant workforce group within agronomy retail.

Significance of Study

Given these challenges, this study explored how millennial workers who left careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest described their decision-making processes. By examining their lived experiences, the research illuminated the underlying factors contributing to employee turnover in this essential sector. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform leadership and organizational practices within agronomy cooperatives as they navigate generational transitions. As the baby boomer generation continues to retire, agronomy retail faces a growing leadership gap. To sustain operations, there is an increasing need for younger workers, particularly millennials, to step into these leadership roles. However, a troubling trend has emerged: millennials themselves are leaving the field, further exacerbating the workforce shortage.

High turnover among millennials imposes considerable costs on agronomy retailers in terms of time, training, and operational continuity (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). Despite this pressing issue, limited research exists that examines why millennials are departing from careers in agronomy retail. Furthermore, Super's (1953) Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory has not been widely applied to understand the career decision-making processes of this generation. As a result, there remains a gap in empirical research on the millennial workforce drain and its impact on the sustainability and leadership continuity of the agronomy retail industry.

Subjectivity Statement

I am a fifth-generation farmer and millennial with deep-rooted ties to agriculture both personally and professionally. Growing up in a rural community where agriculture had been a way of life for generations, I developed a profound understanding of the farming industry and its

challenges. With over 15 years of experience working in agronomy retail in roles ranging from sales and consulting to management, I gained firsthand knowledge of the industry's operational dynamics, customer relations, and workforce challenges.

Throughout my career, I witnessed significant shifts in the workforce, particularly the increasing trend of millennial turnover in agronomy retail. Frequent employee transitions disrupt continuity, customer relationships, and service efficiency, directly affecting my role as an agriculture vendor. These experiences, combined with extensive engagement with professionals across different levels of the industry, provided me with a comprehensive perspective on workforce dynamics. As both a millennial working in agriculture and an observer of industry changes, I am uniquely positioned to investigate the reasons behind millennial attrition.

This study was driven by my deep concern for the sustainability and success of agriculture, an industry to which I have dedicated my career and family legacy. My dual role as an insider, having grown up in agriculture and currently working with agronomy retail, allows me a nuanced understanding of the issue. My curiosity extends beyond professional interest to a personal investment in uncovering where millennials transitioned in their careers and why they left agronomy retail.

As a cultural insider interviewer, I acknowledged my positionality, recognizing that my background, experiences, and perspectives could have influenced data interpretation. Identifying as a millennial, working with agronomy retail, and advocating for flexible work-life balance within the industry informed the research approach. Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasize that "personal reflexivity in research is about bringing the researcher into the research, making us part of the research process" (p. 37). Reflexivity was critical in this study, ensuring that I remained aware of potential biases before, during, and after conducting interviews. To mitigate bias, I

actively engaged in reflective journaling throughout the study, critically assessing how my perspectives might have influenced data collection, analysis, and findings. Transparency in positionality and continuous reflection enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. While I brought valuable industry knowledge, my role was to objectively interpret the interviewees' experiences rather than imposing personal beliefs or assumptions.

The goal of this research was to understand the experiences of millennials who left agronomy retail and to provide actionable solutions to the industry. I designed the study, conducted semi-structured interviews, made observations, reflected on findings, transcribed and analyzed interviews, and reported meaningful conclusions. By combining academic rigor with industry experience, this study aimed to contribute valuable insights to both academic literature and practical strategies for improving millennial retention in agronomy retail.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to clarify the terminology used throughout the study, ensuring that both the researcher and the audience interpret each term consistently.

Agriculture Vendors – Operate as the strategic business partners supplying agronomy retail within agricultural cooperatives. Agriculture vendors provided not only essential inputs such as seed, crop protection, digital tools, and fertilizer, but also delivered value-added services that shaped the commercial direction of agronomy retail. Unlike frontline agronomy retail operations that focus on farmer-facing sales and service, vendors functioned upstream in the supply chain, engaging in demand forecasting, supply and business planning, market development, technical training, and knowledge transfer to enhance retailer performance and profitability (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.).

Agronomy – Agronomy is a branch of agricultural science that deals with the principles and practices of crop production and soil management. It integrates plant biology, soil science, meteorology, and ecology to enhance food, fiber, and fuel production in a sustainable way. (Agricultural Retailers Association. n.d.).

Agronomy Retail – Agronomy retail refers to the sector of agricultural cooperatives or independent businesses that provide farmers with crop inputs, such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, as well as agronomic consulting services. These retailers help farmers optimize productivity through science-based recommendations and precision agriculture tools. (Agricultural Retailers Association. n.d.).

Career Decisions – The process of making selections regarding a career path, which is continual for a working individual. It involves both internal and external factors (Yale Office of Career Strategy, 2022).

Career Plateauing – When an individual reaches a stage where further advancement, either through hierarchical promotions or new responsibilities unlikely within their current organization, often resulting in feelings of stagnation and reduced motivation (Yang, 2025).

Decision making – How individuals make decisions based on their expectations of the outcome (Vroom & Yetton, 1976).

Midwest Region of the United States – According to the USDA, the Midwest is a leading producer of corn, soybeans, and wheat, making it a cornerstone of the country's food supply and agricultural exports (n.d.). As defined by the United States Census Bureau, the Midwest includes the following 12 states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin (n.d.).

Millennials – A group of people born between 1981 and 1994. Their parents are primarily baby boomers (1946–1964). Millennials are familiar with digital technology, emphasize experiences over possessions, value work-life balance, and express concern for the environment (Twenge, 2023).

Relational Breakdown – Where careers occurs when the supportive social and professional relationships that facilitate growth, collaboration, and well-being at work deteriorate or fail, often resulting in decreased employee motivation, job satisfaction, and engagement (Blustein, 2006).

Structural Empathy – The ability to understand and address how workplace systems, policies, and cultures impact employees' experiences and well-being, recognizing that challenges often stem from structural not just individual factors (Lifestyle Sustainability Directory, 2024),

Chapter Summary

As baby boomers retire and exit the full-time workforce, millennials must step into leadership roles to sustain industries like agronomy retail. However, research indicates that millennials are more likely to change jobs if their workplace expectations are not met, leading to high turnover and workforce instability. The agronomy retail sector already faces significant labor shortages, with 91% of agronomy retailers reporting difficulty in filling positions (Farm Journal, 2021). Additionally, misconceptions about agricultural careers persist, as surveys showed that only 9% of millennials had considered a career in agriculture, and 76% of respondents were unsure whether agriculture or agronomy careers paid well (Land O'Lakes, Inc., 2016). These factors contributed to a shrinking talent pool, exacerbating the leadership gap.

To address this challenge, future employers need to adapt by creating work environments that align with millennials' values, such as meaningful work, sustainability, professional growth,

and work-life balance. If these needs remain unmet, the key questions become why millennials leave agronomy retail and who will replace them. Understanding these reasons is critical to developing strategies that enhance job satisfaction and retention. As the workforce continues to evolve, employer expectations also need to shift to accommodate generational changes in workplace preferences.

This basic qualitative research study investigates the motivations behind millennials leaving agronomy retail and explores their career decision-making process. By examining these issues, the study aims to provide insights that can help industry leaders improve workforce retention and ensure the long-term sustainability of agronomy retail.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Millennials' decisions to leave careers in agronomy retail reflect a compelling intersection of generational values, workplace expectations, and career development theories, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of this vital industry in the Midwest. Often characterized by their desire for meaningful work, autonomy, and growth opportunities, millennials are encountering unique challenges in an industry traditionally perceived as labor-intensive and rooted in rural living (Salahuddin, 2013; Smith & Nichols, 2021). As this generation increasingly pursues careers aligned with values such as sustainability and ethical business practices, sectors like agronomy retail will continue to face pressure to adapt to their expectations (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014).

The Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) provide foundational frameworks for understanding how millennials make career decisions, particularly within the context of agronomy retail in the Midwest United States. These theories emphasize critical elements such as life stages, evolving self-concept, and intrinsic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, that shape career trajectories and transitions (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Super, 1980). Together, they offer a comprehensive lens through which to examine how millennial values and priorities influence their decisions to leave or stay in a given career. This chapter synthesizes existing literature to address the research question: "How do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States?" By defining the millennial cohort, exploring the agronomy retail structure, and analyzing career development through both Super's and Deci & Ryan's frameworks, the chapter reveals the misalignment between traditional agricultural employment models and millennial expectations. These insights

not only highlight key challenges for the agriculture industry but also suggest actionable strategies for organizations to attract, engage, and retain millennial talent.

Transformations in Rural Agriculture and Economic Diversification in the United States

Over the last century, rural agriculture in the United States underwent a profound transformation, driven by technological advancements, communication and transportation shifts, and evolving lifestyle preferences (Adrian & Green, 2001b; Ahearn et al., 2016). Labor-saving innovations, such as mechanized farming equipment, significantly reduced the need for manual labor, thereby increasing efficiency and productivity (Ahearn & Newton, 2009). These advancements resulted in a smaller workforce with higher productivity, echoing Patricia Daly's observation that agricultural employment declined significantly over the decades but remained crucial for the nation's food supply, representing less than 4% of all jobs (Daly, 1981). More current, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) (2023), agriculture and its related industries provided 10.4% of total U.S. employment, encompassing 22.1 million full- and part-time jobs in 2022. Direct on-farm employment accounted for about 2.6 millions of these jobs, or 1.2% of U.S. employment. The remaining jobs were in agriculture- and food-related industries, such as food services, eating and drinking places, and food/beverage stores. This data underscores the significant role that agriculture and its associated sectors play in the U.S. economy, not only in terms of food production but also in employment across various industries. Improved transportation networks and the rise of digital communication enabled farmers to access broader markets and adopt modern agricultural practices more swiftly (MacDonald et al., 2013). This increased efficiency and market access led to a dramatic rise in farm output despite

the steadily declining farming population, further supported by innovations in farm technology that reduced human labor dependency (Daly, 1981).

The USDA reported that nearly 89% of farm household income came from nonfarm sources, underscoring the increasing reliance on the broader rural economy (2020). This shift reflects broader trends in rural America, where diversification into non-agricultural industries such as manufacturing, services, and technology becomes critical for economic sustainability (Irwin et al., 2010). Ahearn et al. (2016) emphasizes that this reliance on non-farm income became necessary for many farming families, especially as family-run farms transitioned toward corporate models, with farmers taking on external jobs to sustain their operations. Daly (1981) also noted that moonlighting in non-agricultural sectors was common for farmers, as it helped maintain their economic viability. As a result, while agricultural productivity continued to grow, rural communities depended more on nonfarm income to sustain their livelihoods, making the connection between rural agriculture and the rural economy increasingly intertwined (Ahearn et al., 2016).

Agriculture Cooperatives

The concept of cooperatives in the United States dates back to early settlements, drawing influence from European history. As settlers arrived in America, they needed a structured way to purchase and sell supplies, leading to the development of cooperative systems. In the United States, agricultural cooperatives played a particularly significant role in shaping the economy, more so than other cooperative industries (Pitman, 2018). "Cooperatives are the institution that provides the common man, that is, the small farmer, equality in the marketplace" (Hogeland, 2006, p. 71). In 1916, the Cooperative League of the United States of America was established, followed by the formation of the American Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union, which

continues to influence agriculture today. These organizations encouraged farmers to collaborate to secure higher profits for their goods and develop cooperative structures (Pitman, 2018). The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 also allowed the USDA to partner with land-grant universities to promote agricultural best practices (Hogeland, 2006). However, the most significant expansion of large cooperatives occurred with the passage of the Cooperative Marketing Act of 1926, which enabled the USDA to support farming cooperatives for nearly a century (Pitman, 2018).

The International Cooperative Alliance defined a cooperative as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (n.d., p.1). The Alliance also described farmer cooperatives as places of business where people who use the services provided by the cooperative were also members of the cooperative business. A farmer could own stock in the cooperative and vote on the business functions of the cooperative.

A purchasing farmer and an independent small business cooperative could either be purchasing or processing cooperatives. A purchasing cooperative, by definition, offers cost savings to owner-members through bulk purchase benefits (National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International, n.d.). A processing cooperative works together as owners to add more value and profit to commodities. Worker cooperatives involve all employees in the ownership of the cooperative. Consumer cooperatives consist of individual members who purchase goods and services. There are three distinct advantages to forming a business structure in the cooperative framework: cooperatives limiting the liability of members, allowing ownership transfer, and helping rebalance power and wealth (National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International, n.d.).

The Agricultural Cooperative Service (ACS) carries out the programs set by the Cooperative Marketing Act of 1926. The definition set by ACS in 1965 was as follows:

> A cooperative is a voluntary contractual organization of persons having a mutual ownership interest in providing themselves with needed service(s) on a nonprofit basis... [and is] democratically controlled by its members based on their status as member-users and not as investors in the capital structure. (Savage & Volkin, 1965, para. 11)

Cooperatives played a vital role by supporting economic development, promoting sustainability, and empowering local communities. In agriculture, cooperatives help farmers and ranchers access markets, purchase supplies at competitive prices, and share resources and knowledge (USDA Rural Development, 2022). They provide a structure for collective decision-making and ensure that profits are distributed among members rather than external shareholders (International Cooperative Alliance, n.d.). Beyond agriculture, cooperatives operated in various industries, including finance, retail, and housing, fostering economic resilience, creating jobs, and prioritizing member needs. Their focus on community well-being and equitable growth make cooperatives a cornerstone of modern, inclusive economies (USDA Rural Development, 2022). Agriculture cooperatives allow farmers and ranchers members to purchase supplies and market agricultural commodities in a dynamic group. These businesses remained essential to rural communities. In recent years, agriculture cooperatives have merged, grown, and expanded in services and geography. They competed against each other for sales volume and operated on low net margins to stay competitive (Hogeland, 2006).

Although definitions and numbers of agriculture cooperatives have shifted slightly, their core objective has remained uniting farmers to increase buying power and market strength

(Pitman, 2018). Agriculture cooperatives primarily sell seeds, fertilizer, technology, plant nutrients, and crop protection products (Savage & Volkin, 1965). Agronomy retail formed the backbone of modern agriculture by ensuring that farmers had access to the resources they needed to produce crops (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). According to the USDA 2021 Agricultural Cooperative Statistical Summary, the number of cooperatives has declined. In 2022, the USDA reported 337 agriculture cooperatives that had existed for over 100 years. In 2021, there were 1,699 cooperatives down from 1,744 in 2020. Minnesota had the most cooperative headquarters (147), followed by Texas (146), North Dakota (109), and California (101). Minnesota led with $20.8 billion in cooperative sales in 2021. Across the country, agriculture cooperatives employed 202,988 full-time, part-time, and seasonal workers (USDA Rural Development, 2022).

The agronomy retail sector not only faces a shortage of qualified workers (Whittaker & Williams, 2016) but also contends with a growing societal disconnect from agriculture (Kover & Ball, 2013). This disconnect appears in surveys like the United States Farmers and Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) 2011 study, which shows that 72% of consumers had little to no knowledge of farming or ranching. Daly (1981) emphasized that agricultural labor and expertise shifted, making it harder for consumers to connect with agricultural practices. A 2012 follow-up revealed that over 25% of consumers felt confused about food choices, especially younger adults aged 18–29. Despite this, nearly 60% of consumers expressed interest in learning about food production. However, lower-income households often lacked the time or resources for further education (USFRA, 2012). The agricultural industry faces an opportunity to close the knowledge gap through outreach and accessible information about food production. By reflecting on historical declines in agricultural labor and broader rural economic shifts, these insights can

provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities within United States agronomy retail today.

Evolution and Foundations of Agronomy Retail

Advancements in scientific research, technology, and the agricultural sector's changing demands have shaped agronomy's evolution within agricultural retail. Agronomy, the science of soil management and crop production, is the foundation of modern agricultural practices, helping optimize yield and sustainability (Smith & Jones, 2019). In agronomy retail, the role of agronomists has evolved to include advising on crop health and soil conditions and incorporating technologies like precision farming and digital tools to enhance productivity and efficiency. Agronomists also play a critical role by building strong relationships with farmers and providing expertise on products, fertilizer recommendations, and emerging technologies (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). Historically, agronomy was closely tied to traditional farming methods; however, the increasing complexity of global food systems and environmental concerns have driven a shift toward integrated approaches that consider both ecological impacts and economic viability (Johnson et al., 2018). As Daly (1981) pointed out, the decline in agricultural employment has also pushed for innovation, where technological advancements compensate for the labor shortfall, further emphasizing the importance of agronomy in modern farming operations.

Agricultural cooperatives are pivotal in supporting farmers financially and through solid relational ties (Cook, 1995). These agriculture cooperatives are important because farmer-owner benefits are closely tied to their patronage and the equity capital they contribute. This relationship-centric approach extends beyond financial transactions, particularly in agricultural agronomy retail, where millennial workers view their roles as providing valuable services to

farmers through building partnerships and fostering trust (Cook, 1995). Thus, the cooperative model is a foundational element of the agricultural agronomy retail sector, emphasizing the importance of human relationships and economic benefits (Cook, 1995; O'Brien & Klein, 2021). Such a model underscores the interconnected nature of agriculture, where the success of cooperative services relies heavily on maintaining solid farmer-cooperative relationships. Pitman (2018) also reinforces that agriculture cooperatives serve as a historical backbone of United States agriculture, enabling smaller-scale farmers to compete and sustain their operations through collective action and shared resources.

Agronomy retail operates at the intersection of agriculture and business, providing essential services to support agricultural production, including selling seeds, fertilizers, equipment, and crop protection products (Agricultural Retailers Association, n.d.; Knight et al., 2020). Agriculture, broadly defined, encompasses all food, fiber, and fuel production activities, including dairy farming, livestock raising, forestry, and crop cultivation (United States National Archives, 2023). Agronomy retail plays a vital role in ensuring that farmers can access the resources they need for efficient production and delivery of agricultural products to market. Agricultural agronomy retail businesses range from small, family-owned operations to large cooperatives with multiple outlets, illustrating the diverse nature of the sector (Agricultural Retailers Association, n.d.). As agronomy retailers adapt to modern agricultural challenges, their services become increasingly critical to the sustainability and growth of farming operations. Hogeland (2006) expands on this by explaining how cooperatives provide necessary inputs and advocate for sustainable agricultural practices, positioning themselves as critical actors in addressing environmental and market challenges.

Agronomy retail professionals, such as sales agronomists in agriculture, are vital in providing essential services, products, and knowledge to farmers, particularly in rural communities. This sector is crucial for supporting agricultural production by offering services such as credit, access to agricultural inputs, and expert guidance on farming practices (Adrian & Green, 2001b; Webb, 1990). Individuals working in agronomy retail often serve multiple roles, blending their responsibilities as farmers and informal educators, allowing them to share valuable insights based on firsthand experience (Nelson & Martin, 2015). This multifaceted role is critical in rural areas, where access to expert advice and resources may be limited, and local knowledge sharing becomes an invaluable tool for agricultural success.

Key roles within agronomy retail include several specialized positions. Agronomy managers oversee operations, providing administrative leadership and reporting to higher management levels, including general managers and board directors (Jones & Wells, 2019). Sales agronomists are responsible for fostering solid relationships with farmers and decision-makers, offering value-added services like fertilizer recommendations and advice on emerging technologies that may enhance farm productivity (Smith et al., 2018). Digital specialists assist farmers and sales agronomists by interpreting the vast amounts of data collected on farms and helping to apply it effectively to improve agricultural outcomes (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.; Johnson, K. & Brown, P., 2019). Applicators play an essential role in managing pests, weeds, and diseases by operating machinery that applies fertilizers or crop protection products across fields (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.; Thompson, 2020). Agriculture vendors supply critical inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and digital tools to agronomy divisions, engaging in activities like supply planning, business strategy development, and knowledge transfer (Anderson & Clarke, 2017). These specialized roles are essential to the

modern agronomy retail model, helping to integrate technology and sustainability into everyday farming operations.

Employment Landscape in Agronomy Retail

The employment landscape in the agronomy retail sector is undergoing significant transformations due to technological advancements, demographic shifts, and evolving industry demands (Cook, 1995). As precision agriculture and digital technologies continue to be integrated, the sector seeks to enhance efficiency and sustainability. However, these innovations require a highly skilled workforce capable of managing complex data systems and new technological tools (Tucker, 2011b). According to Haldar and Damodaran (2022), the successful adoption of digital technologies in agriculture relies heavily on the availability of workers proficient in data analytics and precision farming techniques, a skill set currently lacking in many regions.

A persistent shortage of qualified workers, particularly those trained in traditional agricultural practices and digital technologies, is becoming increasingly problematic (Fulton & Larson, 2006; Hintzche, 2024). This shortage is exacerbated by the sector's aging workforce, where many experienced professionals are nearing retirement, creating a growing skills gap (Carlisle et al., 2019c; Pratley, 2008b). Furthermore, Cook (1995) suggests that agricultural cooperatives, historically supporting farmers in operational and financial capacities, now face the additional burden of addressing labor shortages through innovation and workforce training initiatives. Additionally, barriers such as high land costs and the substantial initial capital required to enter the field make it difficult for new workers, particularly those interested in sustainable and agroecological practices, to establish themselves in the industry (Carlisle et al., 2019a).

In addition to the workforce shortage, systemic issues in the agronomy retail sector further complicate employment challenges. One of the key obstacles is the perception of agricultural careers, particularly among younger generations. Agriculture is often viewed through the lens of outdated stereotypes that emphasize manual labor and limited career advancement opportunities (Pratley, 2008b). This image persists despite the growing reliance on high-tech solutions such as data analytics and environmental management systems, which offer diverse and lucrative career paths (Tucker, 2011a). To attract more talent, industry stakeholders must rebrand agriculture as a modern, innovative field that provides opportunities for professional growth and environmental impact. As Fulton, Hendrikse, and Millar (2020) argue, the evolving role of cooperatives in agriculture, particularly in providing access to new technologies and market information, positions them as crucial actors in reshaping the image of agriculture for younger generations. By providing financial support, mentorship, and clearer career development pathways, the sector can cultivate a new generation of skilled workers interested in technology and committed to sustainability (Carlisle et al., 2019b; Pratley, 2008a). Additionally, Buendía et al. (2020) emphasize that cooperatives offer a more appealing employment model for millennials due to their emphasis on sustainability, community, and shared ownership, which could help shift the perception of agricultural careers among younger generations.

Furthermore, the successful workforce transformation will require strong partnerships between industry, educational institutions, and government agencies. These collaborations can help ensure that academic programs are aligned with the evolving needs of the sector and that students are equipped with the relevant skills required for both traditional and modern agricultural practices (Pratley, 2008a). Educational systems must adapt by integrating digital tools and precision agriculture training into their curriculums to meet the growing demand for

skilled workers (Blanchet et al., 2020). Haldar and Damodaran (2022) add that educational institutions should promote organic and sustainable farming methods to address growing consumer demand for environmentally responsible agricultural practices. At the same time, industry and government partnerships can focus on creating supportive policies that lower entry barriers and offer incentives for young professionals to pursue careers in agronomy (Thilmany et al., 2019). These partnerships could leverage cooperative models, as Cook (1995) suggests, to foster innovation and encourage the integration of younger workers into the agricultural workforce. Together, these efforts can mitigate the workforce challenges facing the sector, ensuring that the next generation is well-prepared to advance the field of agronomy retail.

Sales agronomists play a vital role in agronomy retail by building strong relationships with farmers and other key decision-makers on the farm. They provide expert advice and sell essential crop inputs such as fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides, seeds, and agronomy services, ensuring farmers benefit from their knowledge and recommendations. These professionals enhance their value by offering tailored solutions, such as fertilizer recommendations, and introducing farmers to new, beneficial technologies. Their effectiveness is rooted in a strong foundation in agronomy and sales, making them indispensable to the success of agricultural operations (AgCareers.com, n.d.; Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.).

Complementing the work of sales agronomists, digital specialists play a crucial role in supporting farmers and agronomists by helping make sense of the vast amounts of data farmers collect about their farms. These specialists enable farmers to understand and apply data to improve farm management and productivity. Given the varying skill levels among farmers in interpreting data, digital specialists are instrumental in bridging the gap between farm data and agronomy insights (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.).

Another essential role in agricultural agronomy retail is that of applicators. These professionals operate specialized equipment designed to spray crop protection products and spread fertilizers or crop nutrients on growing crops. Applicators ensure that crops are managed effectively throughout the growing season, directly contributing to plant health and productivity (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). Together, sales agronomists, digital specialists, and applicators form a collaborative network of professionals whose roles are indispensable in supporting farmers and ensuring the success of agronomy retail. Their combined efforts enhance farm productivity and foster innovation and resilience within the agriculture industry, enabling farmers to adapt to evolving challenges and market demands.

Rural agriculture has seen a sweeping transformation (Adrian & Green, 2001b) driven primarily by labor-saving technological advancements, communication and transportation improvements, and lifestyle preferences (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Data suggests that farming has outlived the natural trajectory but, over time, has continued increasing productivity and yields (Irwin et al., 2010). The USDA ERS (2025) states that nearly 89% of households' incomes come from non-farm sources. This dramatic change is changing how farmers make decisions and purchases and how they increase their crop yields. The changes make rural agriculture dependent on the rural economy (Irwin et al., 2010). Agricultural agronomy retailers, or those who sell agricultural products and services, are part of that rural economy. Many professionals within agronomy retail collaborate to share knowledge and insights, providing farmers with the resources and expertise needed to enhance their operations. (Agriculture Retailers Association, n.d.). These findings mirror Ely and Meyerson's (2000) insights on the cumulative emotional impact of gender bias in male-dominated industries and Birt et al.'s (2016) argument that relational misalignment accelerates disengagement when values and environment are out of sync.

Emerging Patterns and Challenges

Millennials view technology as an integral part of daily life, seamlessly incorporating devices like smartphones, smartwatches, and various applications into their personal and professional routines (E. A. Vogel, 2019). In agronomy retail, leveraging technology is crucial for the success of talent management strategies, particularly in attracting and retaining younger generations (Carr & Montealegre, 2016). This shift in workforce demographics is occurring alongside other pressing challenges within the agricultural agronomy retail sector. Key issues such as fluctuations in commodity prices, resource limitations, climate change, and rising concerns about sustainability and food safety are reshaping the industry (Bain & Company, 2016; Griffin et al., 2019). Additionally, Ahearn et al. (2016) emphasize that these challenges are compounded by the increasing need for diversification in rural economies, as traditional agricultural activities alone no longer provide sufficient income for many farm households. This growing reliance on off-farm employment has further impacted how agronomy retailers adapt to workforce demands, requiring more specialized and flexible employment practices to accommodate this shift.

Technological advancements, particularly in digital agriculture and precision farming, have emerged as promising solutions to some of the industry's most pressing issues. Innovative technologies, including the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and robotics, are increasingly being used to optimize farm operations and boost crop yields (Assimakopoulos et al., 2024). However, despite the potential benefits of these innovations, many agronomy retailers face significant obstacles to implementation. Ahearn and Newton (2009) point out that while technological progress has significantly improved productivity, the high implementation and maintenance costs create barriers, particularly for smaller-scale farmers. High costs, system

complexities, and the need for reliable rural connectivity are among the most pressing challenges (Griffin et al., 2019). Despite these hurdles, the potential for precision agriculture to improve resource efficiency and sustainability remains strong, as it can reduce environmental impacts while enhancing productivity (Assimakopoulos et al., 2024).

One notable trend within the agronomy retail sector is the increasing consolidation of farm operations, which allows larger farms to absorb the fixed costs associated with adopting new technologies. Ahearn et al. (2016) note that this consolidation often benefits more significant operations, which are better positioned to invest in advanced technologies, further widening the gap between large and small-scale farms. More extensive operations are more likely to implement precision agriculture technologies, which may further exacerbate the divide between large and small-scale farms (Griffin et al., 2019). Additionally, the rise of data-driven decision-making in farming has become a critical component of modern agricultural practices, with the collection and analysis of farm data playing a central role in optimizing operations (Assimakopoulos et al., 2024).

The agronomy retail sector is also grappling with workforce shortages, which are particularly problematic given the increasing complexity of agricultural technologies. Recruiting skilled workers capable of managing and operating high-tech equipment has become a top priority for agronomy retailers (Hintzsche, 2024). Ahearn et al. (2016) also highlight that these shortages are compounded by broader demographic shifts in rural areas, where the outmigration of younger workers has led to an aging workforce. Training programs, internships, and technical development initiatives are among the strategies to close this gap and develop a more capable workforce (Sfiligoj, 2024). Additionally, data privacy and ownership concerns continue to grow as precision agriculture technologies become more widespread. Farmers are increasingly

advocating for more apparent legal protections regarding who owns the data collected on their farms and how it is used (Sfiligoj, 2024).

The agronomy retail sector in the United States continues to face emerging patterns and challenges driven by workforce shortages, technological advancements, and evolving industry demands. A critical challenge is retaining a stable, skilled workforce amidst rural depopulation and increased competition from urban-based industries. The Retaining a Farm Workforce report by Holbrook Landcare (2024) emphasizes that the agriculture sector's labor challenges are exacerbated by younger generations seeking employment opportunities in urban settings, where access to amenities and diverse career options are more prevalent. This dynamic directly impacts the ability of agronomy retailers to attract and retain talent, particularly millennials who prioritize work-life balance and access to technological innovation in their roles.

Additionally, environmental sustainability is becoming a central focus in agronomy retail, as both market demands and regulatory pressures push for more sustainable agricultural practices. Initiatives such as the 4R Nutrient Stewardship (The Fertilizer Institute, n.d.) and precision irrigation systems aim to improve resource management while minimizing environmental impacts (Sfiligoj, 2024). These efforts are critical in addressing agronomy retailers' regulatory challenges, particularly in areas affected by environmental crises such as the Lake Erie water contamination, highlighting the need for stricter nutrient management regulations (Sfiligoj, 2024).

The agricultural agronomy retail sector is navigating an increasingly complex landscape shaped by technological advancements, workforce shortages, regulatory pressures, and environmental sustainability challenges. While technological innovations such as precision farming hold promise for enhancing productivity and sustainability, these technologies' high

costs and complexities present significant barriers to widespread adoption. Addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort to invest in workforce development, regulatory compliance, and sustainable practices (Ahearn et al., 2016).

Millennial Retention in Agronomy Retail

Retaining millennial workers in the agronomy retail sector is crucial as this generation increasingly comprises a significant portion of the workforce. Millennials, characterized by their focus on meaningful work, opportunities for professional development, and a balanced work-life dynamic, bring expectations that differ from those of previous generations (Ng et al., 2010). Traditionally viewed as labor-intensive and rooted in rural communities, the agronomy retail sector faces challenges in meeting millennial expectations for technology-driven, innovative environments that align with their values, particularly regarding sustainability (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014; E. A. Vogel, 2019). Retaining millennials in this sector requires addressing these differences through strategic engagement, career growth opportunities, and a focus on community involvement. Additionally, millennials desire a greater sense of purpose in their roles, particularly in sectors like agriculture, which are increasingly tied to global issues such as climate change, food security, and sustainability (A. P. McGlynn, 2010). By aligning corporate goals with millennial values, the sector can attract and retain this generation more effectively (Twenge et al., 2010).

One of the primary strategies for attracting and retaining millennials in agronomy retail is creating opportunities for continuous learning and professional growth. Research highlights the importance of integrating learning into talent management strategies within agronomy retail organizations (Carr & Cassie, 2014). "Factors such as the ability to learn, grow, develop, and work in a team model may impact millennials' job satisfaction" (Brenny & Yelich Biniecki,

2024, p. 3). Millennials value continuous development and seek roles where they can advance their knowledge and skills (Ng et al., 2010). A survey by Adrian and Green (2001a) showed that nearly 93% of agronomy retail managers prioritize hiring and training, clearly recognizing the importance of professional development in retaining millennial workers. Kaifi et al. (2012) noted that millennials thrive in environments that offer mentorship, feedback, and skill development, which are crucial for long-term engagement. Creating an environment that fosters learning through training programs, internships, and clear career pathways can help address millennial expectations and reduce turnover (Carlisle et al., 2019b). E. A. Vogel (2019) also highlights the importance of digital training and professional development programs in agricultural settings, which offer millennials the tech-driven learning experiences they value.

Another critical factor in millennial retention is aligning corporate and personal values, particularly regarding sustainability and community engagement. More than previous generations, millennials are concerned with environmental stewardship and sustainability practices (Losch, 2022a). Agribusinesses that fail to adopt eco-friendly practices risk alienating millennial employees, leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement (Pratley, 2008a). By integrating sustainable practices and promoting environmental responsibility, agronomy retail businesses can better align with millennial values and increase retention (Gault, 2018a). Additionally, millennials highly value ethical work environments, prioritizing sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Ngotngamwong, 2021). Incorporating these practices can be a crucial driver of millennial retention, as businesses that align with their values are more likely to foster long-term loyalty. This finding is supported by A. McGlynn (2010), who notes that millennial workers actively seek employers who prioritize global issues like environmental conservation, further reinforcing the need for agronomy retail sectors to adopt and communicate

sustainable business practices. Furthermore, Smith and Nichols (2015) highlight that millennials are driven by their ability to make a social impact, which is a crucial aspect of aligning company missions with the values of younger workers.

Geographic and lifestyle challenges also impact millennial retention in agronomy retail positions. Many millennials prefer to live in urban or suburban areas, and the prospect of relocating to rural locations for work can lead to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction (Pratley, 2008b). Agriculture cooperatives must emphasize the benefits of rural living and offer incentives, such as flexible work arrangements or relocation assistance, to appeal to both the employee and their spouse (E. A. Vogel, 2019). Enhancing the social and professional environment in rural areas can make these positions more attractive to millennials (Gault, 2018a). Simmons (2016) also highlights the importance of flexibility in work arrangements, noting that offering remote work options or flexible hours can significantly enhance millennial retention in rural agricultural positions.

Moreover, Twenge (2010) points out that flexible working conditions and remote work possibilities are attractive to millennials and often a deciding factor in their career decisions. "Millennials put a soaring prominence on flexibility and technology in the workplace" (Brenny & Yelich Biniecki, 2024, p. 4). This flexibility helps offset the geographic challenges associated with rural employment by providing opportunities for work-life balance and autonomy.

The agronomy retail sector must adapt its practices better to meet the expectations and needs of the millennial workforce. By focusing on professional development, sustainability, community involvement, and addressing geographic challenges, agronomy retail businesses can improve millennial retention and ensure a more sustainable workforce for the future. Additionally, fostering partnerships with educational institutions and creating mentorship

opportunities will play a vital role in preparing the next generation of agricultural professionals and maintaining workforce stability (Daly, 1981; Simmons, 2016). Addressing the unique characteristics of millennials will be crucial for building a committed and motivated workforce prepared to meet the evolving challenges of the agriculture sector. This approach is further supported by Twenge et al. (2010), who argue that millennials' focus on development, values, and meaningful work must be central to any retention strategy in industries like agriculture

Career Decision-Making Process

The career decision-making process for millennials in the agronomy retail sector is shaped by a complex interplay of personal values, industry evolution, and societal expectations. Unlike previous generations, millennials prioritize meaningful work, sustainability, and alignment with their values when selecting career paths (Lyons et al., 2012). In an industry often perceived as traditional and labor-intensive, understanding the motivations behind millennials' career choices is crucial for attracting and retaining this key demographic. The integration of advanced technologies, shifting sustainability priorities, and evolving workplace structures play a critical role in shaping millennials' engagement in agronomy retail careers (Gault, 2018b).

Career Decision-Making Influencing Reasons

Millennials are strongly influenced by sustainability and environmental stewardship when making career decisions. Having grown up during a time of heightened awareness regarding climate change and food security, they are drawn to careers that allow them to make a tangible environmental impact. Sustainable agronomy and cooperative business models appeal to millennials who prioritize ethical business practices and community involvement (Buendía, et.al., 2020; Costanza, D. et al., 2012; Murphy, 2011). As Zabel et al. (2016) point out, millennials seek roles that emphasize collaboration, problem-solving, and innovation, making

agronomy retail an attractive career field for those wanting to contribute to both environmental and societal progress.

Another critical influence is the role of technology. As digital natives, millennials gravitate toward industries that integrate technological advancements, and agronomy retail is increasingly leveraging tools like precision farming, data analytics, drones, artificial intelligence (AI), and the Internet of Things (IoT) (Murphy, 2011; R. Costanza et al.,2012). This technological evolution aligns with millennials' expectations for continuous innovation in the workplace. Research suggests that organizations that integrate advanced technology into their operations not only attract but also retain millennial employees, who expect dynamic, tech-driven work environments (Kaifi et al., 2012; Ngotngamwong, 2020).

Flexibility and career growth also play significant roles in millennials' decision-making. Unlike previous generations who prioritized long-term job security, millennials seek roles that offer adaptability, work-life balance, and opportunities for ongoing learning (D. Costanza et al., 2012). Digitalization within agriculture has allowed for greater flexibility in job roles, enabling remote management and data-driven decision-making. Providing mentorship, leadership pathways, and skill development opportunities is essential for retaining millennial talent (Simmons, 2016; Smola & Sutton, 2022). Organizations that focus on professional development and leadership training are particularly appealing to millennials, reinforcing their long-term career satisfaction (Kaifi et al., 2012; Ngotngamwong, 2020)

Career Development with Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory

The Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), is a foundational concept in career development that emphasizes the evolving nature of career decision-making across the human lifespan. The theory, rooted in developmental psychology, argues that career choices are

not isolated decisions but are influenced by a continuous process of personal growth, self-concept formation, and social interaction (Super, 1980). Central to Super's model is the belief that an individual's career development is shaped by various life stages, each characterized by distinct tasks and challenges. These stages of career progression are growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline. The stages reflect individuals' developmental trajectory from forming early interests to disengaging from professional life. Super's work highlighted that career decisions are deeply intertwined with one's self-concept, which evolves in response to personal, social, and environmental reasons over time (Hartung, 2013; Savickas, 2013). The flexibility of the Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), allows for acknowledging career changes that may occur throughout one's lifespan due to shifting societal expectations, technological advancements, and evolving job markets (Fouad & Bynner, 2008).

The core of Super's theory lies in recognizing career development as a lifelong journey. The initial stage, the growth phase (birth to 14 years), emphasizes the early development of interests and attitudes that shape future career choices. During this stage, children and adolescents begin to develop a sense of self through their interactions with the world of work, often shaped by parental guidance, education, and exposure to various occupations (Super, 1980). This early exposure is vital as it lays the foundation for future career exploration and helps establish early career aspirations (Brown & Lent, 2013). Following this is the exploration stage (ages 15–24), where individuals actively engage in part-time work, internships, and educational pursuits that help them clarify their career preferences. This phase is crucial for forming occupational interests and acquiring foundational skills that facilitate future career decisions (Hartung, 2013). Research has shown that early exposure to varied work experiences during this stage can lead to more informed and deliberate career decisions, as individuals are

more equipped to assess their skills and interests in different professional settings (Savickas, 2013).

Super's theory has been widely applied to prior research, reinforcing its credibility, reliability, and validity (Abdullah, 2017; Ismail et al., 2018). For example, Abdullah (2017) used Super's theory to explore young adults' socialization and adaptive personality traits. He found that young adults want to learn and work in environments where they can socialize their learning and be their authentic selves. Ismail et al. (2018) utilized the theory to investigate young adults' demographic reasons and academic achievements through career stages. Super's development self-concept theory can be used to study career commitment among generational cohorts, particularly among millennials. Super's 1953 theory is connected to this research to understand if there is alignment with the establishment stage of the theory in how millennials are making career decisions in agronomy retail. Applying Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), to millennials choosing to leave working in agronomy retail can provide a wide range of understanding of their career motivations and reasons influencing their career choices. The knowledge gained is valuable in developing career development programs, policies, and practices to support the workforce of agronomy retail now and into the future. Super's theory describes moving through the stages of career maturity. Career maturity is related to a successful career where the individual displays knowledge, efficiency, skills, and capability (Super, 1980).

As individuals transition into adulthood, they enter the establishment stage (ages 25–44), marked by their full entry into the workforce. This stage focuses on job stability and proficiency as individuals adapt to occupational roles and seek success within their chosen fields (Savickas, 2016). Establishment is characterized by striving to achieve long-term career goals, developing expertise, and gaining professional recognition (Super, 1980). Over time, workers move into the

maintenance stage (ages 45–64), where the emphasis shifts toward maintaining their professional identity and staying relevant in their careers through continuous learning and skill development. This stage is essential as it involves maintaining professional competence, updating skills, and navigating mid-career transitions (Arthur et al., 1999). Finally, the decline or disengagement stage (age 65 and beyond) involves the gradual reduction of work responsibilities and a shift toward retirement. During this phase, individuals often experience a redefinition of their self-concept as work becomes less central to their identity and other life roles take precedence (Super, 1980). For some, this stage may bring a renewed focus on mentoring or leaving a legacy in their profession (Brown, 2015).

As a generation, millennials bring unique perspectives to Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), particularly in making career decisions. Unlike previous generations, millennials emphasize finding purpose and aligning their careers with personal values, particularly sustainability, innovation, and work-life equilibrium (Ng et al., 2010). Super's exploration and establishment stages are especially relevant to millennials, who often engage in a more extended exploration phase, seeking varied career experiences before committing to a specific path (Savickas, 2016). This extended exploration phase aligns with Super's idea that career development is fluid and non-linear. With the rise of technology and the need for continuous learning, millennials often prioritize professional environments that provide flexibility and opportunities for development, reflecting Super's understanding that career paths are dynamic and influenced by personal growth and external reasons (Hess & Jepsen, 2009).

Millennials are frequently observed as "job-hopping" more than previous generations, aligning with Super's theory. The idea prolongs the exploration stage to find roles that better match their personal goals and values (Benson, 2016). The trend highlights millennials' emphasis

on adaptability and lifelong learning, aligning with the evolving workplace's increasing demand for agility and resilience. Millennials are known for their propensity to change jobs and careers more frequently than previous generations. Research indicates that millennials will change jobs an average of four times in their first decade out of college (Luscombe, 2016).

The increasing integration of technology and the shifting dynamics of the modern workforce have led millennials to value adaptability and continuous learning, reinforcing the need for a career development framework that accommodates nonlinear trajectories (Super et al., 1996). Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), provides a foundational approach to understanding how individuals make career decisions over time. Still, its application to millennials requires considering the rapidly evolving professional landscape (Blustein, 2006). As digitalization and globalization reshape industries, millennials frequently encounter career paths that demand agility, interdisciplinary skills, and innovative thinking (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). These changes suggest that while Super's developmental stages remain relevant, modern career pathways require greater emphasis on flexibility, ongoing skill acquisition, and adaptability to frequent transitions (Brown & Lent, 2013).

Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamic nature of career development. By recognizing the ongoing interaction between self-concept and career choices, Super's model offers insights into how individuals, including millennials, navigate their professional journeys. The theory's emphasis on the developmental stages of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline underscores the lifelong nature of career decision-making. It highlights the importance of adapting to personal and external changes throughout one's career. Super's work also acknowledges that career development is not a one-size-fits-all process but is shaped by a

complex interplay of individual, social, and economic reasons (Hartung, 2013; Savickas, 2016). This framework is valuable in understanding how individuals can successfully adapt to new roles and challenges in an increasingly fluid and dynamic career landscape.

Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory Usage

Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953) is foundational for exploring millennial career decisions in agronomy retail. This research uses the theory to analyze how millennials navigate their career paths and how the alignment between their evolving self-concepts and career roles influences their decision to leave or remain in the sector. By emphasizing developmental stages such as growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement, Super's model provides a structured lens to understand how career decisions unfold over time (Super, 1980). For millennials, who are often in the exploration and establishment stages, this research examines how their career experiences within agronomy retail align with their personal values, aspirations, and professional goals, ultimately impacting their engagement and retention (Super, 1990).

The exploration and establishment stages are particularly relevant in understanding millennial turnover. During exploration, individuals refine their interests and skills through internships, educational programs, and initial career roles, which help shape their self-concepts (Super et al., 1996). This research investigates how millennial workers in agronomy retail perceive their roles during this stage and whether the sector provides opportunities that align with their interests in environmental responsibility, technological advancement, and career flexibility. In the establishment stage, which involves securing and stabilizing a career path, millennials may face challenges such as limited growth opportunities, rigid organizational structures, or misalignment with their values, prompting them to seek alternatives. By applying

Super's framework, this study explores how these careers stages interact with external pressures and organizational practices, influencing decisions to stay or leave.

The life-space dimension of Super's theory is also integral to this research. Millennials often seek careers that allow them to integrate multiple life roles, including family, community involvement, and personal growth (Super, 1980). Agronomy retail, characterized by rural work environments and demanding schedules, may disrupt this balance, leading to dissatisfaction and career transitions. This study leverages the life-space perspective to assess how millennials manage these competing roles and how the agronomy retail sector's practices either support or hinder this balance. Additionally, the theory's recognition of career development's fluid and nonlinear nature aligns with millennials' tendency to be workforce wanderers, extending their exploration stage as they search for roles that better fit their evolving self-concept. This research uses Super's model to analyze these patterns and provide insights into how organizations can better align their practices with millennial career development needs.

Self-Determination Theory and Its' Role in Millennial Career Decision-Making

The Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000a), offers a robust framework for understanding human motivation and behavior, particularly concerning career decision-making. This theory suggests that individuals are driven by the intrinsic need to fulfill three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are critical in fostering self-motivation and well-being. Unlike external rewards that may drive decision-making for previous generations, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) emphasizes internal reasons that propel individuals toward fulfillment and growth. This theory has become especially relevant when examining millennial career decisions, as this generation prioritizes intrinsic motivations over external ones, such as job stability or salary (Gagné & Deci, 2005;

Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the agronomy retail sector, the theory's components are essential in understanding how millennials make career choices and what keeps them engaged and committed.

Autonomy of Self-Determination Theory

The cornerstone of the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) is the need for autonomy, which refers to the desire to control one's decisions and actions. Autonomy plays a pivotal role in shaping career decisions as millennials seek opportunities to exercise freedom and take ownership of their work (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). This preference for autonomy contrasts with older generations, who may have been more inclined to prioritize job security or external incentives, such as financial compensation (Ng et al., 2010). Millennials tend to gravitate toward careers that allow them to pursue projects aligned with their interests and values (Latham, 2018). For instance, in sectors like agronomy retail, where technology-driven innovation and sustainability are becoming more prevalent, millennials will likely find purpose-driven work that aligns with their intrinsic desire for autonomy (J. Brown & K. Smith, 2017).

Autonomy, a core component of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), refers to individuals' capacity to make independent decisions and exercise control over their actions, leading to increased intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). Autonomy plays a significant role in millennials' career decision-making in agronomy retail. Milot-Lapointe et al. (2021) assert that employees who experience higher levels of independence are more motivated, satisfied, and committed to their careers. This empowerment allows agricultural professionals to make critical decisions in crop management and resource allocation, aligning their work with personal goals and values (Hauser, M., 2014). This sense of autonomy is essential in agriculture, where tasks often require responsibility and initiative.

The autonomy experienced by millennial workers aligns closely with their career preferences as they seek roles that provide flexibility and the opportunity to apply their skills creatively. Quiñones Carrasquillo (2024) highlights that when employees feel autonomous, they are more likely to internalize their work as personally meaningful, strengthening their commitment to their career choices. Additionally, Adrian and Green (2001a) emphasize that agricultural cooperative managers exercise high levels of autonomy due to the decentralized nature of the sector, where quick responses to local business conditions are critical. This independence contributes to job satisfaction and ensures sustained engagement within the industry.

Competence of Self-Determination Theory

In addition to autonomy, competence is another fundamental component of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) that strongly influences millennials' career choices. Competence involves the need to feel adequate and capable in one's environment. Millennials are drawn to careers that offer continuous opportunities for learning, skill development, and personal growth. They seek environments where they can measure their progress and receive constructive feedback, enhancing their competence and reinforcing their motivation and engagement (Gagné & Deci, 2005). The need for continuous learning aligns with millennials' preference for roles where mentorship and professional development are prioritized, further boosting their sense of competence and job satisfaction (Guilbert et al., 2016).

Competence refers to an individual's sense of effectiveness and mastery over tasks. Competence in one's work is closely linked to career satisfaction and retention (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). In agronomy retail, competence is fostered through skill development and training, which is vital for keeping employees engaged and motivated in an industry that demands

technical and non-technical expertise. McDonald et al. (2024) underscore the importance of non-technical skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving in agriculture, asserting that these abilities are critical for immediate job performance and long-term career development.

Competence is tied to millennials' desire for continuous learning and skill enhancement. Dimock (2019) explains that individuals in agriculture who experience high levels of competence are more likely to internalize their work as meaningful, enhancing overall job satisfaction. The need for competence is particularly relevant for millennial employees prioritizing personal growth and career development opportunities. Training programs focusing on technical and non-technical skills are essential for fostering a sense of competence and reducing turnover in the agronomy retail sector (McDonald et al., 2024). Millennials prioritize roles where they can continually develop new skills and feel a sense of efficacy in their work, reinforcing their intrinsic motivation to stay in their careers (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Relatedness of Self-Determination Theory

Relatedness, the third pillar of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), refers to connecting with others and building meaningful relationships. This need is significant for millennials, who value collaboration and positive workplace cultures. Millennials often prefer environments that foster teamwork, open communication, and a sense of belonging, as these reasons contribute to their overall job satisfaction and commitment to long-term career goals (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In sectors such as agronomy retail, where collaboration and community engagement are vital components, millennials may find that their desire for relatedness is fulfilled, contributing to retention and job satisfaction (J. Brown & K. Smith, 2017).

In agronomy retail, a sector often involving rural and isolated working conditions, fostering relatedness can be challenging yet essential for employee motivation and retention. Research indicates that employees who experience solid social connections are more likely to remain engaged and motivated in their roles. Relatedness fosters career satisfaction, as employees are more likely to internalize their tasks as meaningful when they feel part of a supportive and collaborative environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

McDonald et al. (2024) demonstrate that fostering teamwork and communication in agriculture can significantly enhance employees' sense of connection, impacting their job satisfaction and long-term commitment to the sector. Moreover, relatedness in agronomy retail extends beyond immediate work relationships; it also involves a broader sense of belonging to a community or industry with shared goals and values (Adrian & Green, 2001b). Employees who feel their work contributes to a larger purpose, such as sustainability or community well-being, are more likely to remain motivated and committed to their career choices (Reeve & Deci, 1996). Millennials seek careers that align with their values and provide a sense of purpose, which can be cultivated through relational solid networks within the agronomy retail industry (Ng et al., 2010).

Career Satisfaction of Self-Determination Theory

Career satisfaction is crucial in sustaining careers within agronomy retail, particularly when examined through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). Autonomy enables employees to make meaningful decisions about their work processes, fostering a sense of ownership and control over their career path (Milot-Lapointe et al., 2021; R. Hauser, 2014). This empowerment allows individuals to align their decisions with personal values, directly contributing to job satisfaction. The ongoing evolution of agriculture, propelled by technological advancements and sustainability efforts, offers employees opportunities to

continuously develop their skills and expertise, further enhancing competence and retention (McDonald et al., 2024). The relationship between autonomy and competence is critical for sustaining long-term career success in agriculture. Milot-Lapointe et al. (2021) found that agricultural professionals who experience high levels of independence and competence report greater career satisfaction. Similarly, McDonald et al. (2024) linked non-technical skills such as leadership and problem-solving to job satisfaction and career fulfillment, reinforcing the relevance of Self-Determination Theory in agriculture.

Self-Determination Theory Usage

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) provides a valuable lens to examine millennials' career decision-making processes. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) offers insights into why millennials prioritize meaningful work, personal growth, and positive social connections in their careers by emphasizing the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For industries like agronomy retail, understanding these motivational drivers can help organizations create work environments that attract and retain millennial talent, aligning job roles with the values and aspirations of this generation

Based on the reviewed literature, a qualitative research approach is particularly well-suited for exploring millennials' career decisions in agronomy retail. Studies underscore that millennials prioritize intrinsic motivations, such as meaningful work, autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b; Gagné & Deci, 2005), which are complex and deeply personal reasons effectively explored through qualitative methods. Previous research highlights the value of capturing individual narratives, including Bateman's (2014) study on millennials' reasons for leaving jobs, to understand the nuanced reasons influencing career transitions. The qualitative approach allows for in-depth insights into how millennials describe

their career decisions, particularly within the unique context of agronomy retail. This sector, shaped by traditional values and emerging technological shifts, provides a rich backdrop for understanding millennials' evolving expectations, values, and career movement decisions in the context of agronomy retail and career decision-making.

Theoretical Framework Synthesis

Integrating Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how millennials make career choices and navigate transitions, particularly within agronomy retail. These two theories, when combined, provide both a developmental and motivational lens to explore career decision-making among millennials, a generation known for prioritizing autonomy, meaningful work, and professional growth. The combination of these theories can explain why millennials might leave careers in agronomy retail as their career trajectories evolve and their psychological needs shift over time.

Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), examines career development across different life stages, emphasizing how evolving self-concepts shape career decisions. The theory outlines a lifelong progression through exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement, highlighting how individuals reassess their career choices based on personal growth, life role changes, and external influences (Super, 1990; Hartung, 2013). In agronomy retail, millennials often seek career paths that align with their values, such as environmental responsibility and technological advancement, influencing how they navigate different career stages.

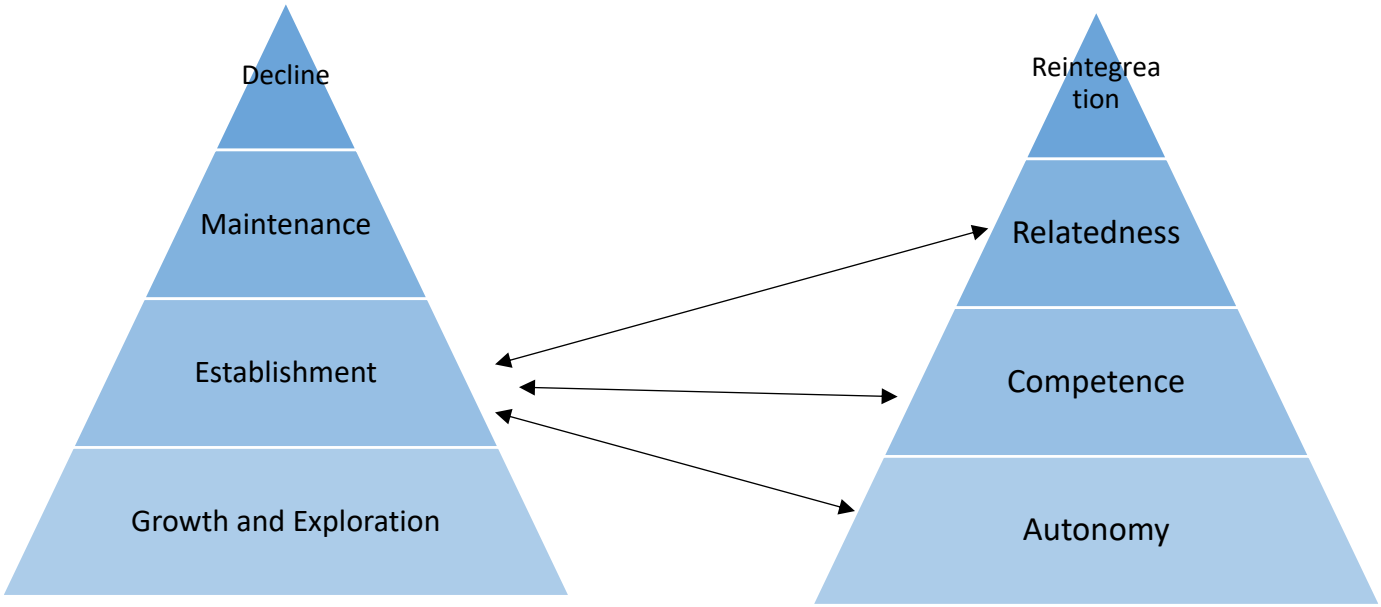
Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000a), introduces a motivational perspective on millennials' career decisions by emphasizing three core

psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, individuals experience greater job satisfaction and are likelier to remain in their careers (Gagné & Deci, 2005). For millennials in agronomy retail, autonomy may involve making independent decisions and contributing to sustainability efforts. Competence is reinforced through opportunities for skill development and professional growth, while relatedness is fostered through collaboration and meaningful workplace connections (Latham, 2018). Combining these theories provides a comprehensive framework for understanding millennials' career decision-making in agronomy retail. Super's theory explains how career development evolves, while Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) identifies the motivational factors that influence job satisfaction and retention. For instance, a millennial in the exploration phase of Super's model may experiment with different roles in agriculture. At the same time, the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) suggests their decision to stay, or leave will depend on whether the job fulfills their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The framework of Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) can also provide insights into why millennials may leave agronomy retail if a job fails to meet their psychological needs. For example, insufficient autonomy or opportunities for professional growth can lead millennials to become disengaged and pursue career opportunities elsewhere. Industries like agriculture, which may adopt new technologies and sustainability practices slower than others, risk dissatisfaction among a generation prioritizing innovation and purpose-driven work (Losch, 2022b). External reasons such as changes in personal roles or the pursuit of a better work-life balance often influence millennials' career transitions, aligning with Super's theory (Savickas, 2013).

The combination of Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), and Self- Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding millennials' career choices, particularly in agronomy retail. This dual approach highlights the developmental stages through which millennials progress in their careers and underscores the importance of fulfilling fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By using this framework, in Figure 2.1, organizations in the agriculture sector can better tailor their strategies to attract, retain, and engage workers, ensuring alignment with their evolving career goals and intrinsic motivations.

Figure 2.1. Theoretical Framework



Note. As the researcher, I developed this figure and included categories and indicators to examine how Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) can be integrated to address the research question: How do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States? *Millennials, based on age, are in the Establishment phase of Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory, and align closely with the needs for Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness as outlined in Self-Determination Theory. The horizontal arrows in the figure illustrate how each stage of career development can be meaningfully connected to corresponding*

Self-Determination Theory and Life-Span, Life-Stage Career Theory

Understanding millennials' career decisions in agronomy retail requires examining their internal motivations and the external career development stages they navigate. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1990) provide complementary perspectives on why millennials may leave the industry, offering insight into their psychological needs and broader career trajectories.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b) identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential for career satisfaction and retention. Millennials prioritize career autonomy, seeking flexibility and control over their work. However, agronomy retail often involves rigid schedules, extensive travel, and external pressures that may limit perceived autonomy. Competence, another key component, is influenced by access to training, professional development, and recognition in the workplace. When these opportunities are insufficient, millennials may feel disengaged and seek alternative career paths. Relatedness, or the need for meaningful workplace relationships, is also crucial. While agronomy retail fosters strong networks with farmers and industry professionals, millennials may struggle with isolation in rural settings or a disconnect between their values and workplace culture (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), provides an external perspective by mapping career progression through growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement stages. Millennials, particularly in the exploration and establishment stages, are focused on aligning their careers with personal values, skills, and long-term goals. Millennials may transition to other industries if agronomy retail does not provide

clear career pathways, advancement opportunities, or alignment with sustainability, and work-life balance preferences (Herr, 2001; Super, 1990).

These theories illustrate how psychological motivations and career development stages intersect to shape millennials' career decisions. Unmet needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can lead to dissatisfaction, particularly during the exploration and establishment stages when individuals evaluate long-term career fit. Addressing intrinsic motivations and structural career pathways is essential for improving millennial retention in agronomy retail, ensuring the industry adapts to evolving workforce expectations.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, the decision-making process of millennials leaving agronomy retail is shaped by a combination of personal values, generational characteristics, and theoretical frameworks. Millennials, driven by the desire for meaningful work, professional growth, and flexibility, often seek careers that align with their values of sustainability and ethical practices (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014; Smith & Nichols, 2021). Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1953), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) comprehensively understand how millennials navigate their career transitions, emphasizing the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in shaping their career satisfaction and decisions (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Super, 1980). Moreover, workplace reasons such as technological integration, opportunities for continuous learning, and work-life balance are critical to retaining millennial talent in the agronomy retail sector (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; J. Vogel, 2019). Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the challenges of retention in agronomy retail and aligning organizational strategies with the expectations of millennial workers. This review

highlights the importance of aligning industry practices with the evolving values of millennials to foster long-term engagement and success in the sector.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand how millennials in the Midwest region of the United States navigated the decision to leave careers in agronomy retail. Using a basic qualitative research design, the inquiry sought to capture participants' lived experiences and uncover the factors, both internal and external, that shaped their career transitions. The central question driving this research was: How do millennials describe their decision-making process for leaving careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States?

The approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of complex, context-specific experiences, emphasizing participants' voices without being confined to a rigid theoretical structure (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through detailed interviews and thematic analysis, the study examined the motivations, challenges, and values that influenced individuals' choices to exit the industry. The findings aimed to provide actionable insights for improving retention strategies and workforce engagement in the agriculture sector, particularly among younger professionals (Patton, 2015; Twenge, 2023).

Research Question

How do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States?

Research Design

This study employed a basic qualitative research design to explore how millennials in the Midwest region of the United States described their decision-making processes for leaving careers in agronomy retail. A qualitative approach was ideal for examining complex, experience-based transitions, as it prioritized participants' lived experiences and the meanings, they ascribed to them (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through in-depth, semi-structured

interviews, the study sought to uncover the nuanced motivations, challenges, and values that influenced participants' career decisions.

The decision to use a basic qualitative methodology reflected the need for a flexible yet structured framework capable of accommodating the layered nature of personal and professional transitions. As foundational to qualitative inquiry, this approach allowed for the exploration of how individuals construct meaning through their interactions with the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research was grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which recognizes that knowledge is co-constructed through personal and social experiences (Gray, 2014; Moon & Blackman, 2014; Neuman, 2014). This lens supported an in-depth exploration of how participants interpreted their career decisions within the broader cultural and organizational context of agronomy retail.

Crucially, three pilot studies conducted between fall 2022 and spring 2024 shaped and refined the final research design. These pilots were instrumental in developing, testing, and validating the semi-structured interview protocol and aligning it with the study's objectives (Seidman, 2019; Yin, 2018). Each pilot included interviews, researcher journal notes, concept maps, and member checking to enhance methodological rigor.

The first pilot study in the fall of 2022 focused on millennials who had chosen to stay in agronomy retail, revealing key motivators like professional development and workplace flexibility. For example, participants emphasized the value of accessible training and conferences, particularly those that addressed leadership development in a male-dominated field. These insights led to refinement of interview questions related to ongoing career commitment and highlighted the importance of access to flexible professional learning.

The second pilot study in the spring of 2023 pivoted to those who had exited agronomy retail, identifying themes such as poor work-life balance, limited career advancement, and unsupportive workplace cultures. One participant described a pivotal moment in his departure: a manager's dismissal of his childcare needs reinforced a culture that undervalued family obligations. This pilot prompted modifications in the research design to more deeply probe participants' experiences with workplace flexibility and support systems.

The third pilot study in the spring of 2024 served to further refine the interview protocol and evaluate question clarity. Participants included both those who remained and those who left agronomy retail. It revealed additional themes such as burnout, community connection, love for the work, and customer relationship dynamics. A participant named Mike shared how deep commitment to customer service became both a retention factor and a source of professional pride. These reflections confirmed the importance of including questions that explored passion, relational fulfillment, and community influence.

Together, these pilot studies informed both the methodological structure and thematic scope of the final study. They validated the interview format, confirmed the relevance of emerging themes, and ensured the study was grounded in participants' authentic experiences. As a result, the final design included semi-structured interviews that were sensitive to both individual and systemic influences on career decision-making in agronomy retail.

To analyze the data, the study began with a deductive approach using *a priori* coding, developed from the literature, pilot studies, and the theoretical frameworks of Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1953) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). A detailed codebook supported consistency and analytic rigor throughout the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). The analysis was iterative, blending deductive structure with inductive openness to

emergent themes. A detective analysis method, a pattern-seeking, non-linear approach, further encouraged deep engagement with the data to identify recurring themes and insights (Fife & Gossner, 2024; Saldaña, 2016).

In summary, the pilot studies played a foundational role in shaping the basic qualitative research design. They contributed methodological precision, enhanced alignment with participant experiences, and provided thematic direction. This iterative development process allowed for a comprehensive and authentic exploration of millennials' career decisions in agronomy retail, yielding findings that are both conceptually rich and practically applicable (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2016).

Participants

This study focused on millennials who had previously worked in agronomy retail but had since left the industry within the Midwest region of the United States. Participants held roles such as sales agronomists, digital specialists, and agronomy sales managers. These individuals were selected because their experiences offered valuable insight into the personal and professional factors influencing career transitions. The Midwest provided an ideal context due to the regional consistency in agronomic services and organizational structures, which enhanced comparability across participant experiences.

A combination of purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling strategies was employed to identify eligible participants. Purposive sampling served as the primary method, allowing for the intentional recruitment of individuals who met specific criteria, millennials born between 1981 and 1994 who had worked in agronomy retail and voluntarily exited the field (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Twenge, 2023). The strict criteria ensured that participants had direct, relevant experiences aligned with the study's research question. To expand the sample and reach

individuals no longer active in industry networks, snowball sampling was also used. Initial participants were encouraged to refer colleagues or acquaintances who fit the criteria. The referral-based approach was particularly effective in accessing a dispersed and potentially hard-to-reach population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, convenience sampling supported the recruitment process by leveraging the researcher's existing professional and regional networks. While not randomized, this approach enhanced feasibility and timeliness without compromising relevance, as all selected participants still met the established eligibility standards (Etikan et al., 2016).

The final sample consisted of 12 participants, consistent with qualitative research standards that prioritize data saturation over quantity. Saturation was reached when no new themes or perspectives emerged during the interview process, indicating that sufficient depth and variation had been achieved (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017; Mason, 2010). Had saturation not been reached, additional participants would have been recruited iteratively. The blended sampling strategy ensured a diverse and relevant participant pool while maintaining the depth and rigor needed for a rich exploration of millennials' decision-making processes in leaving agronomy retail careers.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

The use of semi-structured interviews, concept mapping, and analytic memoing further strengthened this alignment by ensuring flexibility in data collection while maintaining a structured approach to analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share personal narratives in an open-ended manner while ensuring that responses aligned with key thematic areas related to career motivation, work-life balance, job satisfaction, and industry

perceptions (Seidman, 2019). Concept maps served as tools for visually organizing and interpreting patterns that emerged from the data, helping to systematically connect individual experiences to broader trends (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Yelich Biniecki & Conceição, 2016).

Data Analysis

Managing qualitative data involves selecting and applying methods tailored to the research objectives and the nature of the data collected. I, as the researcher, chose tools and techniques that aligned with their goals, ensuring the data was systematically organized and analyzed to uncover meaningful insights (Bazeley, 2021). This process extended beyond data collection to include reflection and interpretation, requiring the me to move beyond surface-level observations and explore deeper meanings and relationships within the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). By analyzing participants' shared experiences and narratives, the researcher generated insights that contributed to understanding the research question (Creswell, 2013).

The focus of this study was to understand the decision-making process of why millennials left careers in agronomy retail. This required capturing real-world experiences through qualitative methods that allow participants to share their perspectives in depth (Percy et al., 2015). Creswell (2013) emphasizes that qualitative research often explores the meaning of participants' experiences while addressing potential inequities or systemic issues. Gathering detailed information enabled the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and generalizations that connected participants' narratives to broader frameworks and literature.

Organizing Data

The organization of data in this study followed a systematic and iterative process that ensured clarity, accuracy, and alignment with the research purpose. The process began immediately following each interview, with audio recordings transcribed using digital

transcription software. Once transcripts were generated, I reviewed each one by listening back to the original audio recordings and correcting any errors within the automated transcription. This step was essential to maintaining the integrity of participants' voices and ensuring accuracy in capturing the nuanced meaning of their responses (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Following transcription verification, I constructed handwritten concept maps to visually represent the key themes and narratives emerging from each interview. This step provided an early opportunity for data immersion and helped in identifying linkages between participant statements and broader thematic patterns. These handwritten concept maps were then transferred into digital formats, allowing for better storage, organization, and analysis across participants. As emphasized by Saldaña (2016), the use of visual tools like concept mapping supports deeper reflection and enhances transparency in qualitative research.

Once the transcripts and concept maps were finalized, I applied a structured coding framework using *a priori* codes derived from established theoretical models and pilot study insights. Specifically, the coding schema was informed by Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1953), which emphasizes the role of life roles and developmental stages in career decisions, and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), which centers on the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These theoretical constructs provided a foundation for interpreting participants' decision-making processes while allowing for new, emergent codes to surface during analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Gilgun, 2019). Using Microsoft Word, I manually applied these codes to the transcripts by highlighting relevant text passages and tagging them with corresponding categories. I employed visual cues, such as color-coding, underlining, and margin annotations, to distinguish between thematic groupings and theoretical categories. This manual approach promoted close engagement with the data,

fostering a deeper interpretive process while allowing flexibility to modify or expand codes as themes evolved (Saldaña, 2011, 2016).

The layered organizational process, from digital transcription and verification to visual mapping and structured coding, ensured the research remained methodologically sound and theoretically anchored. It also upheld key principles of qualitative research, such as transparency, reflexivity, and participant-centered analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Through this comprehensive strategy, the data enabled a robust exploration of millennials' career decision-making in agronomy retail.

Analytic Memoing

Analytic memoing supported reflexivity and trustworthiness in the research process by enabling me, as the researcher, to document evolving thoughts, biases, and emerging themes throughout data collection and analysis (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). These memos served as a critical space for ongoing reflection, where methodological decisions, emotional responses, and theoretical insights could be captured in real time. By revisiting and refining these notes throughout the study, the researcher was able to track shifts in interpretation, clarify assumptions, and maintain transparency in the analytic process. This ongoing documentation not only provided a clear audit trail but also contributed to the depth and credibility of the study by ensuring that emerging patterns were grounded in both participant narratives and my introspection.

Coding

A priori coding served as a foundational element of this study's analytical framework, providing both structure and flexibility in exploring millennials' career transitions from agronomy retail. The codes were developed based on two primary theoretical models, Super's

Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1953) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), alongside insights from three pilot studies conducted between fall 2022 and spring 2024. This deductive approach helped establish a solid conceptual base while allowing for the emergence of unexpected themes during the analysis process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldaña, 2016).

Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory emphasized evolving self-concepts, life roles, and career stages, which informed codes such as professional identity, career growth, family obligations, and geographic flexibility. These elements captured how participants navigated their roles and aspirations across life stages. Complementing this, Self-Determination Theory introduced three core psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which shaped codes reflecting intrinsic motivations. For instance, autonomy-related codes included flexibility, purpose-driven work, and work-life balance, while competence was expressed through professional development, technology innovation, and continual learning. Relatedness was reflected in team collaboration, desire for community, and interpersonal workplace connections.

The pilot studies informed the coding framework in real-world narratives. Recurring themes such as burnout, leadership challenges, customer relationships, and limited professional advancement led to additional context-specific codes, including managerial support, customer base, culture, and disengagement. These codes reflected unique dynamics within agronomy retail and helped ensure that the analysis captured both personal and systemic influences.

All codes were organized into three overarching categories: career motivation reasons, decision-making reasons, and millennial reasons. Each category was defined in a detailed codebook, which included conceptual definitions, supporting quotes, and references to relevant

literature and theory (Gilgun, 2019; Twenge, 2023). For example, technology innovation was categorized under career motivation due to its alignment with millennials' interest in agricultural advancements, while work-life balance was placed under both decision-making and millennial reasons, underscoring its dual significance. This coding structure aligned closely with the underlying theories. Codes linked to autonomy, competence, and relatedness fit within Self-Determination Theory's framework, while those emphasizing identity shifts and evolving obligations drew from Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory. Career motivation and millennial codes often overlapped, reflecting generational values and contextual influences that shaped participants' decisions.

Methodologically, the use of *a priori* codes supported transparency, consistency, and theoretical alignment. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, including interview transcripts, concept maps, and analytic memos (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking ensured participants could validate or clarify their contributions (Birt et al., 2016), while reflexive journaling documented the researcher's evolving insights, strengthening both transparency and analytical depth (Saldaña, 2016). By integrating *a priori* codes derived from established theories and pilot data, and remaining open to emergent insights, this study achieved a balance between deductive and inductive thematic development. This approach provided a nuanced, credible interpretation of how millennials in the Midwest navigated their career exits from agronomy retail, offering valuable contributions to both academic and industry understanding (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Casula et al., 2020; Nowell et al., 2017).

Research's Pilot Codebook

The pilot studies, the findings in the literature, the research conducted, and my knowledge of the sector of agronomy retail lent themselves to the following pre-determined

codes. These *a priori* codes were adjusted once the study was completed and the data was coded, see codebook below in Table 3.1 (Gilgun, 2019; Saldaña, 2016).

Table 3.1. Codebook of *A Priori* Codes from the Pilot Studies

Career Motivation Reasons	Decision Making Reasons	Millennials Reasons
Autonomy	Management/Leadership	Desire for Community
Competence	Logistics/Operations vs. Sales	Experiences
Relatedness	Work-Life Balance	Skills
Purpose-driven	Technology Innovation	Schedule Flexibility
Satisfaction	Long Term Potential	Pay and Promotion
Team Collaboration	Customer Base	Seasonal Constraints
Status Quo	Family Farm	Family Desires
Gender Representation	Opportunities for Rural Employment	Continually Learning
Professional Development	Relationships	Communication
Corporate Social Responsibility	Culture	Work-life balance
Meaningful Work	Perceived Industry Future	Peer Influence
Job Security	Managerial Support	Desire for Meaningful Impact
Autonomy in Problem-Solving		Family Obligations
Professional Identity		Personal Time
Stability		Geographic Flexibility
Skill Development		
Growth		

To clarify the organization and origin of the *a priori* codes used in this study, I categorized them into three main groups: (a) career motivation reasons, (b) decision-making reasons, and (c) millennial reasons. These categories were developed based on the theoretical framework, existing literature, and insights gained from the pilot studies.

The career motivation reasons category was informed by the theoretical framework on motivation, specifically Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), which identified (a) autonomy, (b) competence, and (c) relatedness as core psychological needs driving motivation. Additional codes in this category, such as: (a) purpose-driven, (b) satisfaction, and (c) meaningful work, expanded on the theory to capture broader reasons influencing career motivation. While some codes aligned directly with the theoretical constructs (e.g., autonomy aligned with millennials' desire for flexibility and self-direction), others, like Corporate Social Responsibility and Gender Representation, addressed specific motivators relevant to agronomy retail and millennials' values. The literature informed these supplementary codes, and the codes were reinforced through the pilot studies. The decision-making reasons category focused on the practical and contextual factors that influenced participants' career decisions. Codes such as: (a) management/leadership, (b) work-life balance, and (c) logistics/operations vs. Sales highlighted participants' concerns with workplace structure, operational demands, and personal priorities. These codes were drawn from both the literature and pilot studies, where participants described balancing family responsibilities, navigating industry-specific challenges, and evaluating long-term career potential.

The millennial reasons category encompassed attributes, motivations, and challenges associated explicitly with millennials' unique generational traits and work values. For example: (a) the desire for community, (b) flexibility, and (c) continual learning reflected millennials' characteristics, such as their focus on building connections, prioritizing adaptability, and valuing ongoing personal and professional growth. These codes emerged from pilot study narratives, which highlighted millennials' emphasis on work-life integration and meaningful work, as well as existing literature discussing generational traits and preferences.

Considering the central role of: (a) autonomy, (b) competence, and (c) relatedness in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), it was worth examining whether other Career Motivation Reasons codes could be organized within these categories. For instance, Autonomy encompassed codes such as Flexibility, Work-Life Balance, and Purpose-Driven, which aligned with millennials' desire for control over their work and personal lives. Competence included: (a) professional development, (b) continual learning, and (c) technology innovation, reflecting millennials' focus on skill-building and expertise. Relatedness captured codes like: (a) desire for community, (b) team collaboration, and (c) relationships, emphasizing social connections and interpersonal fulfillment. However, specific codes, such as: (a) corporate social responsibility and (b) gender representation, did not align directly with these categories. These were better understood as external motivators or contextual factors that resonated with millennials' values and experiences.

The organizational framework clarified how the codes related to the theoretical constructs, literature, and pilot study findings. Labeling codes based on their origin ensured transparency and demonstrated the iterative process of integrating theory, empirical data, and generational context. Further adjustments were made as the analysis progressed, particularly when new themes emerged that challenged or expanded the initial categories.

Coding Cycles

In this study, coding served as the foundation for analyzing the semi-structured interview data. Consistent with a basic qualitative research approach, I, as the researcher, functioned as the primary instrument of analysis, responsible for interpreting participants' narratives and constructing meaning from their experiences. The coding process unfolded in iterative cycles,

allowing both deductive and inductive insights to emerge in alignment with the study's constructivist paradigm.

The first phase of coding involved the application of concrete codes, explicit, descriptive labels that captured directly observable content from the interview transcripts. These initial codes served to organize the data by highlighting surface-level references present in participants' narratives. For instance, mentions of time were coded based on references such as "first year," "seasonal work," or "after the second child." Similarly, participants' job roles were coded with terms like "agronomist," "sales rep," and "crop consultant," while career stages were categorized using labels such as "entry-level," "management," or "career pivot." Additionally, codes were applied to decisions and transitions, including statements like "left the company," "stayed for promotion," or "moved to education." These concrete codes provided an essential foundation for deeper thematic analysis by rooting the data in the participants' lived realities. Concrete coding grounded the analysis in the participants' lived realities by identifying specific points of reference that reflected their day-to-day experiences. These codes served as a stable analytical entry point for the subsequent, more interpretive rounds of coding, where abstract themes and deeper patterns began to surface. This coding cycle approach, beginning with structured, concrete codes and evolving into layered, thematic interpretation, ensured that the data remained both faithful to participants' words and responsive to the broader research questions guiding the study.

After completing the initial round of concrete coding, I progressed into a conceptual coding phase, which focused on interpreting more abstract and interpretive elements within the participants' narratives. In this stage, I looked beyond surface-level observations to identify deeper constructs such as motivations, frustrations, internal judgments, values, and emotional responses that shaped participants' decision-making processes (Hennink et al., 2017). This

allowed for a richer and more nuanced analysis, capturing the underlying meanings and personal significance participants attributed to their experiences in agronomy retail. Conceptual coding helped link individual stories to broader themes, revealing patterns of thought and feeling that were not always explicitly stated but were nonetheless central to understanding their career transitions. This second cycle of coding enabled a deeper exploration of how participants made sense of their career transitions and the underlying values that influenced their decisions to leave agronomy retail.

To ensure a thorough and systematic analysis, I conducted three full passes through the entire data set. During each pass, I used Microsoft Word's formatting tools to visually differentiate the themes and codes. In the first pass, I highlighted text using color-coded fonts aligned with the three main coding buckets: (a) career motivation reasons, (b) decision-making reasons, and (c) millennial reasons. Each bucket was assigned a distinct color, blue, green, and orange, respectively to allow visual clarity in recognizing how different aspects of participants' responses aligned with the *a priori* codes established in the earlier stages of the study (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldaña, 2016).

In the second pass, I used bold, italics, and underlining to emphasize coding nuances and subthemes. For example, bold was used for *a priori* codes derived from Self-Determination Theory (e.g., autonomy, competence), italics for codes associated with Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (e.g., professional identity, career growth), and underlining for codes that emerged inductively during analysis. This formatting allowed for easy identification of overlapping codes and evolving themes within and across interviews.

During the third pass, I revisited all previously coded transcripts to verify consistency and ensure saturation. At this stage, no new themes emerged, indicating that the data had reached

thematic saturation (Mason, 2010). I refined code definitions where necessary and re-grouped passages to ensure alignment with both theoretical frameworks and pilot study findings. This iterative cycle also allowed me to detect convergence and divergence across participants' experiences, thereby strengthening the validity and depth of the thematic analysis (Hennink et al., 2017).

Throughout the process, I cross-referenced each code with the detailed codebook developed during the *a priori* coding phase, adjusting the framework as needed to reflect new insights while preserving conceptual clarity. This coding strategy ensured that emergent themes were grounded in participants' narratives and reinforced by a theoretical and empirical foundation (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Gilgun, 2019). By employing multiple coding cycles and integrating visual cues through formatting, I maintained rigor, consistency, and reflexivity throughout the analysis, ultimately producing a nuanced and credible understanding of millennials' career decision-making processes in agronomy retail.

Table 3.2. Expanded Codebook of *A Priori* Codes with Theoretical and Pilot Study

Code	Category	Theory	Pilot Study
Autonomy	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	2 & 3
Competence	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	1
Relatedness	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	1 & 2
Purpose-driven	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	2
Satisfaction	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	1
Team Collaboration	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	1
Status Quo	Career Motivation	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	3
Gender Representation	Career Motivation	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Professional Development	Career Motivation	Both	1
Corporate Social Responsibility	Career Motivation	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Meaningful Work	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	1 & 2
Job Security	Career Motivation	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Autonomy in Problem-Solving	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	2
Professional Identity	Career Motivation	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	3
Stability	Career Motivation	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	1
Skill Development	Career Motivation	Self-Determination Theory	1
Growth	Career Motivation	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	1 & 3
Management/Leadership	Decision-Making	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Logistics/Operations vs Sales	Decision-Making	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Work-Life Balance	Decision-Making	Self-Determination Theory	2 & 3
Technology Innovation	Decision-Making	Self-Determination Theory	1 & 3
Customer Base	Decision-Making	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2

Code	Category	Theory	Pilot Study
Family Farm	Decision-Making	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	3
Relationships	Decision-Making	Self-Determination Theory	1, 2, & 3
Managerial Support	Decision-Making	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Experiences	Millennial Reasons	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	1
Skills	Millennial Reasons	Self-Determination Theory	1
Schedule Flexibility	Millennial Reasons	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Pay and Promotion	Millennial Reasons	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Seasonal Constraints	Millennial Reasons	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	1, 2, & 3
Communication	Millennial Reasons	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	2
Continually Learning	Millennial Reasons	Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Career Theory	1

Data Preparation

Deductive analysis provided a structured approach to organizing data within a theoretical framework, enabling me to test and refine existing theories (Fife & Gossner, 2024). This process began by categorizing data according to predefined themes or constructs, identifying patterns that either supported or challenged the theory. The use of *a priori* coding enhanced this process by providing initial codes derived from literature or theory, offering a focused yet flexible framework for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Following the initial analysis, the data was grouped into recurring themes or topics through thematic analysis. This approach allowed me to identify patterns, reflect on insights, and draw conclusions linked to the research question (Bhattacharya, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). I

systematically compared millennial traits and characteristics of those who left agronomy retail with broader generational trends, highlighting specific reasons for career shifts and their broader implications.

A Priori Coding

A priori coding began with developing initial codes based on existing theories or relevant literature. This structured method ensured a focused approach to data analysis, particularly in studies that evaluated specific behaviors or interactions within a theoretical context (Fife & Gossner, 2024). While providing an initial framework, *a priori* coding was flexible, allowing researchers to adjust codes as new themes emerged during the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This adaptability ensured that data interpretation remained responsive to the complexity of the participants' experiences (Casula et al., 2020).

The coding process involved iterative refinement, which enabled me to deepen my understanding of the data and enhance the theoretical framework (Elliott, 2018). By applying and expanding *a priori* codes throughout the analysis, the researcher blended structured theoretical frameworks with emergent insights, resulting in a richer and more nuanced interpretation of the data.

Figure 3.1. Coding Example

Eight: ***I mean, what I did. I loved my customers. I loved the company I was working for. But I would say probably two things. Work life balance. There was no way we could have a family or even start a family. and then what was I going to do with said child for six months because spring and fall were both busy. there was two, there was no real promotion at that time at retail and so that was hard. when I was at retail, I was getting my master's degree, my MBA. And that was exciting so when finished it when I was at ag vendor one, but I had kind of inquired then at the ag retail and said, "Hey, if I get my MBA, I don't want to sell doing this the rest of my life.***

Themes

Themes in this basic qualitative study functioned as the central analytic products that encapsulated the patterns, meanings, and structural influences embedded within participants' narratives. The generation of themes was driven by a deductive analytic approach, grounded in pre-established theoretical constructs, complemented by inductive insights derived from interview transcripts, concept maps, and analytic memoing (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). This approach allowed for a structured yet responsive thematic framework that remained aligned with the study's purpose: to understand the decision-making processes that led millennials in the Midwest to leave careers in agronomy retail.

At the core of the deductive approach was the application of *a priori* codes developed from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1953), that shaped initial thematic expectations. These codes, which reflected concepts such as autonomy, competence, relatedness, role salience, and career development, provided an analytical lens through which participants' decision-making narratives could be interpreted. For example, codes like (a) work-life balance, (b) professional identity, and (c) continual learning were directly rooted in these theoretical traditions and guided the early cycles of analysis.

The *a priori* coding structure served as a roadmap for thematic exploration. It allowed for an organized examination of how participants' career transitions corresponded with motivational and developmental factors theorized in existing literature. These codes were applied deductively during the first round of coding, where data segments were marked using color-coded highlights and font formatting (e.g., bold for Self-Determination Theory codes, italics for Life-Span Theory), enabling a visual and conceptual organization of the narratives (Fereday & Muir-

Cochrane, 2006). This method helped ensure consistency across transcripts and created an audit trail that enhanced analytic rigor (Nowell et al., 2017).

Thematic development progressed through multiple coding cycles, each one refining and reorganizing codes into meaningful clusters. As additional insights surfaced through analytic memoing and participant language, the framework evolved to accommodate emergent codes that enriched the analysis without compromising theoretical integrity. Importantly, themes were not chosen based solely on their frequency of appearance; instead, they were evaluated for their interpretive weight, resonance across cases, and alignment with the research question (Patton, 2015). After achieving thematic saturation, codes were clustered into conceptually cohesive thematic buckets, categories that represented the shared motivations, tensions, and systemic challenges participants faced. For example, codes tied to autonomy, purpose-driven work, and customer relationships ultimately informed broader themes around desire for meaningful impact and navigating industry constraints. These themes were then supported by direct participant quotations, cross-interview comparisons, and member checks, ensuring trustworthiness and depth (Birt et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The final thematic structure acted as a scaffold for interpreting millennials' career transitions from agronomy retail, bridging personal experience with structural realities. Themes such as: (a) limited growth opportunities in rural contexts, (b) the role of professional identity and fulfillment," and (c) conflicts between workplace culture and personal values, emerged as explanatory frameworks that helped answer the central research question. Through this deductive-aided thematic process, the study provided not only a detailed understanding of career decision-making but also actionable insights for improving engagement and retention of younger professionals in the agricultural workforce.

Analytic Memoing

Analytic memoing was a critical tool in this qualitative research study, serving as a structured mechanism for reflection, interpretation, and meaning-making throughout the data collection and analysis process. As the primary researcher, I employed memoing to document my evolving thoughts, reactions, and analytical insights after each participant interview and during multiple coding cycles. This process allowed me to trace the development of key themes and refine my understanding of participants' narratives in real time.

Memoing also facilitated awareness of my own subjectivity and potential biases, which was particularly important given my insider status as a millennial with experience in the agricultural industry. By intentionally stepping back to reflect on how my perspectives might shape data interpretation, I was able to bracket my assumptions and engage more objectively with the participants' lived experiences. These reflections were captured in a dedicated reflexive journal and linked to individual interviews, thematic developments, and shifts in the coding process. Saldaña (2016) emphasized that memoing helps researchers maintain methodological rigor and authenticity by providing a visible audit trail of analytic decisions, which was especially vital in maintaining transparency and trustworthiness in this study.

Throughout the analysis, analytic memos evolved from simple descriptive notes into deeper conceptual reflections. Early memos included observations about participant tone, setting, or unexpected answers. As analysis progressed, memos became more theory-driven, helping me compare participant responses with constructs from Self-Determination Theory and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory. These entries also informed the development of my *a priori* codebook and provided rationale for adapting or merging codes in response to emergent themes.

Memoing further contributed to the iterative nature of qualitative analysis by capturing insights that informed subsequent interviews and coding cycles. After each transcription review, I used memos to record points of clarification, contradictions, or resonance across participants' accounts. These entries often prompted me to revisit earlier data and apply updated codes or refine existing themes. By anchoring my interpretations in both participant evidence and theoretical frameworks, memoing helped ensure the analysis remained grounded, flexible, and analytically robust.

In summary, analytic memoing played a foundational role in enhancing the depth, transparency, and credibility of the research. It supported a reflexive engagement with the data and contributed meaningfully to the development of findings that authentically represented the career experiences and decision-making processes of millennials who exited agronomy retail.

Part of the Researcher's Journal After an Interview

As part of ensuring reflexivity and transparency throughout the study, I maintained a researcher's journal to document personal reflections, observations, and reactions following each interview. This journaling process served as a critical space for examining my positionally, recognizing potential biases, and thoughtfully engaging with the participants' narratives without allowing my own experiences to interfere. The excerpt below offers a glimpse into one such entry, highlighting the internal dialogue and ethical mindfulness that guided my approach. This reflection followed an interview with a participant named Courtney and illustrates how I navigated empathy, neutrality, and integrity while honoring her unique voice.

> After the interview with Courtney, I found myself resonating with many of the challenges she described, particularly around work-life balance and lack of support from leadership. As a researcher with a background in agriculture, it was easy to relate

to her frustrations, and I noticed an instinct to validate her experiences based on my own. I had to consciously remind myself to approach her narrative with neutrality, recognizing that her story stands on its own and should not be interpreted through the lens of my personal experiences. This awareness helped me maintain focus on her unique perspective and experiences.

I also employed member checking and peer debriefing to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, allowing participants and colleagues to review the data interpretations and offer feedback. This process allowed me to send a full summary of what I plan to use in the results and finding and reinforced triangulation. CHAPTER 1 - Chapter 1 -Appendix C - includes the email that I sent as a follow-up after the interview, concept map, and summary was completed by me, the researcher, and sent back to the participant via email. Each participant was given 10 business days to make edits, provide comments and feedback for members checking.

By embracing a constructivist epistemology, I accepted that knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and participant. Rather than striving for objectivity, I focused on being transparent about my positionality and committed to honoring the authenticity of each participant's lived experience. My goal was not to generalize but to provide a credible, nuanced exploration of the decision-making processes that led millennials to leave careers in agronomy retail.

Data Representation

In this basic qualitative study, data representation was a critical element for accurately conveying participants' lived experiences and ensuring the integrity of their narratives throughout the research process. The goal of data representation was to present the voices of participants authentically and transparently, while aligning with the study's purpose of understanding

millennials' decision-making processes for leaving careers in agronomy retail. This representation extended beyond mere transcription and coding; it involved the thoughtful organization, interpretation, and display of findings in a manner that preserved the depth and complexity of participants' insights.

To achieve this, I implemented a multi-layered approach to representing data. Each semi-structured interview was digitally transcribed and manually reviewed to ensure accuracy. From there, the data was visually organized through both hand-drawn and digital concept maps, which served as an intermediate step between raw data and coded themes, see Figure 3.2. These visualizations allowed for a deeper understanding of how individual experiences are connected to broader thematic trends. Concept maps also facilitated the identification of relationships among participant experiences and their alignment with *a priori* codes based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1953).

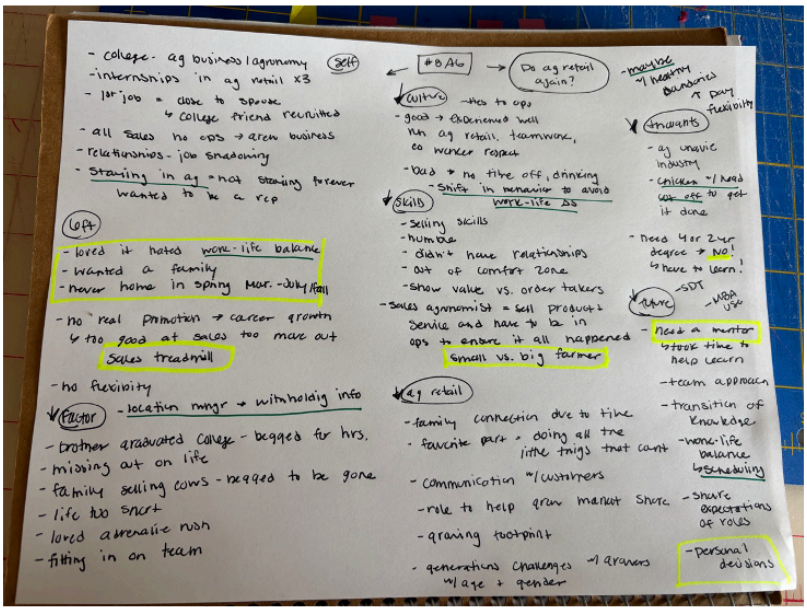
In presenting findings, care was taken to preserve the richness of participants' narratives using direct quotations, descriptive summaries, and thematic illustrations. Quotes were chosen based on their ability to convey the nuances of decision-making, motivation, and workplace experiences, while also ensuring that a diverse range of participant voices was represented. Themes were constructed inductively and deductively, informed by pilot studies, theoretical frameworks, and the coded data itself. Each theme was illustrated with data from multiple participants to reinforce validity and to demonstrate consistency across the sample.

To protect confidentiality and promote trustworthiness, all participants were assigned pseudonyms and identifiable details were removed or altered. This ethical consideration ensured participants' privacy while maintaining the contextual richness necessary for qualitative understanding. Additionally, member checking was conducted by providing participants with

their transcripts and visual representations (i.e., concept maps) to confirm that their stories were captured accurately and respectfully.

By integrating narrative excerpts, thematic synthesis, and visual data displays, the data representation in this study not only supported the credibility of the findings but also honored the voices and experiences of the millennials who shared their stories. This layered strategy of representation shown in Figure 3.2, includes both a handwritten concept map, which captures the researcher's immediate reflections and evolving insights after each interview, and shows a digital concept map, which systematized those reflections into a more structured, theory-informed framework. Together, these visual tools complemented the narrative and thematic analysis, ensuring that the results were grounded in participants' lived realities, reinforced by conceptual rigor, and accessible to both scholarly and professional audiences.

Figure 3.2. Display of a digital and handwritten concept map captured from the semi-structured interviews



Note: As part of the analytical process, I created concept maps to visually organize and make sense of the evolving patterns and connections within the data. These maps were initially drafted by hand during and after each interview to capture immediate reflections, key themes, and relationships among emerging ideas. Later, the handwritten maps were digitized by creating a map into Microsoft Word to enhance clarity, organization, and accessibility for further analysis and integration into the final coding framework.

Analytical Software Use

This study conducted data analysis manually using Microsoft Word instead of advanced qualitative software such as NVivo. While such software could efficiently organize qualitative data, it often imposed pre-determined structures that might have limited flexibility in recognizing emerging patterns and themes (Vagle, 2018). Additionally, software algorithms could have reduced the richness of participants' narratives, making it difficult to fully capture the complexity of Millennials' career transitions in agronomy retail (Peoples, 2020). To maintain interpretive depth, I manually coded transcripts using color highlights, font styles, underlining, and margin comments to track codes, evolving themes, and analytic reflections

Although manual analysis was more labor-intensive than using NVivo, it allowed for deeper engagement with the data and greater interpretive accuracy (Saldaña, 2016). The lack of automated functions, such as text searches and visualization tools, presented challenges; however, given the manageable sample size and thematic focus of the study, these limitations did not hinder the data analysis process. Instead, this hands-on approach ensured that themes emerged directly from participants' narratives, enhancing the authenticity and rigor of the research.

I took the different font colors and word types and put them in a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet, see Table 3.3. with notes to help me understand the stories of how millennials were making decisions to leave working agronomy retail through the *a priori* codes.

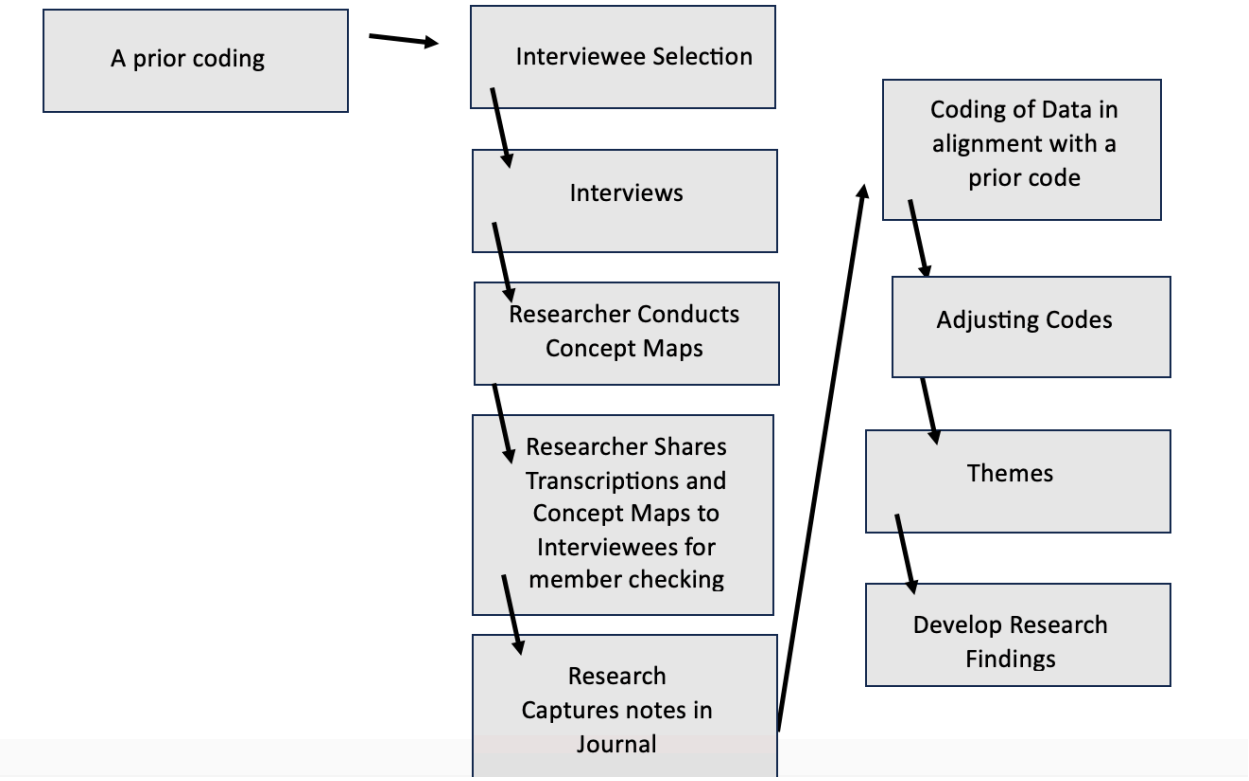
Table 3.3. Quotes from Transcription

Document	Theme Identified	Statement	Explanation
EightClean.docx	LSLS	I mean I'm passionate about it, I do love agriculture. It's how I grew up. It's the lifestyle I like.	This quote relates to Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory as it discusses career identity and the influence of family and lifestyle on career decisions.
EightClean.docx	SDT	And C did, he might have been thinking it, but he definitely didn't show the judgment, wasn't like, 'Come on, Ashley, don't be an idiot.' I mean, he was always willing to answer any question I had.	This quote highlights the supportive work environment and relatedness, as the mentor provided a non-judgmental space for learning, enhancing the interviewee's competence and sense of belonging.

Connecting the Data

I ensured that the collected data aligned with the research question, interpreting participants' narratives and identifying themes that contributed to answering the study's objectives. This process emphasized the importance of accurately capturing participants' experiences while linking findings to broader frameworks and literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By combining a structured approach with reflective analysis, the researcher provided a comprehensive understanding of millennials' career decisions to leave agronomy retail careers. Figure 3.3 shows the visual flow of the data for this study.

Figure 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Process



Note. The researcher developed this figure to visually show the flow of the data will be captured and managed throughout the research process.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research was essential to ensuring the accuracy, integrity, and credibility of this study's findings. Guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, his research employed multiple strategies to support a rigorous and transparent analytical process.

Credibility was achieved through triangulation, which involved cross-verifying data from semi-structured interviews, concept maps, analytic memos, and member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin, 2012). These multiple data sources enhanced the internal consistency and depth of findings. Member checking allowed participants to review their full interview transcripts, summaries of selected data, and researcher-generated concept maps, providing

opportunities to clarify, expand upon, or correct their contributions (Birt et al., 2016). This process reinforced the authenticity of participants' voices and improved the accuracy of interpretations.

Analytic memoing was used throughout data collection and analysis to document evolving reflections, methodological decisions, and thematic development. This created a transparent audit trail that clearly linked raw data to final interpretations and themes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Saldaña, 2016). Memoing also supported the iterative nature of qualitative analysis, allowing for continuous alignment between data and participant narratives.

Transferability was supported through thick description, which allowed readers to understand the research context and assess whether findings might apply to similar settings or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Dependability and confirmability were further strengthened through consistent documentation of the research process, including reflexive journaling to account for personal bias and positionality.

My reflexivity as a millennial working in agriculture was integral to maintaining sincerity and transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I continuously reflected on how my background could shape interpretations and kept detailed notes to ensure participant experiences remained central. Collectively, these strategies ensured that the study met Tracy's (2010) "Big Tent" criteria for rigorous and credible qualitative research.

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, guided by Tracy's (2010) emphasis on sincerity, respect, and relational accountability in qualitative research. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University prior to data

collection, ensuring that the study complied with institutional and national research ethics protocols.

To protect participant privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and data were stored securely on password-protected devices. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature, including their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Orb et al., 2001). Relational ethics played a central role in the study design, emphasizing mutual respect, transparency, and participant well-being throughout the research process (Tracy, 2010). In addition to verbal consent, participants engaged in member checking, reviewing their transcripts, selected excerpts used in the study, and concept maps constructed by the researcher (Birt et al., 2016). This not only ensured accuracy but empowered participants to shape how their narratives were represented.

Although participants were not financially compensated, their contributions were acknowledged through non-monetary gestures. Each participant received a full transcript of their interview, a summary of the analysis involving their data, and a copy of the final report. These actions reflected ethical research grounded in reciprocity, respect, and transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Throughout the study, ethical integrity was reinforced through ongoing researcher reflexivity, clear communication with participants, and prioritization of participant autonomy and agency. These practices ensured that the research was both ethically sound and deeply respectful of the individuals who shared their experiences.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach for exploring the underlying reasons and decision-making processes that led millennials to leave careers in agronomy retail,

particularly in rural areas. By employing a basic qualitative research design, this study uncovered millennials' motivations, challenges, and experiences, providing valuable insights into a critical workforce issue: retaining and engaging younger generations in agriculture. Through semi-structured interviews, concept mapping, and analytic memoing, I gathered and analyzed rich, in-depth data to address the research question.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to share detailed narratives about their experiences while focusing responses on key thematic areas relevant to the study's purpose. Concept maps complemented the interviews by visually organizing connections and patterns in participants' reasons for leaving agronomy careers, aiding in the thematic analysis process. Analytic memoing documented my ongoing reflections, decisions, and observations, ensuring a transparent and rigorous approach to data analysis. This methodological framework aligned with Creswell and Poth's (2017) emphasis on flexibility and iteration in qualitative research. By maintaining a clear record of methodological decisions and adapting to emerging findings, I ensured the study's trustworthiness and validity, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) standards for credible qualitative research. These strategies collectively supported a robust exploration of millennials' career transitions.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrated how the methodological design illuminated the reasons influencing millennials' departure from rural agronomy careers. The findings contributed actionable insights for the agriculture industry to address workforce retention and engagement challenges, offering strategies to attract and support this vital demographic in shaping the sector's future.

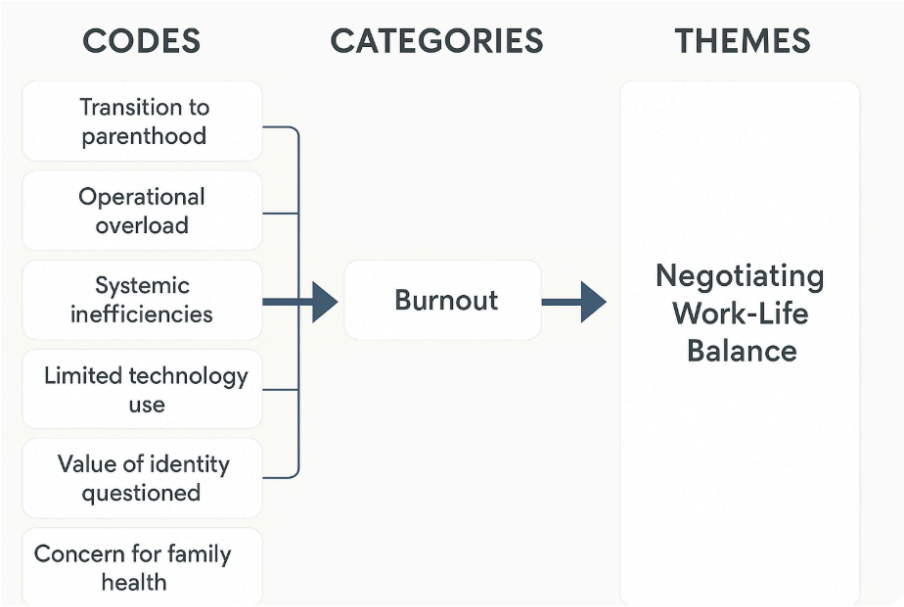
Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the findings from a qualitative study on career decision-making and professional trajectories among 12 millennials with past work experience in agronomy retail. It opens with an overview of the study and participant backgrounds, then outlines the key themes identified through semi-structured interviews. All participants, who had left agronomy retail positions in the Midwest, provided detailed insights into the factors influencing their career transitions. Interviews, conducted virtually and lasting 45 to 90 minutes, allowed for both flexibility and geographic reach. Real-time memoing and participant concept maps were used to capture and interpret experiences, ensuring a deeper understanding of how individuals made sense of their decisions to exit the industry.

The purpose of this study was to explore the research question of, how do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States. The visual below illustrates the final stage of qualitative data analysis, showing how raw interview data were systematically transformed into overarching themes. The process began with initial coding, where meaningful phrases and participant quotes were identified, such as “micromanaged and undervalued,” “outdated technology slows work,” and “no time for family.” These codes were then grouped into conceptual categories that captured shared patterns, including loss of autonomy, inefficient systems, burnout, and relational disconnection. Through iterative comparison and memoing, these categories were refined and synthesized into three central themes that directly answered the research question: Autonomy and Constraints in Role, The Centrality of Relationships and Belonging, and Negotiating Work–Life Balance. This visual demonstrates how participant experiences moved from individual

accounts to collective meaning-making, illustrating the analytic progression from descriptive data to interpretive understanding.

Figure 4.1. A Visual Representation of the Final Coding Process



Note. Figure 4.1 This is a visual representation of the final coding process, showing how initial codes *were grouped into* categories *and then abstracted into overarching* themes.

The study followed *a priori* coding process informed by theory and refined through iterative thematic analysis. Three central sub-themes were grouped under three major themes that emerged from this analysis: (a) Autonomy and Constraints in Role, with sub-themes of Empowerment vs. Micromanagement and Career Plateauing; (b) The Centrality of Relationships, with sub-themes of Mentorship as Identity Anchor and Relational Breakdowns; and (c) Negotiating Work-Life Balance, with sub-themes of Transition to Parenthood and Burnout and Exit. These themes, shown in Table 4.1, reflect both individual and shared experiences across participants and provide a comprehensive view of the factors shaping career exits from agronomy retail. Triangulation of data sources included interviews, researcher concept maps, and researcher memoing, were all used to validate and enhance the credibility of the findings.

Table 4.1. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Sub Themes
1. Autonomy Constraints in Role	a. Empowerment vs. Micromanagement b. Career Plateauing
2. The Centrality of Relationships	a. Mentorship as Identity Anchor b. Relational Breakdowns
3. Negotiating Work-Life Balance	a. Transition to Parenthood b. Burnout and Exit

Participant Overview

This study included 12 participants, each of whom self-identified as a millennial, born between 1980 and 1994 (Strauss & Howe, 1991), and met the eligibility criteria of having previously worked in agronomy retail within the Midwest region of the United States before voluntarily exiting the field. To qualify, participants needed to have held roles such as agronomy manager, sales agronomist, or digital agriculture specialist, reside in a Midwestern state, and left their careers in agronomy retail. All participants engaged meaningfully in the study, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality throughout the research.

Recruitment was conducted through purposeful sampling within the researcher's professional network, followed by snowball sampling to access a broader and more diverse participant pool. The twelve participants represented a geographic cross-section of the Midwest, including the states of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually and ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in duration. Of the participants, four identified as female and eight as male. Their career stages, family structures, and post-agronomy paths varied widely. While some emphasized family formation and childcare responsibilities as central to their decision to leave, others pointed to professional stagnation, burnout, and a desire for better alignment with personal values and long-term goals.

Despite the diversity of experiences, all participants expressed a shared intent to offer candid, thoughtful reflections that could inform the future of the industry. A detailed summary of participant characteristics is provided in Table 4.2. These collective narratives form the foundation for exploring the broader themes that emerged during analysis and illuminate the complex decision-making processes millennials undertook in leaving agronomy retail careers.

Table 4.2. Participant Information

Participant Pseudonym	Sex	Previous Agronomy Retail Role	Years in the Agronomy Retail Role	Career After Agronomy Retail
Randy	Male	Agronomy Retail Sales	2	Agriculture Industry
Paul	Male	Agronomy Retail Manager, Sales and Digital Specialist	20	Farming
Jack	Male	Agronomy Retail Sales and Digital Specialist	6	Agriculture Industry
Sarah	Female	Agronomy Retail Sales	4	Agronomy Vendor
Elaine	Female	Agronomy Retail Sales	3	Agriculture Industry
Kevin	Male	Agronomy Retail Manager and Sales	3	Agriculture Academics
Mark	Male	Agronomy Retail Sales and Digital Specialist	7	Agriculture Industry
Abby	Female	Agronomy Retail Sales	6	Agronomy Vendor
Courtney	Female	Agronomy Retail Sales	6	Agriculture Consulting
Ty	Male	Agronomy Retail Sales and Digital Specialist	13	Agriculture Consulting
Abe	Male	Agronomy Retail Sales	5	Agronomy Vendor
Joe	Male	Digital Specialist	3	Farming

Note. The table presents each participant's gender-neutral pseudonym, their prior agronomy retail role, the number of years they worked in the industry, and their subsequent career path. While pseudonyms were selected to protect confidentiality, they may occasionally reflect the gender of the actual participant (e.g., female names were used for women and male names for men). This approach balances anonymity with readability while ensuring that personal identities remain protected.

Randy

As a millennial professional with roots in the agricultural community, shaped by a family background in farming and seed sales. After earning a business degree and completing multiple internships in agronomy retail, he began his career in agronomy retail in the Midwest, viewing it as a steppingstone rather than a long-term path. His early enthusiasm gave way to frustration due to long hours, low pay, limited career advancement, and cultural misalignment within the workplace. Determined to find more fulfilling and better-compensated opportunities, Randy transitioned into erosion control sales grateful for the foundational lessons learned in ag retail, he credits that experience for helping him clarify his professional goals and values. A quote from

Randy that best describes his agronomy retail career, "It almost showed me more about what I don't want to do forever than really showed me what I do."

Paul

Being someone who has spent over a decade building a multifaceted career in agronomy retail. Starting as a custom applicator, he advanced into roles encompassing sales, precision agriculture, and customer support. He was driven by a deep commitment to helping growers and contributing to global food production. Known for his strong relationships with clients and a willingness to take on diverse responsibilities, he eventually left the agronomy retail industry due to increasing work-life imbalance, lack of upper management support, and a desire to start his own farming operation. "Some of those people were more than just a grower, they were a friend," Paul shared. He remains connected to agriculture through selective seed sales, maintaining the trusted relationships he built over years in the field.

Jack

Jack began his career in agronomy retail shortly after graduating in 2016 with a background in biology and education. Initially drawn to the field through meaningful internship experiences and a strong passion for working with farmers, he quickly assumed increasing responsibilities in his role, often managing the workload of multiple former employees. Despite eagerness for sales, technology, and agronomic innovation, the combination of limited career advancement, minimal recognition, and unsustainable work-life balance led to his departure. One of the quotes of advice Jack shared was, "One of the pointers that I got was don't get your CDL, because then you get stuck in a truck, then you get stuck running operations and all that." Since leaving agronomy retail, he has transitioned into higher-level roles in the agricultural sector,

continuing to work closely with farmers while gaining greater flexibility, growth opportunities, and personal fulfillment.

Sarah

She is a professional from the Midwest who began her career in agriculture at the age of 17 through internships in agronomy retail. Sarah holds a college degree in crops and soil science and has several years of hands-on experience as a sales agronomist and district seed representative. In these roles, she built strong relationships with growers and provided comprehensive farm planning and agronomic support, which contributed to her success. While passionate about agriculture and mentoring, she eventually transitioned out of agronomy retail due to the intense seasonal stress, lack of work-life balance, limited career development, and low compensation. When Sarah talked about her experiences in agronomy retail she shared, "As much as I can complain about my time at ag retail, I wouldn't trade it for anything… I would always go back to ag retail to start my career… but I wouldn't stay there forever." Today, she continues to work in the agricultural industry in a role that offers greater autonomy and alignment with personal and professional goals, while still valuing the foundational experience gained in agronomy retail.

Elanie

After earning a four-year degree in animal science and approximately eight years working in agronomy retail in the Midwest, she transitioned to a family-owned business. Despite a strong passion for agriculture and meaningful relationships with farmers and colleagues, she ultimately chose to leave the industry to prioritize family life and better balance personal responsibilities. Her decision was driven largely by the demanding and unpredictable hours of agronomy retail, particularly during planting season, which conflicted with raising a young child

while her spouse farmed full-time. Sarah got emotional when talking about her decision to leave, when she stated:

> I was starting a family, and it just wasn't working for me … If I could have stayed in ag retail, I probably would have if I could have found a way to have the family and be there for my daughter but yet also still give what I needed to.

Although she appreciated the professional growth and technological learning opportunities within the role, she found greater flexibility and alignment with family needs outside of agronomy retail.

Kevin

With a bachelor's degree in agronomy and several formative internships in both retail and wholesale agricultural settings, he spent three years working in agronomy retail in the Midwest, selling fertilizer, seed, crop protection, and emerging precision ag services. Driven by a desire for growth, he pursued a master's degree and transitioned into a regional agronomy training role with an agriculture vendor, supporting early-career agronomists across multiple states. Known for a strong understanding of agronomic practices and a passion for mentoring, he ultimately left agronomy retail due to challenges with work-life balance, lack of support, and limited career development opportunities. "I knew I wasn't going to be there in agronomy retail forever … I understood the job, I felt like I had perfected the job, but I knew that that wouldn't be a forever job," Kevin reflected. His career reflects a deep commitment to the industry and insight into the systemic factors influencing career decisions among millennials in agronomy retail.

Mark

Known for a passion for precision agronomy and a strong sense of customer commitment, he transitioned out of agronomy retail due to concerns about pay variability,

limited work-life balance, and a lack of upward mobility. Despite moving into a corporate role with broader impact and greater stability, he remains deeply connected to agriculture, valuing its purpose and the tangible contributions it makes to communities and the global food system. "I was doing just fine, but the stress was not a stress that you have in corporate... the variable of the pay and the hustle, it's a little exhausting as you're trying to plan life and future," were the thoughts that Mark continued to share in his interview.

Abby

She began her career in agronomy retail following multiple internships during college and a degree in agricultural business and agronomy. Originally drawn to the industry for its connection to agriculture and strong earning potential, she quickly advanced in a sales role, significantly growing her customer territory. Abby shared the story:

> I loved my customers. I loved the company I was working for. But I would say probably two things. Work life balance… there was no way we could have a family or even start a family… and then there was no real promotion at that time at retail, and so that was hard.

Despite success and a passion for building farmer relationships, she ultimately left agronomy retail due to burnout, poor work-life balance, and limited career advancement opportunities. Since leaving agronomy retail, she has continued working in agriculture through roles with agriculture vendor sales and distribution, where she found greater flexibility, professional growth, and alignment with personal values, especially as she became a mother.

Courtney

Courtney is a millennial woman from the Midwest with deep agricultural roots, having grown up on a family farm where she developed a strong connection to rural life and farming

values. With hands-on experience in agronomy retail spanning multiple co-ops and private dealers, she built a successful career as a sales agronomist, known for her dedication to small growers and ethical sales practices. Despite her passion for helping farmers and excelling in customer relationships, she ultimately left agronomy retail due to systemic issues including poor work-life balance, gender bias, burnout, and lack of support for working mothers. When sharing her story, Courtney stated:

> I honestly didn't spend any time with [my daughter] until she was six because I was in retail. I was non-existent unless it was snowing… There was no balance. I mean, I was expected to do this job, but small print everywhere else. So there was no balance.

She transitioned to private consulting, allowing her to stay connected to agriculture while prioritizing her family and personal well-being.

Ty

He brings over a decade of experience in agronomy retail across the Midwest, where he held roles ranging from seed manager to regional sales agronomist. Raised on a farm and drawn to agriculture through a well-rounded agronomy degree and multiple internships, Ty built his career on strong farmer relationships, a passion for problem-solving, and a deep commitment to teamwork. In working his agronomy retail job he stated:

> I was involved in a large area doing that… helping others sell to difficult customers, training sellers, showing them how to talk in front of growers. Of course, all the complaint calls—I helped ground on as well, from bad germinations to replace to all of that.

Despite early career enthusiasm, increasing operational demands, lack of work-life balance, and burnout led him to transition out of ag retail. Today, he remains connected to

agriculture in a different capacity, carrying forward his industry knowledge and values while prioritizing family life.

Abe

He is a millennial professional who began his career in agronomy retail in the Midwest after gaining initial experience in seed sales. Coming from a dairy farming background, he sought to broaden his agronomic knowledge and diversify his career skills. Although passionate about agriculture and dedicated to customer success, he ultimately left agronomy retail after two years due to misalignments between job expectations and reality, workplace culture challenges, and the physical and emotional demands of the role.

> That night when I got home, I knew I was like, this isn't for me. Yep. That was the last straw. It's like, if that's what I have to fight against, I'm not going to bust my butt just to get nowhere.

These were Abe's thoughts as he made the final decision to leave agronomy retail. He transitioned to a role with an agricultural vendor, where he found better work-life balance and a stronger fit for his long-term goals in the seed industry.

Joe

Having a strong personal and familial connection to agriculture, he was raised around farming in the Midwest and entered the agronomy retail industry through college internships, where hands-on training and mentorship fostered his deep interest in agronomics. Over several years, he held a multifaceted role that included operational tasks, sales support, and leadership in new technologies like drone spraying. When sharing about his career in agronomy retail, Joe state:

> I love the agronomy part of it. I mean just being in depth with all that and the training was great and it's a really good experience. You learn a lot about agronomics and it's just like a hands-on school.

Despite a strong work ethic and passion for agriculture, he ultimately left agronomy retail due to poor work-life balance, limited career advancement, and compensation concerns. Now working in a more focused seed sales role, he remains active in agriculture and values the foundational experience gained from agronomy retail.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized around the central research question; how do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States? Each section presents significant themes that emerged from the coding process. These themes and sub themes are supported and contextualized through illustrative examples drawn from participant interview responses and relevant documents, offering insight into how they inform the broader inquiry.

Table 4.3. Themes and Sub-Themes Emerging from Career Narratives in Agricultural Retail

Theme	Sub Themes
1. Autonomy Constraints in Role	a. Empowerment vs. Micromanagement b. Career Plateauing
2. The Centrality of Relationships	a. Mentorship as Identity Anchor b. Relational Breakdowns
3. Negotiating Work-Life Balance	a. Transition to Parenthood b. Burnout and Exit

Autonomy Constraints in Role Navigation

The first theme, Autonomy Constraints in Role Navigation, captures how the need for independence, growth, and meaningful career progression shaped millennials' decisions to leave careers in agronomy retail. Many participants entered the industry with genuine enthusiasm,

eager to support farmers, build their expertise, and contribute to their communities. Early mentorships often served as a source of inspiration and professional development. Abe shared, "My mentor empowered me to go learn," reflecting how guidance and freedom early on reinforced his engagement. However, this sense of autonomy diminished over time. Abe was told to focus on seed sales. "I was given seed growth goals that were not realistic with the other job duties asked of him, allowing little time and space for thinking outside of the box to get my job done". Participants described how outdated organizational structures, rigid leadership, and poorly defined responsibilities replaced the initial empowerment they experienced. Abby noted, "There was no flexibility back then. It was like, this is what we do. Everybody puts their time in," pointing to how micromanagement and inflexibility wore down motivation and creativity. As autonomy eroded, so too did the participants' connection to the work, with many describing how their roles became unsustainable and misaligned with their values.

Empowerment vs. Micromanagement

Within the broader theme of autonomy and constraints, the sub-theme Empowerment vs. Micromanagement emerged as a powerful and deeply personal factor in participants' decision-making process. Early in their careers, many millennials experienced empowering relationships with mentors and leaders who encouraged independent growth. Abe shared, "It taught me how to work with people that are young, old, from all different backgrounds," reflecting on how his mentor gave him the freedom to learn and make mistakes. Similarly, Joe recalled, "Fred was one of the best people I've probably ever worked with… it was a great partnership," highlighting the positive impact of guidance built on trust and respect.

However, this experience of empowerment often faded as participants advanced. Many described how leadership shifted from supportive to controlling, especially in high-stress periods

like planting season. Sarah shared, "The leadership within agronomy retail was of an older generation that was concerned about the profit margin but not the farmer's profitability," suggesting that short-term metrics began to overshadow long-term collaboration and trust. Others noted that leaders were "out of touch" with the day-to-day realities of modern agronomy, and decisions were made without meaningful input from those closest to the work.

The contrast between being trusted to lead and being micromanaged was stark. Participants repeatedly expressed frustration at being excluded from strategic conversations or having their input dismissed. As Jack put it, "There's nothing more frustrating than having responsibility without authority." Paul echoed this: "I had ideas, but they weren't heard… they'd say, 'We've done it this way for 30 years,' and that was the end of it." This culture of rigidity not only undermined morale but also made participants feel stuck in roles that didn't evolve. This erosion of autonomy became a turning point for many. What had once been a collaborative environment transformed into a structure where trust was lacking, innovation was stifled, and employees were monitored rather than mentored. Kevin described it as "being just another number," despite managing key accounts and demonstrating consistent performance. The shift from feeling valued to feeling controlled led participants to question their future in the industry.

Career Plateauing

The sub-theme Career Plateauing further illustrates how autonomy constraints shaped millennials' decisions to leave agronomy retail. Many participants felt there was little opportunity for advancement or that their skills were underutilized. Elaine observed, "If I wanted to be a step higher, I had to leave and go work for an agriculture vendor." Jack similarly noted, "Once I was truly onboarded as a sales agronomist, there wasn't much more learning and development

happening." For millennials seeking long-term growth, this stagnation prompted critical reflection.

Participants described asking deeper questions about their future roles, responsibilities, and how well the work aligned with their life goals. Jack explained, "I would be a little more detailed in asking career progression questions... I wouldn't say demanding, but I would ask more questions about role expectations to leadership." Many began to sense that their potential was being overlooked. As Mark noted, "You're working two and a half people's jobs, and when review time comes, they say ‘You're average, here's 3%.' It was a slap in the face." Some felt their trajectory was capped not by capability, but by inflexible systems. "By the third year, you've figured out what to do. After that, it's the same grind year after year," one participant reflected. Kevin shared, "I felt like I had perfected the job, but I knew I wasn't going to be there forever... I just didn't see a future where that job could be my forever path." Without a clear ladder to climb, many began to disengage emotionally and mentally, even before physically exiting.

In many cases, the tipping point came when professional dissatisfaction collided with personal priorities. Ty said plainly, "Work-life balance is the number one reason why I left." Joe added, "I'm sitting there on salary and I'm working 15-hour days … getting paid probably $5 an hour." Others, like Courtney, revealed how burnout stretched into personal realms: "I had my child Bella, and it got worse and worse as years went on … this is probably the answer for my divorce." For Sarah it was the impossibility of sustaining the work with a growing family: "You start looking at having kids, starting a family … it's really hard to work in agronomy retail and have a family." Mentorship and support also played a role in perceived growth or the lack of it. As Sarah noted, "I didn't have any agronomy support. I really didn't have any sales support. I had

to teach myself everything from the ground up." While early roles sparked optimism and a sense of learning, participants described how stagnation set in once the learning curve flattened and upward mobility proved limited or nonexistent.

Millennials in this study did not leave lightly, they left after concluding that agronomy retail, in its current form, could not offer them the growth, balance, or recognition they needed to sustain a fulfilling career.

Summary: Autonomy and the Decision to Leave

In response to the research question, how do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States, the theme of autonomy surfaced as a central and decisive influence. Participants did not leave the industry impulsively. Their decisions were deliberate and often stemmed from long-term reflection and growing misalignment between their values and the realities of the work environment. While many entered agronomy retail with optimism, driven by purpose, passion, and early empowerment from mentors, this support often diminished over time. The shift from trust and autonomy to rigid oversight, micromanagement, and outdated leadership models left many feeling confined, unheard, and professionally stagnant.

As participants matured in their careers, they increasingly questioned their trajectory and whether continued tenure in agronomy retail would offer growth or fulfillment. Elaine captured the dilemma directly: "If I wanted to be a step higher, I had to leave and go work for an agriculture vendor." Similarly, Jack expressed how professional development stalled; "There wasn't much more learning and development happening." The erosion of opportunity was not just professional, it became personal. Ty shared, "Work-life balance is number one reason why I left." Courtney went even further, connecting the culture of burnout to her personal life: "This is

probably the answer for my divorce." These accounts reveal that the inability to grow or shape one's role meaningfully intersected with major life events, including becoming parents and striving for healthier family dynamics. The tipping point for many was a perceived loss of influence and identity. Feeling micromanaged, excluded from decisions, or dismissed when proposing change led participants to disengage emotionally before they exited physically. Paul stated, "They'd say, ‘We've done it this way for 30 years,' and that was the end of it." For millennials who valued adaptability, collaboration, and innovation, this rigidity was not just frustrating, it was a deal-breaker. They sought roles in agriculture where their voices mattered, where trust was mutual, and where they could contribute without sacrificing their health or family.

Ultimately, autonomy was not simply about decision-making power; it symbolized respect, trust, and alignment with broader life goals. Millennials in this study made the decision to leave agronomy retail when that autonomy vanished and was replaced with systems that felt controlling, unsupportive, and outdated. Their exits were not a rejection of agriculture, but a conscious step toward careers that were sustainable, relational, and reflective of their evolving identities.

The Centrality of Relationships and Belonging

The second major theme to emerge from this study, The Centrality of Relationships and Belonging, underscores how millennials' career decisions were significantly shaped by the quality of their interpersonal connections within agronomy retail. Participants consistently described relationships, not tasks or titles, as the emotional foundation of their work. These connections included mentors who fostered early growth, teammates who supported them through long days in the field, and the farmers they proudly served. When present, positive

relationships functioned as sources of stability, identity formation, and motivation. As Joe shared, about a former employee, "He's basically like my mentor and I still talk to him to this day… he taught me a lot through the years." Similarly, Abby recalled how a seasoned coworker across the hall helped her transition from an "ambitious, clueless college graduate to a confident professional". These mentoring bonds offered more guidance. They anchored participants' sense of belonging and professional self-worth. However, when those support systems were absent or deteriorated due to micromanagement, generational disconnects, or exclusionary leadership, participants' emotional investment unraveled. Courtney's concept map reflected this duality, pairing a deep connection with farmers alongside words like "conflict," "undervalued," and "misaligned priorities," highlighting how internal dysfunction could tarnish even the most rewarding aspects of the work. Relational breakdowns whether through generations, gender-based judgment, exclusion from critical communication, or demeaning work expectations, left many participants questioning their future in the industry. For Abby, being forced to change into clothes at work to attend her sibling's graduation encapsulated the emotional toll of such disconnections. "My brother graduated from college. I had to beg … it was on a weekend… I had to beg to get off of work for a few hours to go to this. My phone rang non-stop the whole time I'm sitting at the graduation ceremony. I couldn't go home to change. I had to change in our closet bathroom at work into good clothes, go to the college town to the graduation, and they told me, ‘You come right back.' I couldn't attend going out to supper or anything with my family and that is a special family moment I will never get back." These insights emphasize that millennials did not leave simply because of logistics or burnout; many left because they no longer felt seen, respected, or connected to the people and values that once grounded them in their work.

Mentorship as Anchor

The role of mentorship emerged not only as a formative influence but also as a critical differentiator in participants' long-term engagement and eventual departure. Mentorship was described as a key driver of early confidence, identity development, and professional belonging. For many participants, their initial connection to the industry was deeply shaped by the guidance and relational investment of a mentor who helped them find footing in a complex, high-stakes environment.

Joe spoke of the lasting impact of such relationships: "Fred was one of them … one of the best people I've probably ever worked with … I think the good ones obviously give you a mentor or train you the right way." This mentoring relationship remained intact even after Joe left agronomy retail, highlighting the lasting emotional value of authentic support: "He's basically like my mentor and I still talk to him to this day … it is a great partnership." Sarah, who entered the industry as a teenager, reflected on the indispensable role mentorship played in shaping her skillset and confidence: "If it wasn't for the mentor, I don't know if I'd known half of what I learned early in my career." This early guidance created a strong professional foundation, but for some, the absence or loss of mentorship was equally defining. As roles evolved and organizational priorities shifted, participants noticed a decline in meaningful development support. Elaine shared a regret many echoed: "I do wish I could have had a mentor that could have walked me through what the job should look like." Without mentorship, participants struggled to navigate ambiguous expectations and demanding workloads. The lack of relational investment led some to feel abandoned or overlooked, particularly in high-pressure roles that demanded rapid learning and emotional resilience. Abby captured this contrast by highlighting

how lucky she felt to have a positive mentor early on: "A coworker in the office… was highly respected… and just a super person."

Participants emphasized that mentorship extended far beyond onboarding or technical training, it served as a powerful signal of belonging, recognition, and future potential within the organization. Participants' narratives revealed that high-quality mentoring relationships were closely tied to stronger engagement and commitment within agronomy retail. Those who reported feeling guided and supported described greater job satisfaction and a stronger willingness to persist in the role. Conversely, participants who lacked mentorship often experienced uncertainty, slower development, and reduced confidence in their professional trajectory. Overall, participants who felt seen, guided, and developed reported investing more emotionally in their work, while the absence of these supports often contributed to disengagement and eventual exit. However, when mentorship eroded or was never present, many began to question whether the organization truly supported their growth. This questioning often sparked broader doubts about long-term fit, career satisfaction, and future viability. For Jack, this shift was part of a larger reevaluation: "I came in clueless. College graduate. Wanted to learn." But once learning plateaued and mentorship faded, the drive to remain in agronomy retail weakened.

The findings suggest presence or absence of mentorship functioned as an early indicator of whether participants saw a future in agronomy retail. When strong mentorship was in place, millennials felt empowered and purposeful. When it was missing, their connection to the role and organization frayed, accelerating their decision to exit. The data revealed that relational infrastructure, particularly the presence or absence of mentorship had a significant influence on participants' engagement and career trajectories. Participants who experienced strong mentorship

described greater confidence, professional growth, and willingness to remain in their roles, while those who lacked such support reported feeling undervalued and more likely to leave agronomy retail.

Relational Breakdowns

While many millennials in agronomy retail described entering the field with enthusiasm and a desire to contribute meaningfully to agriculture, several participants indicated that challenges in building and maintaining strong relationships appeared to play an influential role in how they later reflected on their decisions to leave. The workplace relationships that participants did have early in their careers such as mentors or supportive peers were often foundational to their confidence, growth, and professional identity. However, as they moved deeper into their roles, many reported a breakdown in communication, trust, and recognition that made continued employment feel not only unfulfilling but emotionally untenable.

A central pattern across interviews was the lack of open communication and transparent leadership. Participants consistently described feeling excluded from decision-making processes or intentionally kept in the dark. Abby articulated this clearly: "He wanted to withhold information … that's what pushed me over the edge." The emotional toll of being left out or misled undermined trust in leadership and gave the impression that their voices and insights were not valued. Elaine echoed this sentiment, noting, "You try so hard to do everything right and still get overlooked, it wears on you." This type of emotional erosion compounded over time and led participants to question whether they belonged in environments where collaboration and honesty were lacking. Another common theme was the lack of cross-departmental respect, which created resentment and alienation. Joe described the tension between sales and operations: "There's a perception… that sales just drive around all day while operations do the hard work." This

misunderstanding bred mistrust between teams, ultimately sabotaging cohesion and shared purpose. Millennials in the study, who often prioritize collaboration and inclusive culture, found such division to be toxic. Without relational bridges across departments, daily work felt adversarial and isolating, making long-term commitment difficult to envision.

Gender and generational bias further exacerbated feelings of exclusion. Sarah shared, "They really judged me based on my gender … that was probably the hardest." Courtney described the work culture as a "good old boys' club" that left her feeling unwelcome, particularly when she sought to grow into leadership. These inequities weren't just obstacles, they were violations of professional dignity and identity. Participants reported that their ideas were frequently dismissed, their needs as parents ignored, and their ambition interpreted as insubordination. This was particularly jarring in a field that marketed itself as community-oriented and purpose-driven. The absence of meaningful mentorship in later stages of participants' careers added to this disconnection. While early guidance helped many transitions into the field, ongoing mentorship and support systems were rarely sustained. Mark emphasized the importance of mentorship: "Best college education that required me to learn hands-on. I see agronomy retails not last long when there is not a mentorship and learning plan put into place." Without such support, many millennials felt adrift, uncertain about advancement opportunities, and unmotivated by the flat and transactional nature of their career paths.

A lack of recognition also played a powerful role in participants' disengagement. Jack recalled feeling deflated after a performance review: "I sat down with my manager, and he said, ‘You've done a fine job this year. We're going to give you the average 3% raise … And I remember just being really offended by that." Abby's experience of being denied time off to attend her great-grandmother's birthday only to be told to return immediately underscored how

leadership often failed to consider employees' humanity. Such moments didn't just represent policy shortcomings; they were deeply personal experiences that highlighted a misalignment of values.

Over time, participants described relational breakdowns led to emotional disengagement, which preceded physical departure. Mark described the toll succinctly: "It just became a grind." Even for high performers, the emotional cost of being consistently overlooked, disrespected, or misunderstood proved too steep. Participants did not cite a single bad day or disagreement as their reason for leaving; rather, they described a slow-building realization that the workplace culture no longer reflected their expectations for communication, growth, or belonging. The data indicated that relational deficits, such as the absence of mutual respect, inclusive leadership, and emotional safety shaped participants' decision-making processes. When trust eroded and workplace cultures failed to provide meaning or recognition, participants described leaving agronomy retail as a necessary step to protect their well-being and align their careers with their values. Participants did not describe their decisions to exit agronomy retail as impulsive; they were the outcome of relational disappointments that gradually made staying feel impossible. Without the foundational elements of mentorship, inclusion, and transparency, the sense of purpose that once anchored them to the field eroded, leaving them searching for work environments where they could be seen, valued, and supported as whole people.

Summary: The Centrality of Relationships and Belonging

In answering the central research question, how do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States?, this theme illustrates that relationships were not peripheral to their choices, but foundational. Participants' narratives reveal that belonging, mentorship, and interpersonal respect

were vital to their initial engagement and long-term commitment. The presence of strong relational support early on, such as mentors who modeled growth and stability, helped many navigate the steep learning curve of agronomy retail, and limited updated technology use. However, participants shared those relationships fractured due to micromanagement, exclusion, or unaddressed value misalignments participants' motivation and identity within the role diminished. Ultimately, the decision to leave often reflected a search not for escape, but for a workplace where relational respect, personal values, and community were once again aligned.

Negotiating Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance emerged as one of the most emotionally charged and decisive factors influencing millennials' exits from agronomy retail. While nearly all participants expressed a strong personal tie to agriculture, many having grown up on farms or in rural communities, the demands of agronomy retail proved increasingly at odds with their broader life goals. The cultural mantra of endurance and nonstop service, while once motivating, became unsustainable. Jack captured this ethos plainly: "When the sun's shining, you've got to make hay." At first, this work ethic instilled pride. But over time, it left participants burned out, emotionally depleted, and questioning whether the trade-offs were worth it. Participants described missing weddings, holidays, graduations, and even medical appointments due to peak-season demands. As one interviewee stated, "You were expected to put work first—always. Even if that meant sacrificing time with your newborn or your spouse."

Transition to Parenthood

Parenthood served as a powerful inflection point in the decision-making process. As participants transitioned into new roles as mothers and fathers, their tolerance for imbalance decreased. Kevin reflected, "As you start to turn the page on about the age of 25, you're in a

stage of your life where you start looking at having kids … it had never been clearer to me that I need to find something different." This realization often came after a particularly jarring moment. Paul shared, "When my first child was born, we did the footprints and then I answered my phone that had been ringing during delivery to answer questions about spraying… my wife was not impressed." These moments were not rare. Sarah recounted, "I had my first kid while I was working in retail … and I worked there for about a year with her. But it was hard. I didn't feel like I could be a good mom and do that job well at the same time." For many women in particular, the demands of the role clashed with caregiving responsibilities. Elaine explained, "If I was going to start a family, I needed to be the one present for my kids." Meanwhile, Courtney reflected on longer-term consequences: "I think agronomy retail didn't help me with my parenting as I didn't really know my child as grandparents and daycare spent more with her than I did." These experiences made clear that the decision to leave wasn't rooted in a lack of dedication, but in an evolving understanding of what it meant to thrive both personally and professionally.

The absence of flexibility or formal accommodations exacerbated this tension. Several participants said they were denied time off even for critical family moments. One described needing to attend her child's school play and being told, "Only if you're back in time to finish your reports." These subtle but cumulative experiences led many to conclude that the system was not built to support whole, multi-dimensional lives.

Burnout and Exit

While parenthood often accelerated the decision-making process, burnout emerged as a universal undercurrent. Participants described years of taking on multiple roles, sales, logistics, deliveries, and emergency repairs, largely due to chronic understaffing. Courtney explained, “At

probably all retailers… you get pulled into doing something because you're low on manpower… always hauling anhydrous tanks or working 15-hour days." Kevin echoed this strain: "Even if you were a day or two out of the office, it seemed like it was a week behind when you got back. You just never caught up." The accumulation of tasks outside their job descriptions made many feels undervalued. Joe noted, "I felt like they didn't recognize what I actually did. It was all about how many acres you covered, but no one saw how late you stayed or how many times you went the extra mile." Elaine added, "Trying to sell anything was difficult because our facility was out of date. It felt like we were set up to fail."

The restricted use of technology within agronomy retail contributed to increased inefficiency and workload, heightening the risk of burnout among employees. Many participants described working in systems that resisted digital tools for planning, scheduling, or customer management. Manual recordkeeping, outdated equipment, and inefficient communication processes created repetitive work and delayed problem-solving. What could have been automated or streamlined often fell back on the agronomist, resulting in longer hours and higher frustration. For example, Kevin described still relying on paper-based ordering and tracking systems, while others referenced the absence of basic digital coordination tools between sales and operations. This resistance to adopting technology not only slowed progress but also reinforced feelings of inefficiency and futility. Ty also reflected on how outdated systems contributed to the stress of daily work, noting that "so much of what we did could have been automated or handled through technology, but instead, it all fell on people. You'd spend hours on what should've been a five-minute task." This sentiment echoed others who felt agronomy retail's resistance to digital tools intensified burnout by forcing manual work and constant catch-up.

Even promotions failed to offset the pressure. Paul admitted, “I had taken on a lot more work than I ever thought I was capable of… but I was obviously corrected on that pretty quick.” Joe, despite advocating for improvements and supporting his team, felt dismissed: “The biggest thing is just figuring out ways to compensate those people more… and move people up if you think they’re good talent. But that never happened.” Importantly, most participants did not leave agriculture entirely. They pivoted to roles that allowed them to stay connected to the industry while regaining personal sustainability. Elaine observed, “It’s common that agronomy retail people want to work for an agriculture vendor. There’s more flexibility and not as many crazy hours.” For many, leaving wasn’t about abandoning the profession, it was about reclaiming balance and purpose in a system unwilling to modernize.

Summary: Negotiating Work-Life Balance

In addressing the central research question, How do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States, the theme of negotiating work–life balance provides a clear, emotionally grounded answer. Participants initially entered the field with passion and purpose, often shaped by rural upbringing, mentorship, and a strong desire to serve farmers. However, as they matured and life circumstances shifted, particularly through the transition to parenthood, they found themselves in an industry that demanded unrelenting sacrifice without sufficient support or reward.

Burnout was intensified not only by operational overload but also by the limited use of technology within agronomy retail. Participants described environments that relied heavily on manual processes, outdated systems, and inefficient communication methods. Tasks that could have been automated or simplified through digital tools instead consumed excessive time and energy. Ty explained that “so much of what we did could have been automated or handled

through technology, but instead, it all fell on people." This lack of modernization compounded exhaustion and left employees feeling trapped in cycles of inefficiency.

These technological and structural shortcomings, combined with rigid work expectations eroded participants' initial enthusiasm. They began to question their professional identity, value, and long-term sustainability within agronomy retail. For many, the decision to leave became a strategic and deeply personal act of self-preservation, aimed at protecting their health, their families, and their continued contribution to agriculture in more balanced, adaptive roles.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents findings from a qualitative study exploring how millennials in the Midwest United States described their decision-making processes for leaving careers in agronomy retail. Through in-depth interviews with twelve participants who had held roles ranging from sales agronomists to digital specialists, the study captured both professional and personal motivations behind their career exits. The analysis was guided by the central research question; how do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States?

Three primary themes emerged: Autonomy and Constraints in Role, The Centrality of Relationships and Belonging, and Negotiating Work-Life Balance. Within these themes, subthemes such as: (a) Empowerment vs. Micromanagement, (b) Mentorship as Identity Anchor, (c) Career Plateauing, (d) Relational Breakdowns, (e) Transition to Parenthood, and (f) Burnout and Exit illustrated the layered complexity of participants' decisions. Participants described early optimism in their roles, often supported by mentorship and purpose-driven commitment, which overtime gave way to experiences of stagnation, micromanagement, lack of recognition, and unsustainable demands. Work environments that devalued autonomy and trust, restricted

advancement opportunities, and imposed excessive workload pressures were cited as major influences. Relationships with mentors, peers, and supervisors, played a decisive role in shaping belonging and motivation. When communication, recognition, and respect eroded, participants reported disengagement that preceded their exits. Although individual stories varied, participants consistently emphasized that their departures were not rejections of agriculture itself but critiques of the employment model within agronomy retail. As life circumstances shifted, particularly around family formation and parenting, the inflexibility of the retail structure increasingly conflicted with personal goals and values. Many sought roles in agriculture that offered continuity of purpose but provided greater adaptability, recognition, and balance.

Overall, the findings reveal a generational shift in expectations: participants valued adaptability, balance, and respect for the whole person over endurance, hierarchy, and conformity. Their decisions to leave reflected deliberate reassessments shaped by autonomy, relationships, and work-life balance, underscoring systemic challenges that influence millennial retention in agronomy retail.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative research was to explore the research question of, how do millennials describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail in the Midwest region of the United States? Through twelve semi-structured interviews with self-identifying millennials who worked in agronomy retail as a retail manager, sales agronomist, or data specialist, the study provided valuable insights regarding the personal, organizational, and industry-wide factors influencing their decisions to exit these roles. In addition to participant interviews, insights were further enriched through the researcher's journal notes, concept maps developed after each interview, and the process of member checking, all of which contributed to a deeper understanding of emerging patterns and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings.

This study aligns with the literature and framework established in Chapter 2 - particularly regarding millennial values, career expectations, and the application of Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (1953) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a, 2000b). These frameworks framed the study by addressing how millennials experience career development through various life stages and how their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape their career decisions. As emphasized in the literature (Brenny & Yelich Biniecki, 2024; E. A. Vogel, 2019; Ng et al., 2010; Twenge et al., 2020) millennials prioritize meaningful work, flexibility, professional growth, and alignment with their values, particularly sustainability, innovation, and ethical practices. These priorities repeatedly surfaced in participants' narratives, especially in themes such as autonomy and constraints in role navigation, negotiating work-life balance, and the centrality of relationships.

What distinguishes this study from prior research is its unique focus on agronomy retail, an underexamined but critical component of the agricultural workforce, paired with a generational lens on career decision-making, consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing the need to understand evolving workforce expectations in context (Twenge, 2023; Buendía et al., 2020). While previous studies have examined millennial turnover broadly across various industries, few have investigated the interplay of identity, organizational structure, rural labor dynamics, and family life specific to agronomy retail (Super, 1980; Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Smith & Nichols, 2021; Twenge, 2023). Even less attention has been given to how young professionals in agriculture weigh long hours, seasonal burnout, community ties, and career plateauing when deciding to exit a sector deeply embedded in their values and upbringing.

This research breaks new ground by situating these career exit decisions within Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory, which highlights the evolving interplay of life roles across developmental stages, and Deci and Ryan's (2000a) Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Together, these frameworks provide a layered understanding of why millennial talent disengages from a field they often enter with deep intrinsic passion. Moreover, this study integrates underutilized methods, such as researcher reflection through concept mapping and journal notes to enhance the depth of analysis and to center participant voices with credibility and nuance.

In doing so, this work not only grounds the findings in existing theories but also extends them by applying them to an agricultural setting that demands new thinking in workforce strategy. It broadens the literature by highlighting a gap between millennial career ideals and the realities of rural retail agronomy, pointing toward structural shifts needed to retain emerging talent in agriculture. Ultimately, this study generates new knowledge by articulating the lived

experiences of millennials in a sector under pressure to modernize, and the findings can inform a a platform for future inquiry into how the agronomy retail industry can evolve to support a more sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready workforce.

Discussion of Findings

Navigating the Tension Between Autonomy and Structural Constraint

A defining tension uncovered in this study is the misalignment between millennials' desire for purposeful, autonomous work and the structural rigidity embedded in many agronomy retail organizations. Participants' early career stages often reflected optimism, steep learning curves, and fulfilling mentorship relationships aligning closely with the exploration and establishment phases outlined in Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory. However, this momentum was frequently interrupted by inflexible job designs, blurred role expectations, and limited opportunities for advancement.

This growing friction is best understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), which asserts that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential psychological needs for motivation and engagement. Participants entered the workforce with high intrinsic motivation, driven by a desire to serve farmers and solve complex agronomic problems, yet repeatedly encountered environments that prioritized control over creativity, directly undermining autonomy. Abby and Elaine, for example, described being constrained by micromanagement and bureaucratic norms that actively stifled innovation, echoing Bateman's (2014) and Ngotngamwong's (2020) findings that disengagement often results from environments that undervalue autonomy and personal agency.

Technology also played a complex role within this dynamic. While precision agriculture tools, digital scouting platforms, and data-management systems had the potential to expand

autonomy and competence by enabling employees to make informed, real-time agronomic decisions, many participants described these technologies as double-edged. In some cases, digital systems increased managerial oversight and task monitoring, reinforcing the same hierarchical controls that limited self-direction. Others reported that inconsistent training and lack of integration left them feeling less competent rather than empowered, reflecting an erosion of the Self Determination Theory need for competence. Conversely, participants who worked in technologically adaptive teams, where innovation was encouraged and tools were implemented collaboratively, described stronger feelings of relatedness and professional growth, demonstrating how supportive digital adoption can strengthen motivation and engagement when aligned with human-centered leadership (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Carmeli et al., 2009).

These structural and technological limitations also contributed to what participants widely described as career plateauing, where early skill development gave way to stagnation and repetition. Participants like Joe and Paul described being redirected into operational work (e.g., loading trucks, managing inventory), which diluted their advisory roles and led to a breakdown in competence development (Abdullah, 2017; Ismail et al., 2018). This misalignment between job design, technological implementation, and professional identity produced motivational erosion and disillusionment, not with the field of agriculture itself, but with how their roles were structured and valued. In short, the failure to integrate technology in ways that enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness further intensified the motivational gap identified by Self-Determination Theory.

Empowerment and Mentorship as Conditions for Thriving

Not all participants' experiences were negative. A small subset, most notably Abe and Kevin recounted positive developmental trajectories rooted in empowerment and mentorship.

These participants described leadership environments that encouraged problem-solving, respected individual insight, and invested in their growth. Such experiences directly supported all three Self-Determination Theory needs and fostered what Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 13) describe as "optimal functioning." Abe's account of being trusted to manage complex tasks early on speaks to the protective role of autonomy and relatedness in buffering the demands of high-stakes seasonal work.

Mentorship emerged as a developmental anchor, one that facilitated not only skill acquisition but also identity formation, resilience, and belonging. Participants consistently described mentors as more than technical trainers, they were guides, role models, and identity anchors who provided psychological safety in high-pressure environments. Jack's reflection, "I came in clueless. college graduate. wanted to learn," illustrates how mentorship normalized pressure, built confidence, and revealed pathways forward. Such narratives underscore Berger's (2020) and Fry's (2018) assertion that mentorship strengthens employee retention through emotional and professional scaffolding.

Equally telling, however, was how participants defined mentorship by its absence. Elaine's experience of being left to "figure it out" revealed how the lack of structured guidance translated into role confusion, slower integration, and eventual disengagement. Importantly, participants did not interpret mentorship narrowly as skill instruction, they viewed it as a relational contract, one that affirmed belonging and provided direction during formative career stages. This resonates with Deci and Ryan's (2000a) Self-Determination Theory, where competence and relatedness are essential to optimal functioning, and with Super's (1980) Life-Space theory, which emphasizes the role of social systems in vocational development. Critically, when mentorships were inconsistent or disrupted by leadership turnover, participants saw this

not simply as a logistical gap but as a deeper organizational failure to invest in relational capital (Cook, 1994; Gifford & Nilsson, 2014). The lack of continuity carried symbolic weight, communicating to employees that their growth and identity were not prioritized. The findings suggest that mentorship should be treated not as an optional enhancement, but as a core element of workforce sustainability and a strategic lever for long-term retention.

Relational Breakdown and the Emotional Cost of Culture

While mentorship often facilitated early engagement, its absence or breakdown proved equally powerful in shaping attrition. Participants such as Sarah, Abby, and Courtney described toxic team environments characterized by exclusion, microaggressions, subtle, often unintentional slights or dismissive behaviors that communicate devaluation, and generational disconnect. Abby's account of information being intentionally withheld "that's what pushed me over the edge" illustrates how micro-level relational breaches had macro-level retention consequences. These findings align with Buendía et al. (2020), who identify relational capital as a critical determinant of professional retention in high-pressure industries. The emotional toll of working in fractured teams was especially salient. Participants used language like "undervalued," "conflict," and "disrespected" to describe daily interactions. Sarah's gendered experience of being dismissed, and Courtney's description of ethical misalignment, demonstrate the cost of working in cultures that fail to affirm personal identity or uphold fairness especially for underrepresented groups. These findings mirror Ely and Meyerson's (2000) insights on the cumulative emotional impact of gender bias in male-dominated industries and Birt et al.'s (2016) argument that relational misalignment accelerates disengagement when values and environment are out of sync.

Team Culture: Buffer or Burden?

While much attention has been paid to individual relationships like mentorship, team culture surfaced as a distinct and influential variable, what some participants called their "emotional infrastructure" (Carmeli et al., 2009; Super, 1980). In high-stress environments like agronomy retail, where seasonal peaks demand long hours and physical intensity, teams either provided psychological safety and fellowship, or further fragmented participants' sense of worth and connection.

Kevin's concept map, featuring terms like "respectful culture" and "learning together", highlighted how strong teams met both operational and emotional needs. These findings align with Super's (1980) emphasis on the Life-Space dimension of career development, where professional identity is shaped in tandem with one's social systems. Conversely, participants like Joe described interdepartmental conflicts, particularly between sales and operations that fostered resentment and tribalism. These dynamics reflected misaligned incentives and eroded morale, consistent with Carmeli et al.'s (2009) assertion that team dysfunction undermines trust and increases turnover risk.

Life-Stage Transitions and the Erosion of Belonging

As participants aged into new life stages, the tension between personal identity and professional role grew more pronounced. For Ty, Kevin, and Paul, missing family milestones due to work demands became emotionally unsustainable. Their narratives support Super's (1980) theory that career development must evolve in tandem with life roles such as parenting and caregiving. When agronomy retail roles failed to flex with these transitions, employees were forced into difficult trade-offs. Abby's account of changing in a closet bathroom to attend her sibling's graduation and being told to return immediately, exemplifies the symbolic violence of

organizational inflexibility. It was not the task itself that drove disengagement, but the message it conveyed: that workers' full identities were not recognized or respected These stories echo the work of Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) and Smith and Nichols (2021), who found that millennials prioritize work-life integration and resist compartmentalized, transactional models of employment. The findings also lend empirical support to Twenge's (2023) argument that burnout is not the result of individual fragility, but systemic misfit. Participants did not exit because they lacked grit or loyalty, they left because the structure of work failed to evolve with their lives. This was not a personal failure but a rational, values-driven realignment.

At the same time, the findings complicate and challenge prior assumptions. Much of the earlier literature (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021; Twenge, 2023) on millennial turnover frames disengagement primarily as an attitudinal or motivational issue, often attributing exits to generational impatience or weak organizational loyalty. This study directly contradicts those assumptions by showing that exits were not impulsive or entitlement-driven, but carefully weighed decisions rooted in identity alignment and structural realities. Moreover, while previous research has highlighted mentorship and leadership as retention factors (Berger, 2020; Fry, 2018; Gifford & Nilsson, 2014), this study expands the discussion by surfacing the cumulative impact of structural rigidity, seasonal intensity, inflexible schedules, and role overload, factors that even strong mentorship could not fully offset (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021; Twenge, 2023). In this sense, the findings broaden our understanding by linking individual career choices to systemic organizational patterns, reframing turnover as both a developmental and structural phenomenon rather than a deficit in employee commitment.

Exit as Evolution, Not Disengagement

This study both affirms and extends prior research while offering a distinctive perspective. Importantly, the decision to leave agronomy retail was framed by participants not as abandonment, but as a form of professional evolution. Participants like Sarah and Jack transitioned into adjacent roles that preserved their agricultural identity while providing greater autonomy, opportunities to rebuild competence, and renewed relatedness through communities that aligned with their values. These transitions represented not rejection of agronomy, but restoration of core psychological needs identified in Self-Determination Theory Deci & Ryan, 2000a), the need to act with self-direction, to feel effective, and to belong within meaningful relationships.

These reframing challenges the dominant narrative in some turnover literature, which often interprets exit as disengagement or loss of commitment. Instead, participants' stories show that departure can represent a proactive, identity-affirming choice, a process of reclaiming autonomy, rebuilding competence, and seeking relational environments that reinforce belonging. In this light, career exits function less as withdrawal and more as self-regulated adaptation, consistent with the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), understanding that individuals are motivated to pursue contexts that satisfy psychological needs. This distinction broadens our understanding in two ways. First, it highlights how career exits in agronomy retail are deeply contextual, rooted in the structural rigidity and seasonal intensity of the industry, conditions that often constrain autonomy and hinder sustained competence development, while weakening professional relatedness through isolation or misaligned culture. These factors are less visible in studies of turnover in corporate or urban sectors, where work structures may allow for greater psychological flexibility.

Second, the findings align with and extend Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, demonstrating that career transitions are not simply linear progressions or failures, but adaptive realignments to evolving life roles and developmental needs. When paired with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a), these findings underscore that autonomy, the freedom to choose work that aligns with one's identity, and relatedness, the sense of connection to a supportive professional network, remain central motivational needs, even when pursued outside traditional agronomy retail roles. The decision to leave, therefore, reflects an act of self-authorship, a search for coherence between personal values and professional contexts.

Thus, while previous studies emphasize millennial disengagement as a broad trend across industries (e.g., Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021), this research reveals how disengagement in agronomy retail is uniquely shaped by rural labor dynamics, caregiving responsibilities, and the symbolic importance of agricultural identity. By reframing exits as professional evolution rather than withdrawal, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how millennials navigate meaningful, values-driven careers within and beyond the agronomy retail sector, seeking spaces where autonomy, competence, and relatedness can coexist in sustainable balance.

Summary

Across every career story in this study, a consistent theme emerged: relationships are not peripheral, they are the architecture of career sustainability. When those relationships, be it through mentorship, team culture, or leadership were strong, participants felt rooted and motivated. When they fractured or failed, even the most passionate professionals eventually disengaged. These patterns reaffirm the centrality of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1980) as relevant frameworks for

understanding millennial career trajectories. Without structural empathy, developmental foresight, and cultural flexibility, even the best interpersonal dynamics buckled under the weight of outdated systems. Millennials in this study were not asking for handouts, they were asking for workplaces that honor the full complexity of being human. For agronomy retail organizations seeking to retain and engage this generation, the path forward is clear: invest in relational infrastructure, modernize job design, and lead with empathy. Failure to act will not only cost the industry its workforce now but also jeopardizes its future.

Importantly, these findings challenge earlier studies that framed millennial turnover primarily as a problem of individual motivation or generational fragility. Much of the existing research has emphasized millennials' desire for work-life integration (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021) but has often stopped short of interrogating the structural failures that make integration impossible. By contrast, this study highlights how systemic rigidity—seasonal intensity, inflexible scheduling, and stagnant career pathways—was decisive in shaping exit decisions. Similarly, while Twenge (2023) argues that burnout reflects organizational misfit rather than individual weakness, this study extends that argument by showing how misfit was experienced in the unique context of agronomy retail, where even strong mentorship and team culture could not overcome structural barriers.

By situating exits within both Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Space framework (1980), this study broadens our understanding of turnover as a rational and values-driven recalibration rather than a lack of resilience. In doing so, it reframes career exits as adaptive responses to misaligned systems, offering a more nuanced theoretical lens for interpreting millennial workforce trends across agriculture and beyond. Failure to do so will not just cost the industry its workforce, it will cost it in the future.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study show that agronomy retail needs to move away from treating jobs as simple transactions and instead create flexible, meaningful workplaces that respect employees' changing identities, life responsibilities, and personal needs. While the research focused on millennial professionals who exited the sector, the themes uncovered were burnout, stalled career development, structural inflexibility, and eroded relational trust, reflect systemic dynamics that transcend any single generation. Participants' decisions to leave were deliberate, values-driven responses to organizational systems that failed to adapt to developmental stages and the integration of work with life, as framed by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Space Theory (1980). For leaders, human resource professionals, and decision-makers, the message is clear: retention in agronomy retail will not be achieved through incremental tweaks, but through a fundamental rethinking of how careers are scaffolded, workload cycles are managed, and relational ecosystems are nurtured. By embedding mentorship as part of the everyday support system, creating clear and flexible career pathways, and redefining productivity to value long-term sustainability, the sector can begin to transform itself. This also requires building workplaces where everyone feels respected and able to contribute fully, and where women and caregivers have the same opportunities for growth and leadership as others. Taken together, these shifts can help agronomy retail become a future-ready industry capable of attracting, engaging, and retaining the next generation of agricultural talent.

Reimagining Agronomy Retail Through a Human-Centered Lens

The findings of this study offer a compelling call to action for leaders, human resource (HR) professionals, and decision-makers in agronomy retail. While this research focused specifically on millennial professionals who exited the sector, the implications speak to much

broader systemic patterns, particularly those involving generational transitions, evolving life roles, and a shifting understanding of meaningful work. Participants' departures were not impulsive acts of disinterest but rather thoughtful, identity-driven responses to organizational structures that failed to evolve alongside their psychological and developmental needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Super, 1980).

Consistent with Self-Determination Theory, participants sought workplaces that supported their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—but instead encountered environments that emphasized control, hierarchy, and transactional exchange over trust and growth. As Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) and Smith and Nichols (2021) have shown, millennials are motivated by purpose, feedback, and flexibility rather than traditional reward systems. When agronomy organizations failed to meet these expectations, even intrinsically motivated employees experienced disconnection and burnout, confirming Twenge's (2023) assertion that disengagement often reflects structural misfit rather than generational fragility. These findings also align with Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, which emphasizes that career satisfaction depends on the harmony between professional roles and personal development stages. Participants who lacked opportunities for growth or alignment between life and work described feelings of stagnation and loss of meaning, symptoms of systemic rigidity rather than individual weakness. Moreover, the erosion of relational trust in team environments mirrored Carmeli et al.'s (2009) and Gifford and Nilsson's (2014) findings that supportive, mentorship-based cultures are central to engagement and retention.

To foster sustainable engagement, agronomy retail must rethink how it scaffolds career development, manages workload cycles, and nurtures relational ecosystems that affirm belonging, respect autonomy, and encourage competence. The sector's future relevance hinges

on whether it can pivot from transactional models of employment toward adaptive, purpose-driven work cultures rooted in belonging, flexibility, and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Twenge, 2023).

Mentorship as Relational Infrastructure

Mentorship in this study proved to be more than a nice-to-have—it played a crucial role in early-career engagement, identity development, and retention. Participants like Jack and Joe credited their professional confidence and career longevity to relational support from mentors who modeled competence, provided emotional grounding, and affirmed their place in the organization. These findings reinforce Gifford and Nilsson's (2014) assertion that mentorship is a long-term engagement tool, not a one-time onboarding strategy. Yet many participants lacked consistent or meaningful mentorship, leaving them disoriented and unsupported. This absence represented a systemic relational failure, not an isolated oversight. Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space theory suggests that as young professionals negotiate their social roles in a new workplace, guidance is essential for aligning personal values with vocational identity. Without this scaffolding, disconnection and eventual exit become predictable outcomes.

For agronomy retail leaders, several clear action steps can strengthen early-career engagement and retention:

- Design and fund structured mentorship programs that pair early-career professionals with trained, compensated mentors.
- Frame mentorship not solely as technical guidance but as a relational contract, nurturing belonging, psychological safety, and long-term vision.
- Evaluate mentorship outcomes using retention, well-being, and development metrics, not just productivity.

Taken together, these steps shift mentorship from being an informal or incidental practice to an intentional strategy woven into the organizational fabric. By embedding mentorship into policy and culture, agronomy retail can transform it from a short-term onboarding tool into a long-term relational infrastructure that sustains motivation, fosters belonging, and anchors career growth. This approach ensures that mentorship is not just about teaching technical skills, but about shaping identity, building resilience, and creating a sense of purpose that can counterbalance the industry's structural and seasonal pressures.

Reconstructing Career Pathways and Workforce Models

Participants in this study repeatedly described a lack of role clarity, upward mobility, and long-term vision in their agronomy retail careers. As Courtney noted, “You’re expected to wait 30 years before they even think about putting you in leadership.” The “static model” of career development, rooted in the traditional view that professional growth remains fixed once individuals enter a role, with stable motivations and competencies, stands in sharp contrast to Super’s (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, which frames careers as evolving across life stages, and Deci and Ryan’s (2000a) self-determination theory, which emphasizes competence and continual development as essential for sustained motivation. When opportunities for mastery and advancement were unclear, participants experienced career plateauing and motivational decline, patterns consistent with Abdullah (2017) and Ismail et al. (2018), who link stagnation to diminished professional efficacy and identity erosion.

Moreover, agronomy retail’s reliance on seasonal intensity and reactive labor structures appeared incompatible with millennials’ expectations for autonomy, flexibility, and work-life integration (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021). As participants moved through life stages involving caregiving and family responsibilities, many encountered rigid systems that

could not accommodate shifting priorities. These structural barriers reflect the broader generational shifts identified by Twenge (2023), who argues that disengagement among younger professionals is less a symptom of individual impatience than a response to organizational misfit. The data also suggest that the absence of structured professional development and relational scaffolding undermined relatedness, another psychological need identified by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Participants who lacked mentorship or consistent performance feedback described diminished belonging and professional confidence, echoing Gifford and Nilsson's (2014) conclusion that supportive interpersonal systems are vital for retention in high-pressure industries.

Together, these findings indicate that career stagnation in agronomy retail reflects not merely individual dissatisfaction but systemic rigidity that constrains autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Addressing these conditions requires reimagining career development as a dynamic, iterative process aligned with life-span transitions (Super, 1980) and evolving motivational needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Without such adaptation, organizations risk continued attrition of skilled professionals who seek alignment between personal development and professional purpose.

Confronting Burnout by Redefining Productivity

Burnout in agronomy retail was not an incidental complaint; it was a consistent theme voiced by nearly every participant. They described the emotional and physical toll of "rush" seasons, lack of recovery time, and the unrelenting demand to be available at all costs. These patterns reflected what Twenge (2023) frames as structural burnout, the result of outdated systems that equate success with exhaustion, and loyalty with self-sacrifice. Importantly, participants did not view burnout as personal weakness. Rather, they saw it as a signal that the

system had reached its breaking point. Without intervention, these conditions will continue to drive out talented professionals, regardless of their passion for the work.

To mitigate burnout within agronomy retail, several targeted action steps can be implemented:

- Redesign peak season labor models to include recovery windows, cross-training, and job sharing.
- Integrate well-being metrics, such as time-off usage, stress levels, and burnout indicators into strategic planning.
- Rethink success to include employee sustainability, not just seasonal profitability.

Collectively, these findings suggest a shift from viewing burnout as an individual shortcoming to recognizing it as a systemic, organizational responsibility. By weaving well-being directly into labor models and performance metrics, agronomy retail can balance productivity with sustainability. This approach not only supports employee well-being and sustained engagement but also enables the industry to preserve the expertise, innovation, and energy required to adapt to future challenges. Using Technology to Humanize, Not Just Optimize, Seasonal Work

Participants in this study valued efficiency but reported persistent frustration with operational overload and limited structural support. These findings align with Twenge's (2023) observation that burnout among younger professionals often stems from systemic misfit rather than individual fragility. Within agronomy retail, the introduction of new technologies, such as precision agriculture tools, remote scouting systems, and AI-enabled diagnostics, was frequently positioned as a solution to workforce strain. However, consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000a)

Self-Determination Theory, technology alone did not fulfill the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness necessary for sustained motivation.

In contrast to prior research emphasizing that technological innovation can enhance engagement and performance when paired with clear communication and participatory design (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021), participants in this study described inconsistent implementation, limited training, and exclusion from decision-making processes, which eroded competence and increased stress. While Carmeli et al. (2009) highlight psychological safety as essential for successful innovation adoption, participants often experienced the opposite—organizational cultures that prioritized output over support. Furthermore, the lack of communication around technology integration diminished relatedness, reinforcing Ryan and Deci's (2017) assertion that collaborative environments are key to intrinsic motivation.

The resulting disconnection highlights a gap between technological advancement and human-centered implementation, reflecting Super's (1980) view that career development must evolve alongside changing life roles and competencies. Overall, these findings suggest that digital transformation in agronomy retail is most effective when embedded within relational and developmental frameworks that promote psychological need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017). When organizations fail to align technological change with employee growth, the result is not resistance to innovation, but disengagement rooted in diminished autonomy, competence, and belonging.

Prioritizing Inclusion and Gender Equity as Retention Imperatives

This study also revealed that female professionals, particularly mothers, faced compounded barriers in agronomy retail, including inflexible schedules, lack of caregiving

accommodations, and exclusion from informal male networks. Sarah and Abby's stories illustrate how even high-performing professionals were pushed to choose between professional integrity and family identity. These findings demand more than diversity statements; they require systemic change rooted in equity and empathy. In line with Super's Life-Space theory, career development must be responsive to personal identity roles, especially those historically marginalized or structurally unsupported.

The industry of agronomy retail could consider the potential action steps to think about inclusion:

- Offer paid parental leave, flexible scheduling, and re-entry support for returning caregivers.
- Provide leadership training on unconscious bias and inclusive team dynamics.
- Create visible career role models who reflect the diversity of the current and future workforce.

Collectively, these steps recognize that retention and advancement are inseparable from inclusion. By embedding equity into both policy and leadership practice, organizations can move beyond symbolic diversity initiatives and instead build a culture where all professionals—particularly women and caregivers can thrive. Visible role models, structural supports, and leadership accountability signal that agronomy retail is prepared to evolve into a more equitable and sustainable workplace. This, in turn, strengthens not only retention but also innovation and organizational resilience.

Building a Future-Ready Agronomy Culture

Ultimately, the future of agronomy retail depends on its willingness to evolve from a culture of endurance to one of sustainability. Participants in this study were not disengaged from

agriculture they were disengaged from systems that ignored their developmental needs, relational expectations, and life realities. Their departures were acts of alignment, not abandonment. By investing in mentorship, relational safety, structural empathy, and adaptive pathways, agronomy organizations can reverse the current attrition trend and emerge as leaders in workforce transformation. The time for incremental change has passed. What emerges from these findings is the necessity to rethink how agronomy retail builds, supports, and retains talent. This is not simply about filling roles but about creating sustainable systems of work in an industry that feeds the world.

Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

This study not only confirms existing insights on millennial workplace behavior but also challenges reductive stereotypes and expands the scholarly conversation in several important ways. While much of the existing literature on millennial professionals has framed their disengagement as a symptom of entitlement, disloyalty, or aversion to structure (Twenge, 2017), the findings here reveal a far more complex and empathetic portrait. Participants demonstrated deep commitment to agriculture, high intrinsic motivation, and a strong desire to contribute meaningfully to a sector they viewed as vital. Their exits were not impulsive acts of dissatisfaction, but calculated, values-based realignments decisions shaped by evolving life roles, rigid organizational systems, and unaddressed psychological needs.

In contrast to prior studies that emphasize external rewards, technological preferences, or generational work styles (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), this research foregrounds the internal developmental landscape of millennials. By applying Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (1980), the study offers a developmental and motivational lens that is often missing from agribusiness workforce studies. It

highlights that the core drivers of disengagement are structural misalignment, identity dissonance, and relational breakdown not generational fragility. Moreover, this work broadens the literature by situating millennial career decisions within agricultural and rural economies, a space often underexplored in organizational research. While studies of professional identity and workplace culture are abundant in corporate and urban contexts, they are far less common in rural labor markets or production agriculture. This study bridges a critical gap by showing that career trajectories in agronomy are not determined by job structures alone but are deeply shaped by the social, geographic, and developmental contexts in which work occurs. A social constructivist framing highlights how meaning and experience are co-constructed through interactions between individuals and their environments (Creswell, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). In this case, participants' narratives revealed how place, community infrastructure, seasonal labor demands, and rural family systems intersect with professional sustainability. For example, decisions about staying or leaving were rarely described in isolation; instead, they reflected the ways employees negotiated competing identities as agronomists, caregivers, community members, and partners. This aligns with Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space theory, which emphasizes the interdependence of life roles, and with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017), which underscores the importance of relatedness and autonomy within specific contexts.

By situating turnover decisions within these layered realities, the findings illustrate that professional sustainability in agronomy is socially constructed through the interplay of individual agency, relational dynamics, and systemic structures. This constructivist perspective expands workforce scholarship beyond transactional models, making clear that identity, meaning, and

belonging are not optional add-ons but core to understanding retention and disengagement in agriculture.

Finally, this research challenges the siloed nature of much prior workforce literature by adopting a systems-level view one that considers mentorship, leadership culture, gendered experiences, life-stage transitions, and technological disruption together rather than in isolation. It calls for a new paradigm in which career decisions are understood relationally and contextually, moving beyond the narrow lens of retention statistics or generational caricatures. In doing so, this study reframes millennial attrition as the result of structural and developmental factors rather than purely behavioral or cultural ones. It also applies underutilized theoretical frameworks, namely Self-Determination Theory and Life-Space, Life-Span Theory, to agricultural workforce research, placing rural, seasonal, and agronomic contexts at the center of broader conversations about modern careers. By highlighting the emotional, relational, and identity-based drivers of exit decisions, this work advances a more holistic and human-centered understanding of workforce sustainability. This reframing invites both scholars and practitioners to move beyond surface-level interpretations and toward more nuanced, equitable, and responsive models of work in agriculture and beyond. Together, these frameworks reveal that the decision to exit was not merely about dissatisfaction with tasks or leadership, but about deeper misalignments between personal evolution and organizational design. The convergence of identity dissonance, motivational erosion, and structural rigidity reflects a profound theoretical and practical tension one that underscores the urgent need for relational, developmental, and systemic interventions in the agronomy retail sector. Importantly, this study expands on previous scholarship in two ways. First, while earlier research has often framed millennial turnover in terms of generalized generational attitudes (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021),

these findings demonstrate how those attitudes are uniquely shaped by the structural and cultural dynamics of agronomy retail. Second, by using both Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1980), this study goes beyond surface explanations of dissatisfaction to show that career exits are closely linked to unmet psychological needs and conflicts at different life stages. In this way, it reframes turnover not as weakness.

While this study offers a focused, in-depth exploration of these dynamics, it also marks a beginning. Future research could extend this conceptual alignment by exploring generational differences across career stages, comparing regional or organizational cultures, and evaluating interventions that aim to realign personal and professional identity within agriculture. Such inquiry will be essential for developing a more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable workforce strategy. Beyond agriculture, however, these insights carry relevance for other sectors facing similar challenges of retention, generational transition, and identity misalignment. Industries such as healthcare, education, and technology also grapple with high turnover among early- and mid-career professionals, many of whom leave not because of lack of skill or passion, but because organizational models fail to accommodate evolving life roles and psychological needs. By showing how millennial exit decisions are shaped by the intersection of motivation, identity, and structural design, this study contributes a framework that can inform comparative research and workforce innovation in a wide range of professional contexts.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study highlight an urgent need for agronomy retail organizations to shift from traditional, rigid workforce models toward adaptive, human-centered structures that recognize the complexity of modern work, life roles, and motivation. Participants did not exit the

agronomy field due to a lack of commitment or work ethic. Rather, their departures reflected deep dissonance between their evolving identities and the inflexible systems in which they were expected to operate. To address these issues and build a more sustainable, inclusive, and engaged workforce, this study proposes the following practical recommendations:

Institutionalize Structured Mentorship Programs

Mentorship emerged as a critical protective factor for early-career engagement and professional development. Participants who received consistent, supportive mentorship reported greater confidence, clarity, and belonging. In contrast, the absence of mentorship contributed to role confusion, stagnation, and early exit. To address this, organizations should design and implement formal mentorship programs that intentionally pair new employees with trained, committed mentors. Mentorship must be treated as a strategic retention tool, not as an informal or optional practice left to chance. Programs should provide mentors with training in relational communication, generational awareness, and emotional intelligence, ensuring that the guidance offered extends beyond technical expertise to foster belonging and personal development. In addition, organizations should incentivize mentorship through recognition, compensation, or leadership development credits, signaling that mentorship is not only valued but integral to organizational success.

These recommendations highlight that mentorship should be embedded into the organizational framework as a structured and intentional practice. When implemented thoughtfully, such programs have the potential to not only increase retention but also strengthen identity formation and belonging. By formalizing mentorship, agronomy retail organizations can ensure that employees, particularly those in their early career, receive the guidance, affirmation, and professional scaffolding necessary to thrive long term.

Redesign Career Pathways to Prevent Plateauing

Many participants described flat organizational hierarchies with limited growth opportunities. Without clear advancement trajectories, even skilled and motivated employees reported feeling stuck and undervalued, key drivers of attrition. To address this, organizations should create transparent, time-bound career ladders that include defined competencies, developmental milestones, and clear titles. Offering lateral mobility options, such as movement between agronomy, seed, technology, or sales functions, would broaden skill sets and maintain engagement. Developing mid-career acceleration programs is equally important, as they provide meaningful progression for professionals who have reached a growth ceiling. Together, these measures would signal to employees that the organization recognizes their contributions and is committed to their long-term development.

Introduce Structural Flexibility to Support Life-Stage Transitions

Participants, especially those navigating parenthood or caregiving struggled with the rigid, seasonal intensity of agronomy retail. Super's (1980) Life-Space, Life-Span theory reinforces the importance of acknowledging evolving life roles in career development. To respond effectively, organizations should offer flexible scheduling during non-peak seasons, including options for part-time work, remote arrangements, or flex days. Paid parental leave and structured return-to-work support can ease transitions during critical life stages. In addition, job-sharing models during peak seasons can reduce individual overload while ensuring that service capacity is maintained. Such practices not only increase retention but also reflect an organizational culture of empathy and adaptability.

Reframe Burnout as a Systemic Risk, Not a Personal Failure

Burnout emerged as a recurring theme in this study, fueled by long hours, seasonal surges, and unrealistic expectations of constant availability. Left unaddressed, burnout diminishes both morale and productivity. A systemic response should include recovery time built into workload planning after peak seasons, as well as careful monitoring to limit consecutive weeks of excessive hours. Organizations should also shift their culture from valuing "availability" to valuing "impact," emphasizing sustainable performance over endurance. Managers play a key role here and must be trained to recognize early signs of burnout, responding with empathy and meaningful support. This reframing acknowledges burnout not as a weakness of individual employees but as a signal of organizational misalignment.

Foster a Culture of Belonging Through Inclusive Leadership

Participants frequently described the absence of trust, respect, and equity in their workplaces. Women and caregivers, in particular, reported feeling excluded or penalized for prioritizing family or working differently than the dominant norm. To counter these dynamics, leaders should be equipped through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training, with an emphasis on generational and gender awareness. Regular climate surveys can provide valuable insight into psychological safety, team cohesion, and value alignment. Relational leadership models that center collaboration, authenticity, and emotional intelligence can also strengthen belonging. By embedding inclusive practices, organizations can transform culture from a barrier into a foundation for retention and growth.

Use Technology to Enable, Not Replace, Human Expertise

While operational tools and digital platforms can improve efficiency, technology integration must enhance rather than erode employees' autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Training should focus not just on the mechanics of using technology but on how these tools elevate professional value and effectiveness. Involving employees in adoption decisions ensures usability and builds buy-in, while guarding against the perception that automation will simply increase expectations without adding resources or support. Technology should therefore be framed as a partner in human expertise, designed to reduce fatigue and enhance relational capacities rather than displace them.

Align Organizational Culture with Purpose and Values

Millennial participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of meaningful work. When daily responsibilities drifted away from the broader mission of agriculture or from their own values, disengagement followed. Self-Determination Theory underscores the importance of value congruence in sustaining motivation. Organizations must revisit and clarify their mission so it resonates with employees at every level. Values such as sustainability, innovation, and service should be embedded in everyday decision-making not just marketing campaigns. Opportunities for staff to reflect on their impact, whether through grower feedback, success stories, or service milestones, reinforce alignment and purpose.

Engage Employees in Co-Designing Organizational Change

Participants expressed a desire to be valued beyond operational output, asking for real input into shaping the future of agronomy retail. Organizations can respond by establishing innovation teams or task forces that bring together employees from across levels to tackle key challenges. Including employees in decisions about scheduling, policies, and structural redesign not only deepens trust but also improves the quality of outcomes. Piloting changes in select locations before scaling further allows organizations to refine initiatives with direct feedback. Such collaborative approaches help build ownership and sustain innovation.

Make Work-Life Integration a Strategic Priority

Work-life balance was not seen as a "perk" by participants but as a non-negotiable factor in career sustainability. Many described painful trade-offs between personal milestones and professional commitments. By normalizing conversations around personal needs, organizations can create a culture where employees feel supported, not penalized, for integrating their lives with their work. Recognition should extend beyond hours worked to include results achieved, and policies must explicitly acknowledge dual-career households, caregiving responsibilities, and flexible lifestyle choices. Treating integration as a strategic priority fosters both loyalty and productivity.

Lead With Empathy, Not Just Efficiency

Perhaps most importantly, participants made it clear that they wanted to stay in agriculture. Their departures were not about rejecting the field but about organizational structures that failed to evolve with their needs. To reverse this trend, leadership must shift from managing outputs to leading people. Evaluating leaders on the well-being, growth, and retention of their teams, not just on margins or throughput will reinforce this shift. Finally, creating regular opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and adaptive change will ensure that employees feel heard. An industry that listens and responds with empathy is one that will endure.

Closing Reflection

While Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2017) provides a valuable framework for understanding motivation through the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the findings of this study reveal that its traditional, linear formulation does not fully capture the lived experiences of millennials in agronomy retail. Self-Determination Theory assumes that once these psychological needs are met, motivation follows a relatively stable and

sequential trajectory. However, participants' narratives demonstrate that motivation in agronomy retail is cyclical and context-dependent, influenced by fluctuating factors such as organizational structure, seasonal workload, technological change, and evolving life roles.

Rather than progressing along a predictable path of engagement and fulfillment, participants experienced non-linear patterns of motivation, oscillating between periods of growth and frustration. Early career enthusiasm was often replaced by disillusionment when autonomy or feedback diminished, then renewed temporarily through supportive mentorship or expanded responsibility, only to erode again under inflexible systems or excessive workload demands. These findings suggest that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is not a one-time developmental milestone, but an ongoing negotiation shaped by relational, organizational, and structural forces.

In this sense, Self Determination Theory remains conceptually relevant yet empirically incomplete for explaining the complex motivational dynamics observed in agronomy retail. The evidence supports Super's (1980) assertion that career development unfolds through a life-span process intertwined with personal and social systems but extends it by showing how these developmental processes now intersect with technological disruption, generational value shifts (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021), and systemic misfit (Twenge, 2023). These contemporary variables destabilize the linear path implied by Self Determination Theory replacing it with a more fluid model of motivation that ebbs and flows in response to context. The findings also call for a philosophical shift in how agronomy retail conceptualizes work and workforce development. The sector must evolve from a culture of endurance to one of sustainability, where success is measured not only by productivity but also by the capacity for long-term human flourishing. This shift requires workplaces that recognize that motivation is

relational and situational, not static. When employees feel supported, competent, and aligned with organizational purpose, they remain not out of obligation but out of shared commitment, a theme echoed throughout Self Determination Theory emphasis on intrinsic motivation. Conversely, when leadership suppresses growth or dismisses initiative, disengagement becomes a rational response rather than a lack of loyalty, reflecting Super's (1980) view that satisfaction depends on ongoing developmental progress.

Millennials in this study consistently emphasized empowerment, respect, and trust as non-negotiable conditions for engagement. These priorities align with wider generational findings that highlight millennial preferences for purpose, collaboration, and flexibility over rigid hierarchy (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smith & Nichols, 2021; Twenge, 2023). Yet, while such values are consistent across industries, their manifestation in agronomy retail, a field characterized by seasonal intensity, rural labor structures, and traditional hierarchies, makes the consequences of unmet psychological needs particularly acute. Ultimately, the evidence indicates that what distinguishes millennials in agronomy retail is not their motivational foundation, but the contextual complexity of how those needs are either supported or frustrated. The study advances Self Determination Theory by illustrating that autonomy, competence, and relatedness unfold in non-linear cycles rather than predictable stages, continually recalibrated in response to organizational change, leadership behavior, and life-stage evolution. Sustained motivation, therefore, depends as much on organizational adaptability and relational culture as on individual resilience.

In summary this study extends both Self-Determination Theory and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space framework by positioning millennial motivation as dynamic, iterative, and contextually bound. Agronomy retail, and by extension similar industries, must embrace this

complexity to build workplaces where human growth, technological progress, and organizational purpose evolve together, creating systems where people, like the crops they steward, are nurtured to thrive.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers a foundational understanding of how millennial professionals in agronomy retail navigate the complex interplay of personal identity, motivational needs, and organizational limitations. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1980), the findings suggest that career exits are often not rooted in disengagement or generational fragility, but in systemic misalignments between structural rigidity and evolving life roles, between outdated work models and new generational expectations. However, this work represents both a deep dive and a starting point. Future research must build on this foundation to capture the full complexity of millennial exit decisions and their broader implications for agriculture and rural sustainability.

One important direction involves broadening the geographic and structural lens. While this study was based in the Midwest, a region central to U.S. agronomy, the agricultural workforce operates across vastly different climates, crops, regulatory environments, and cultural contexts. Future research should incorporate comparative regional and international studies to understand how career decisions differ across geographies. Super's life-space construct reminds us that geographic and community contexts are not peripheral, but central to how individuals interpret and act upon their career roles. Exploring how place-based factors such as community infrastructure, farm size, and cooperative density shape motivational outcomes will extend both the theoretical and practical reach of this research.

Another critical avenue is deepening lifecycle and generational perspectives. Although this study focused on millennials, often at pivotal life stages such as parenting or homeownership, agronomy retail is a multigenerational ecosystem. Future studies should investigate the experiences of Gen Z entrants, Gen X mid-career professionals, and older workers, examining how motivational needs, definitions of success, and expectations of autonomy and relatedness evolve across the career lifespan. Additionally, incorporating spousal and family perspectives could provide a more holistic, systems-level view of career decisions, particularly in dual-career households where caregiving roles intersect with seasonal labor demands. This extension would directly respond to Self-Determination Theory's focus on relatedness and Super's emphasis on intersecting life roles, adding depth to our understanding of how work-life integration or its absence informs retention outcomes.

Future research must also explore the community-level impact of attrition. Millennial exit from agronomy retail has implications that extend beyond the workplace. When experienced professionals leave, the ripple effects reach farmers, rural economies, and civic institutions. Trusted advisor relationships are lost, service delivery weakens, and community continuity suffers. Research should examine how workforce attrition affects the vitality of agronomic service networks, farm-level innovation, and rural demographic stability. Such inquiry could provide critical evidence for policy development and rural planning, aligning workforce sustainability with broader goals of community resilience and economic health.

Another important area involves investigating innovation, technology, and human adaptation. As agronomy retail adopts digital tools, precision agriculture, and automation, there is an urgent need to understand how technological transformation interacts with human motivation. Do these tools ease operational stress and increase autonomy, or do they introduce

cognitive overload and further disconnect professionals from their agronomic identities? Self-Determination Theory offers a useful framework here, urging researchers to examine whether new technologies fulfill or frustrate employees' needs for competence, autonomy, and meaningful engagement. Future studies could also explore how organizations are supporting or failing to support the human side of digital adaptation, including training, change management, and role clarity.

In addition, research should explore structural innovation and organizational redesign. Millennials are not leaving because they dislike agriculture, they are leaving structures that cannot evolve alongside them. Future inquiry should examine alternative organizational models in agronomy retail, such as employee ownership or cooperative frameworks that enhance autonomy and shared purpose, decentralized leadership teams that foster agile decision-making and inclusive visioning, and career architectures that emphasize coaching, collaborative planning, and human-centered success metrics. Comparative studies assessing how corporate, cooperative, and independent models influence retention, motivation, and belonging will yield valuable insights for designing future-ready agronomy workplaces.

Finally, there is a need to expand the research horizon by positioning agriculture not only as an economic sector but as a societal actor. This study demonstrated that millennial departures from agronomy retail are not acts of disinterest, but reflections of deeper tensions between structural realities and evolving personal, professional, and societal values. Future research should therefore connect agronomy workforce issues to broader conversations about rural revitalization and demographic resilience, gender equity in caregiving-intensive industries, climate-smart agriculture and innovation pipelines, and the role of work in fostering meaning, identity, and sustainability.

In summary, this study provides a critical foundation for understanding the career exit decisions of millennials in agronomy retail. Yet much remains to be explored. Future inquiry should not only expand in scope and depth but also elevate agronomy retail within wider societal debates. As millennials exit, the industry risks losing not just a labor pool, but a generation of professionals who bring vision, adaptability, and purpose. Their departure is a warning, but also an invitation: to reimagine what sustainable, equitable, and meaningful careers in agriculture can become.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the lived experiences of millennial professionals who chose to exit careers in agronomy retail, decisions not rooted in disinterest or generational fragility, but in profound tensions between evolving life roles, motivational needs, and organizational inflexibility. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000a) and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Theory (Super, 1980), the findings reveal that while participants entered the profession with high intrinsic motivation and a strong sense of purpose, their continued engagement was compromised by structural, relational, and developmental misalignments.

Many participants began their careers with optimism and commitment, viewing agronomy not just as employment, but as a vocation rooted in service to growers and stewardship of the land. However, as their lives progressed, especially, with the onset of parenthood, caregiving, or changing values workplace structures that once seemed manageable became untenable. The absence of flexible scheduling, lack of defined career advancement, insufficient mentorship, and a culture that prized endurance over well-being contributed to burnout, identity conflict, and ultimately, career exit. These decisions were not acts of abandonment, but deliberate realignments in search of greater congruence between professional aspirations and

personal values. This chapter also surfaced the critical role of relational infrastructure, mentorship, team culture, and inclusive leadership. in shaping retention. When these elements were strong, participants felt seen, supported, and motivated. When absent or eroded, even the most committed professionals began to question their place in the industry. Work-life balance was revealed not as a personal preference, but as a structural necessity for sustainable engagement.

Collectively, these findings highlight a generational reframing of success, one that emphasizes autonomy, purpose, and holistic well-being over traditional markers of loyalty or sacrifice. If agronomy retail is to remain viable in a labor market shaped by generational transitions, technological innovation, and shifting societal values, it must evolve. This evolution requires not only operational reform but a fundamental reimagining of what it means to lead, to grow, and to sustain people within agricultural systems. Insights from this study extend beyond agronomy retail, offering transferable lessons for other industries seeking to improve millennial retention through enhanced autonomy, meaningful work, and organizational adaptability.

In sum, the exit decisions of millennial professionals offer more than criticism, they provide a roadmap for transformation. By aligning organizational design with the developmental realities and motivational needs of its workforce, agronomy retail can reclaim its role as a career destination that honors both land and life.

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Appendix A - Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE:

Understanding how millennials in the Midwest region of the United States, describe their decision-making process to leave their careers in agronomy retail.

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:	3/10/25	**PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:**	12/1/25	**LENGTH OF STUDY:**	6 months

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki, Ph.D. Professor

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Katie Brenny, Kansas State University, Ph.D. Student

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki, Ph.D. Professor
361 Bluemont Hall
Manhattan KS 66502
Office: 785-532-5535
susanyb@ksu.edu

Katie Brenny
Cell: 507-923-1779
kmbrenny@outlook.com

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu.

PROJECT SPONSOR: Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki, Ph.D. Professor

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this basic qualitative study will be to explore the decision-making process of why millennials in the Midwest region of the United States choose to leave their careers in agronomy retail.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

Self-identifying millennials who have exited this sector will participate in semi-structured interviews conducted virtually through virtual conference tools, enhancing accessibility and comfort. Interviews will follow a structured protocol, with the flexibility to explore unique insights. Data will be secured with both physical and digital protections, including a locked drawer for physical items and password-protected, encrypted storage for digital data on the researcher's computer. Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted virtually through virtual conference tools, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences with flexibility for follow-up questions.
Concept Maps: Visual representations that will help organize and illustrate connections and patterns related to participants' decision-making processes.
Analytic Memos: Reflective notes recorded by the researcher throughout the data collection and analysis process, documenting insights, coding decisions, and emerging patterns.

BENEFITS ANTICPATED:

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
University Research Compliance Office

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Informed Consent Template Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

If you are performing research involving human subjects, it is your responsibility to address the issue of informed consent. This template is intended to provide guidance for crafting an informed consent document. The Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB*) strongly* recommends that you model your consent form on this template. However, if you choose a different approach, it must contain at a minimum the same elements as this standard version. Language and terminology used in the consent form must be written at no more than the 8th grade level, so that the potential participant can clearly understand the project, how it is going to be conducted, and all issues that may affect his or her participation. In addition, please write the consent form in a manner that addresses your subjects directly instead of writing it in a manner that addresses the University Research Compliance Office directly. *Information on the important issue of informed consent can be found in 45 CRF 46 at* http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.116.
Federal law mandates that all signed and dated informed consent forms be retained by the P.I. for at least three years following completion of the study.

WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT: *There are limited instances where the requirement for a formal informed consent document may be waived or altered by the IRB.*
45 CFR 46 states that "An IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it

finds either:
1) *That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or*
2) *That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context."*

If a study employs only questionnaires and surveys as the source of their data, it may generally be assumed that to answer and return the questionnaire is an appropriate and sufficient expression of free consent. However, there are circumstances that might call this assumption into question - e.g., teacher-student relationship between the investigator and the subject, etc. However, a statement should be included on the questionnaire or survey form indicating that participation of the subject is strictly voluntary, the length of time reasonably expected to complete the questionnaire or survey form, and that questions that make the participant uncomfortable may be skipped.

Form Content

PROJECT TITLE: Full title of project. If possible, the title should be identical to that used in any funding/contract proposal.
PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE: provided in the approval letter, must be in place before distributing to subjects.
LENGTH OF STUDY: Estimate the length of time the subject will be expected to participate.
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Must be a regular member of the faculty.
CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Name, phone number and/or email address of the P.I.
IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION*: For the subject should he/she have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are:* Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.
PROJECT SPONSOR: Funding/contract entity.
PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: Explain in lay terms that this is a research project, and why the research is being done.
PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: Explain in lay terms and in language understandable at the 8th grade level how the study is going to be conducted and what will be expected of participants. Tell participants if they will be audio or videotaped, if they will be paid, etc.
ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT: Explain any alternative procedures or treatments if applicable.
RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: Describe any foreseeable risks or discomforts from the study. If there are no known risks, make a statement to that effect.
BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Describe any *reasonably expected* benefits from the research to the participant or others from the research.
EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Explain how you plan to protect confidentiality.
IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS: *In cases where more than minimal risk is involved.*
PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS: If minors or those who require the approval of a parent or guardian are participants, you should include a space for their consenting signature.
PARTICIPANT NAME/SIGNAUTRE: Name of research participant and signature.
WITNESS TO SIGNATURE (PROJECT STAFF): Staff signature.

If any of the following content sections do not apply to your research, feel free to delete from the consent form.

In this study, participants may benefit from having the opportunity to reflect on and articulate their experiences, which can provide personal clarity and validation around their decision to leave careers in agriculture agronomy retail. Sharing their perspectives may also feel empowering, as they contribute to a body of research that addresses important workforce challenges in rural agricultural settings. For the broader class of participants, millennials in agriculture, the study has the potential to highlight systemic issues and motivations that influence career decisions within this sector. These insights could inform organizations and policymakers on ways to better support and retain millennial talent, particularly in rural areas. For society as a whole, this research sheds light on the evolving needs and values of the millennial workforce, contributing to our understanding of generational career shifts in essential fields like agriculture. Addressing these insights could help strengthen the agricultural sector by aligning workplace practices with the preferences and motivations of a critical demographic, ultimately promoting sustainability and stability in agricultural industries.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information, and after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

[Select a statement from the drop down menu]

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME:			
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:		**DATE:**	
WITNESS TO SIGNATURE: (PROJECT STAFF)		**DATE:**	

Appendix B - Interview Script

Script for Semi-Structured Interviews for Brenny Research

Beginning of Interview:

"May I record our interview?"
Pause for participant's response.
"Thank you. Do you have any questions that need to be clarified before we begin?"
Pause for any questions. Start recording.

Opening:

"Thank you, [Participant's Name], for taking the time to meet with me today for this interview about your experiences working in agronomy retail, particularly as a millennial in the midwest part of the United States. This interview is part of my research at Kansas State University, where I am working on my Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership in Adult Education. I appreciate that you've also signed the consent form. Do you have any questions about it?"

"The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the decision-making process of why millennials in the Midwest of the United States choose to leave their careers in agronomy retail. I'm interested in learning about your experiences and perspectives regarding this decision, which will contribute to a broader understanding of career paths and choices in your field."

"I'd like to spend around 30 to 45 minutes asking you semi-structured, open-ended questions about your journey and insights. Does that time frame still work for you, and are you still interested in participating?"

Pause for participant's confirmation.

"As we discussed in our introductory call, I may follow up with you for additional interviews if I need more detail on specific themes that come out of this study. After each interview, I will also send you a summary of what you shared—both in the form of a concept map and a digital transcription. This process is called *member checking*, and it gives you the chance to review what I recorded to make sure I accurately captured your decision-making steps. I will email this summary to you, and if you have any edits or additional comments, you'll be able to provide them before a set deadline noted in the email. Does this approach still work for you and your schedule?"

"Your answers will be kept confidential, and as the researcher, I will analyze your responses along with others to identify common themes. You will be a pseudonym name in the research to ensure confidentially. My goal is to understand the unique reasons influencing career decisions among millennials in agronomy retail."

Definitions:

"Just for reference, here are a few key definitions I'll be using, which are also in the document in front of you:

Share the slide

- **Millennial**: An individual born between approximately 1981 and 1995, currently between the ages of 27 and 41.
- **Agronomy retail**: A cooperative or organization that serves farmers' needs by selling products such as crop protection, seed, feed, energy, nutrients, and technology.
- **Agriculture**: The use of soil and natural resources to produce crops and raise livestock for food, fuel, and fiber for consumers.

"There are no right or wrong answers today. I'm genuinely interested in hearing your views, experiences, stories, and perspectives."

Stop sharing

Interview Questions *(For your guidance)*:

Closing Remarks:

"Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me today. This information is invaluable in helping to understand the unique challenges and motivations involved in careers in agronomy retail. I will follow up with an email displaying the concept map. This will give a chance to ensure that I captured your shared information correctly. I may reach out to schedule a follow-up conversation if I have any additional questions or need clarification."
"Do you have any questions for me at this time, or anything you'd like to add?"
"Thank you once again for your time and insights. I will be in touch soon to provide any additional details on the next steps in this research."

End of interview.

Appendix C - Research Intro Email

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Kansas State University Research Study on Millennials' Career Decision-Making in Leaving Careers in Agronomy Retail

Dear [Participant's Name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study on career decision-making among millennials who have left careers in agronomy retail. As part of my Ph.D. research at Kansas State University in Organizational Leadership and Adult Education, I am exploring the reasons that influence millennial career changes within agronomy retail in the Midwest (States of Illinois, Indian, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) region of the United States. Your unique insights and experiences are invaluable to the study.

Purpose of the Study
This study aims to understand millennials in the Midwest choose to leave careers in agronomy retail. By sharing your story, you'll contribute to a broader understanding of career transitions and challenges in this industry.

Interview Details
We are scheduled to meet virtually on [Date] at [Time]. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes, with potential for a follow-up session to expand on key themes. I will keep all your responses confidential, and only general themes and patterns will be shared in my research findings. You will receive via email a researcher's concept to ensure that your shared information was captured correctly.

Consent Form
Please find the consent form attached. It includes additional information about the study, confidentiality, and your rights as a participant. Kindly review and sign the form at your earliest convenience, and feel free to reach out if you have any questions about the study or consent form.

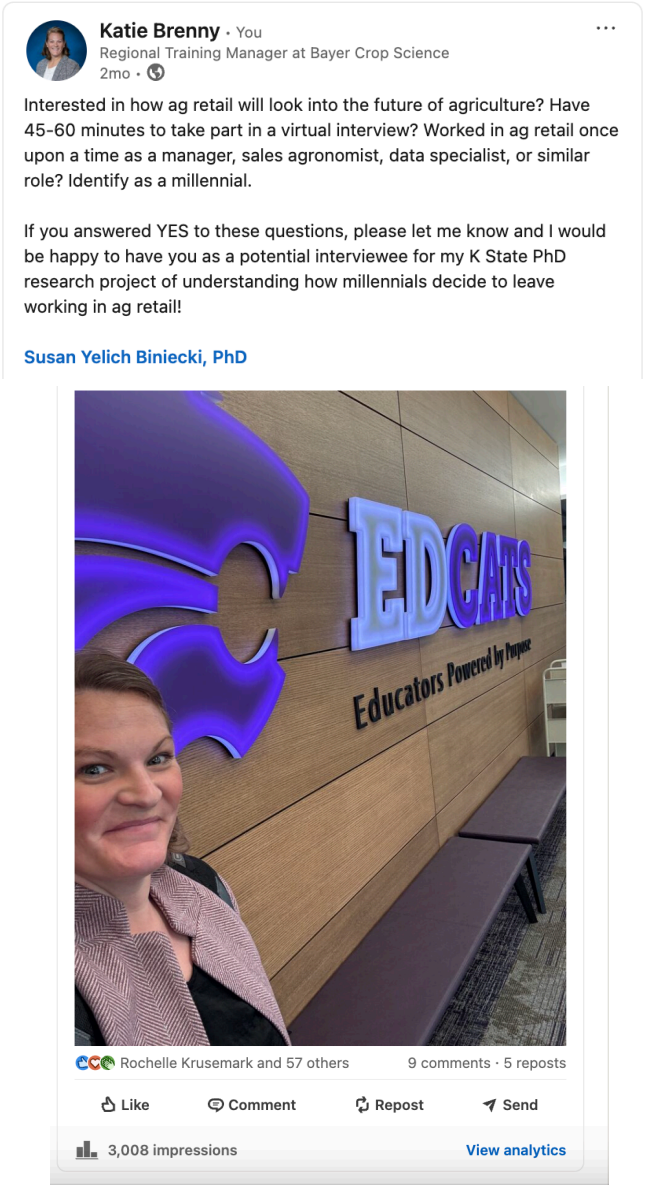
Thank you again for your time and willingness to contribute to this research. I look forward to our conversation and hearing about your experiences.

Warm regards,
Katie M. Brenny
Kansas State University, Ph.D. Candidate
Organizational Leadership in Adult Education
Email: kmbrenny@outlook.com
Phone 507-923-1779

Susan M. Yelich Biniecki
Kansas State University, Ph.D., Professor
Department of Educational Leadership
Email: susanyb@ksu.edu
Office Phone: 685-532-5535

Appendix D - Research Recruitment Flyer

Appendix E - Recruiting Flyers on LinkedIn



Appendix F - Interview Questions

General Topic	Questions	Codebook	A prior Codes
Opening	Can you walk me through your career background in agronomy retail and how you got started in the field?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	All
Opening	What aspects of agronomy retail initially attracted you, and how did your early experiences compare to your expectations?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	All
General Decision-Making Process	What were the key factors that influenced your decision to leave a career in agronomy retail?	Career Motivation, Millennials	Purpose-driven, Satisfaction, Status Quo, Experiences, Skills, Schedule Flexibility, Pay and Promotion, Family Desires, Work-life Balance, Desire for Meaningful Impact, Personal Time
General Decision-Making Process	How did you approach the decision-making process for your career transition, and what considerations played the biggest role in your choice?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Autonomy, Management/Leadership, Long-term Potential, Work-life Balance, Relationships, Culture
General Decision-Making Process	What specific experiences or turning points made you start thinking about leaving?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Competence, Team Collaboration, Professional Development, Corporate Social Responsibility, Culture, Experiences, Seasonal Constraints
Work Environment and Community	In what ways did workplace culture and leadership style shape your overall experience and ultimately impact your decision to leave?	Career Motivation, Decision Making	Job Security, Culture, Management/Leadership, Corporate Social Responsibility
Work Environment and Community	How did your sense of community and connectedness, or lack thereof, influence your decision-making?	Decision Making, Millennials	Desire for Community, Geographic Flexibility, Relationships
Work Environment and Community	What role did feelings of belonging and teamwork play in your career satisfaction and eventual decision to leave?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Gender Representation, Professional Identity, Team Collaboration, Relationships, Desire for Community, Peer Influence, Desire for Meaningful Impact
Skills, Competence, and Professional Development	How did opportunities (or limitations) for skill development and career growth contribute to your decision?	Career Motivation, Decision Making	Professional Development, Meaningful Work, Technological Innovation, Perceived Industry Future
Skills, Competence, and Professional Development	Can you share how well you felt your skills were utilized and appreciated in your role?	Career Motivation	Autonomy in Problem Solving

General Topic	Questions	Codebook	A prior Codes
Skills, Competence, and Professional Development	How did advancements or challenges relate to technology and innovation in agronomy retail impact your experience and career choices?	Decision Making, Millennials	Technology Innovation, Continually Learning
Work-Life Balance and Flexibility	In what ways did work-life balance considerations shape your decision to stay in or leave the field?	Decision Making, Millennials	Work-Life Balance, Seasonal Constraints, Flexibility, Logistics/Operations vs. Sales, Family Farm, Customer Base, Managerial Support
Work-Life Balance and Flexibility	How did the job's demands and flexibility (or inflexibility) affect your personal life and overall satisfaction?	Decision Making, Millennials	Family Farm, Family Obligations
Work-Life Balance and Flexibility	What impact did your family, friends, or significant others have on your career decisions in agronomy retail?	Decision Making	Work-Life Balance, Family Farm, Opportunities for Rural Employment, Perceived Industry Future
Job Roles and Operations	Did you find your role aligned more closely with operations or sales, and how did that alignment (or misalignment) influence your career decisions?	Career Motivation, Decision Making,	Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, Purpose-Drive, Logistics/Operations vs. Sales, Perceived Industry Future
Job Roles and Operations	What were your thoughts on the logistics and operational aspects of your role? Were there particular challenges that played a role in your decision to leave?	Decision Making, Millennials	Logistics/Operations, Seasonal Constraints
Job Roles and Operations	How did your experience with the customer base and market focus in agronomy retail shape your career trajectory?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Customer Base, Satisfaction, Communication
Career Development and Long-Term Potential	How did you view the long-term potential and career growth opportunities in this industry?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Professional Development, Long Term Potential, Desire for Meaningful Impact, Pay and Promotion
Career Development and Long-Term Potential	What impact did opportunities (or lack of opportunities) for professional development and advancement have on your career path?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Professional Development, Long Term Potential, Opportunities for Rural Employment, Desire for Meaningful Impact, Pay and Promotion
Career Development and Long-Term Potential	What concerns, if any, did you have about pay, promotion, or career status in this field, and how did they influence your decision?	Decision Making, Millennials	Long Term Potential Management/Leadership, Relationships, Culture, Perceived Future, Pay and Promotion, Personal Time
Personal Values and Purpose	How did your personal values and sense of purpose align with your work in agronomy retail?	Decision Making, Millennials	Purpose-driven, Corporate Social Responsibility, Managerial Support, Technology Innovation, Experiences, Skills

General Topic	Questions	Codebook	A prior Codes
Personal Values and Purpose	What role does meaningful work play in your career satisfaction, and how did your job measure up in this regard?	Career Motivation	Meaningful Work, Satisfaction
Personal Values and Purpose	In what ways did you feel your work contributed to a larger purpose or mission, and how did that affect your engagement with the role?	Career Motivation	Corporate Social Responsibility, Purpose-driven, Meaningful Work
Reflections	Looking back, what changes do you think agronomy retail employers could make to improve employee retention?	Decision Making	Management/Leadership, Work-Life Balance, Long Term Potential, Customer Base, Relationships Culture, Managerial Support
Reflections	What advice would you give to employers who want to better attract and retain millennial workers in agronomy retail?	Carer Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Team Collaboration, Autonomy in Problem-Solving, Culture, Management/Leadership, Work-Life Balance, Schedule Flexibility, Family Desires, Communication, Continually Learning, Family Obligations, Personal Time
Reflections	What insights or advice would you offer to someone currently in the field who is considering making a career change?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Team Collaboration, Autonomy in Problem-Solving, Culture, Management/Leadership, Work-Life Balance, Schedule Flexibility, Family Desires, Communication, Continually Learning, Family Obligations, Personal Time
Reflections	Is there anything else about your experience or decision-making process that you feel would be valuable for us to understand?	Career Motivation, Decision Making, Millennials	Team Collaboration, Autonomy in Problem-Solving, Culture, Management/Leadership, Work-Life Balance, Schedule Flexibility, Family Desires, Communication, Continually Learning, Family Obligations, Personal Time

Appendix G - Member Checking

1. Email Back to Participant for Member-Checking

I hope this message finds you well. Thank you once again for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences to decide to leave a career in agronomy retail. Your insights are incredibly valuable to my research at Kansas State University.

Attached, please find:

- A full transcript of our interview,
- Concept maps illustrating key themes, and
- A brief summary capturing the main points of our discussion.

I would appreciate it if you could review these materials by Friday April 4, 2025, to ensure they accurately reflect your experiences and viewpoints. If you have any clarifications, corrections, or additional thoughts you'd like to share, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Your feedback is essential to maintaining the integrity of the research findings. If you don't have any edits or additional thoughts, you do not need to respond.

Thank you again for your time, openness, and contribution to this study. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

Example of a Summary of Participant Two's Interview that Was Sent for Member-Checking

1. Initial Motivation to Enter Ag Retail
   - Inspired by a scholarship opportunity and desire to help growers and feed the world.
   - Passion for agriculture and strong belief in contributing to food production motivated the career choice.
2. Career Journey and Evolution
   - Started as a custom applicator, transitioned into sales and precision agriculture.
   - Spent 10+ years in ag retail, developed strong relationships with growers.
   - Took on dual roles and consistently sought training and skill development.
3. Decision-Making Process to Leave
   - First Departure: Burnout as an applicator led to exploring work as a mechanic, realized it wasn't a good fit, returned to ag retail.
   - Final Departure: A mix of personal and professional reasons, including:
     - Desire to farm and take over an existing operation.
     - Lack of clarity and support from upper management regarding workload and role restructuring.
     - Work-life imbalance intensified after having children.
     - Feeling overburdened and under-supported despite willingness to take on additional roles.
4. Professional Challenges
   - High workload and undefined boundaries between roles (sales, tech, precision ag).
   - Emotional stress from balancing friendship with customers and business responsibilities.
   - Limited time for recharging and family due to long, unpredictable hours.
5. Organizational & Cultural Factors
   - Positive support from direct manager but disillusionment with higher management.
   - Felt partially appreciated; value recognized more by customers than upper leadership.
   - Perceived lack of follow-through from upper management on promised changes.
6. Relationships with Growers
   - Deeply personal, trusting relationships made leaving difficult.

- Saw himself as more than a salesperson, often made key agronomic decisions for growers.
- Some growers left the co-op after he did, showing his impact.

7. Reflections and Identity
   - Sales and ag work felt like part of his identity, hard to fully detach.
   - Transitioned into independent farming and small-scale seed/biologicals sales.
   - Feels fulfillment in choosing his own path and remaining connected to ag on his terms.
8. Advice to Others & Industry Recommendations
   - Leave for the right reasons, but don't burn bridges.
   - Ag retail needs to address work-life balance and offer better support for ambitious, skilled employees.
   - Recognize generational shifts, new workers may struggle with the demanding schedule and culture.

Three Main Factors That Influenced Final Decision to Leave:

2. Desire for autonomy and starting a family farm operation.
3. Workload and lack of support from upper management.
4. Need for better work-life balance and more family time

Appendix H - Example Regarding Two Theories

Example of Paul's Interview Regarding Two Theories

Document	Theme Identified	Statement	Explanation
TwoClean.docx	both	When I left the mechanics, I had to go back to ag retail. I knew I'd have a guaranteed check. Obviously on the farm now, the market swing, we had a few good years and now we're in a couple of down years.	This discusses financial security and career stability (LSLS) as well as autonomy and the challenges of independence (SDT).
TwoClean.docx	both	Even if you were a day or two out of the office, it seemed like it was a week. And then if you took a week off, you felt like you never caught up for a while.	This quote relates to both LSLS and SDT. It touches on work-life balance (LSLS) and the pressure of maintaining competence and autonomy in the workplace (SDT).
TwoClean.docx	both	No, didn't was management that was kind of we'll just see how this bounces out. But being supportive it letting the growers down are two different things that that was my biggest thing in the 15 years that I had been at that location, some of those people were more than just a grower where they were a friend that, you know, you text them back and forth now, here, there, or see him in the at the park store or something, call him, see what's going on, you know, it's a definitely a friendship building thing, which was that much was why was that much harder to leave.	This quote relates to both LSLS and SDT. It reflects career identity and relatedness, as the interviewee discusses the deep relationships formed with clients, which made leaving difficult.
TwoClean.docx	both	I think people getting into ag retail know it's going to be long hours. So, I guess the biggest thing is just figuring out ways that they can compensate those people more. And I guess just finding more opportunities to move people up if you think they're good talent.	This quote touches on career advancement and compensation (LSLS) as well as the need for recognition and support in the workplace (SDT).
TwoClean.docx	both	I learned so much and it taught me a lot. So, I would say yes. it was a good opportunity for me. it got me my first job. it taught me a lot about sales. taught me more how to talk to different types of people at different ages. how to work with people that are young, old, from all different backgrounds.	This reflects the development of competence and relatedness (SDT) as well as the early career stage and skill acquisition (LSLS).
TwoClean.docx	LSLS	I started in agronomy right out of college. I got a scholarship from x ag retailer in x year to go to school and be a custom applicator, which took me to x location.	This quote relates to the early career stage and starting out in a career path, which are key aspects of Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory.
TwoClean.docx	LSLS	An opportunity came up closer to home. So, I moved back home, worked at x ag retailer, at the time.	This reflects family influence and the importance of location and work-life balance in career decisions, aligning with LSLS.