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MOTIVATIONS, EXPERIENCES AND EMOTIONS: BEING AN SES VOLUNTEER

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This research began in 2017 and was conducted as part of the *Enabling sustainable emergency volunteering* project. This component of the project aims to investigate issues of recruitment, retention, diversity and wellbeing among State Emergency Service volunteers, and is part of a larger study on volunteering conducted by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

AUTHORS

Dr Darja Kragt, Dr Aleksandra Luksyte, The University of Western Australia; A/Prof Patrick Dunlop, Dr Djurre Holtrop, Prof Marylène Gagné, Curtin University. Contact darja.kragt@uwa.edu.au

SUMMARY

Across Australia, turnover of State Emergency Service volunteers is high, particularly within their first year of volunteering. This turnover is higher than other volunteer emergency services. Little is known about why individuals volunteer with emergency services and what encourages and supports long-term engagement. This research is providing insights and data nationally to help to develop new recruitment and retention strategies for SES volunteers. With the research team being based in Western



▲ ABOVE: THIS RESEARCH IS PROVIDING INSIGHTS AND DATA TO STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE'S AROUND AUSTRALIA TO HELP TO DEVELOP NEW RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES. PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES WA

Australia and with the support of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services WA (DFES), the study involved in-depth interviews with 70 SES volunteers across Western Australia to explore how individuals make sense of their volunteering experience.

The interviews revealed that volunteers deeply value their connection to their unit, derive meaning from both positive and negative emotional experiences, and sometimes have vague expectations about emergency services volunteering. Managing the expectations of volunteers is not a simple task; some volunteers have too few expectations, and others too many. Both

of these scenarios can lead to volunteers having a negative experience and influence their turnover intentions. Based on the findings of the research, strategies to improve volunteer recruitment and retention rates are recommended to include a focus on managing the expectations of volunteers. These include better targeted recruitment messages that emphasise teamwork and personal development opportunities, on-boarding (that is, induction, socialisation, and engagement) processes that convey clear expectations to new recruits, and retention policies that validate volunteers' contributions and achievements.

CONTEXT

Nationally, SES are seeking to improve their retention of volunteers. Organisational practices have been changing to address this, but there has been a lack of research that investigates individual expectations, experiences and meaning among volunteers.

BACKGROUND

The annual turnover of SES volunteers

nationally is high, particularly within the first year of a volunteer's journey. Like all emergency service volunteers, SES volunteers require extensive training, and early turnover incurs significant financial costs and time commitment for training and integration of new volunteers into the organisation. In addition, attracting new volunteers is becoming a considerable challenge, especially in smaller, regional communities.

Previous research on volunteer management advocated for an organisation-based response to recruitment and retention issues, particularly applying targeted human resource (HR) management practices. DFES has successfully developed and implemented several HR policies and practical resources to aid the recruitment, integration and training of volunteers.



▲ Figure 1: WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE RESEARCH AND THEIR LOCATION.

Little is known about precisely why individuals volunteer with emergency services and what maintains their long-term engagement. This research explored DFES survey data among first year volunteers and identified three types of volunteers, based on their initial motivation to join the service and role expectations. The research found that having too few or too many expectations has a negative impact on volunteer experiences and turnover intentions (Kragt *et al.*, 2018).

Survey data alone is limited in its ability to explore volunteer experiences and perspectives. Building on previous volunteering research from the team, this study conducted extensive qualitative interviews to get a deeper understanding of individual perspectives. These interviews focused on three key aspects: sense of meaning and identity, emotional experiences and expectations.

Identity refers to an individual's self-definition based on a relatively stable set of meanings associated with a particular social role (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Previous research has suggested that the role of emotions in volunteering is poorly understood (Hartel & O'Connor, 2015), and as a result, emotions related to volunteer experiences should be investigated. Finally, a psychological contract is a set of expectations that volunteers have when entering a volunteering organisation. This psychological contract is based on what was promised, or perceived to be promised, by a manager, group, team or organisation (Stirling, Kilpatrick & Orpin, 2011).

BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with SES volunteers in metropolitan, regional and remote locations across WA. The study sought to understand how meaning, identity and emotions shape volunteer experiences in the SES. Originally, the study aimed to interview a handful of volunteers and volunteer managers. However, the research team recognised that it was crucial to investigate the volunteers' perspective of recruitment, retention and wellbeing, and the scope was deepened and broadened. All interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis approach.

Overall, 70 volunteers from 17 different units were interviewed. Ten units were located in regional or remote area WA (59%), with nine out of 12 regions represented in the sample. Twenty five interviewees were female (36%), which aligns with the proportion of female volunteers in WA SES overall (37%). Interviewees held a broad range of volunteer roles, including unit managers, training managers, communication managers, team managers and logistics managers.

Half of the interviews were conducted one-on-one, others were conducted in a group setting with two to eight volunteers in a group (average of four interviewees per group). In some cases, a mixed approach was used, where the first part of the interview was conducted in a group, and then one of these interviewees was spoken to one-on-one.

WHAT VOLUNTEERS SAID

"I love working as part of a team. So, that, I guess that meant a lot to me. And it was if, if you're out on a job and you don't know what to do, people are often very, very willing to show you and teach you and help you, so I guess it was quite exhilarating really."

"[Being a volunteer means] to [be a] member of the community and just sort of, just do your part generally. You come in, you work with your team. They're got your back, you've got their back. You go out and you sort of, you see some terrible stuff. But you also see some really great stuff."

"And just so many different experiences. Body, you know, many, many different body recoveries. Which are, which are horrible but they always give you that sense of closure ... to rescues."

"Sometimes the processes can be frustrating. I think we get a lot of admin stuff put onto volunteers, and volunteers don't necessarily want to do that and stuff, you know."

The study focused on questions that addressed interviewees' personal experiences with the SES, and included their background, recruitment, induction and training, expectations, emotional experiences, wellbeing, intention to stay and unit characteristics.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Volunteering meaning and identity

When asked why they volunteer with the SES, the interviewees often referred to 'community' as their primary motivation. The notion of community was conceptualised in two different ways.

First, community was understood as a more general community of people in the town, state, or country. Being able to help and assist other people in the face of an emergency was identified as the primary driver for joining the SES - interviewees found it empowering and rewarding. This motivation became more meaningful to them as they received recognition for their efforts from the members of their communities.

The second concept of 'community'

was evident in how interviewees related to their fellow volunteers in the unit. The interviewees commonly referred to them as their ‘family’. The interviewees found it empowering to belong to a group that is united by a common purpose. Interestingly, some interviewees discussed how their initial motivation to join the SES was to help the larger community, but the reason they continue to volunteer is their connection to the fellow volunteers. In other words, what attracted them to join was different from what kept them coming back.

Emotional experiences

When describing the most exciting and positive experiences they have had as an SES volunteer, interviewees frequently referred to particularly hard and gruesome callouts. Typically, exposure to these types of events could be considered traumatic, rather than ‘exciting’ or ‘positive’, however in the case of emergency service volunteers, it seems that the positive aspect of such an experience stems from their ability to be in control and help those in need. Positive effect was also derived from being a part of the team working together in the face of challenging circumstances.

Another form of positive SES volunteer experience was overcoming personal barriers, such as a fear of heights. Interviewees found these personal growth experiences memorable and exciting, and allowed them to better overcome their fears and gain confidence in their abilities both inside and outside the service.

When asked about their most disappointing or negative experiences,

some volunteers also mentioned callouts, particularly ones that had a negative outcome. However, more frequently, volunteers mentioned being disappointed when, after being deployed, they were unable to do their part. Frequently, this was cited as being due to organisational procedures and rules that were enforced by those managing the incident. Often interviewees reported administrative hassles and organisational procedures as being negative experiences and did not feel that administrative work should be such a big part of their role. Many volunteers reported feeling misunderstood and undervalued by their governing organisation, which was perceived by some as being focused primarily on firefighting. Other negative experiences reported were related to personal interactions between their unit members.

Volunteering expectations

In line with the concept of the psychological contract, there were several types of initial expectations reported by interviewees. One was the expectation of a highly adventurous and exciting role that involved high risk rescues and frequent callouts.

Other interviewees reported that they expected to contribute to the community, however, these interviewees did not seem to have more specific expectations about what ‘helping the community’ would actually involve. Because these initial expectations were fairly vague, the interviewees reported some changes in their expectations, which also led to a different meaning derived from the volunteering role. Finally, some reported having no particular expectations at all when joining.

HOW IS THE RESEARCH BEING USED?

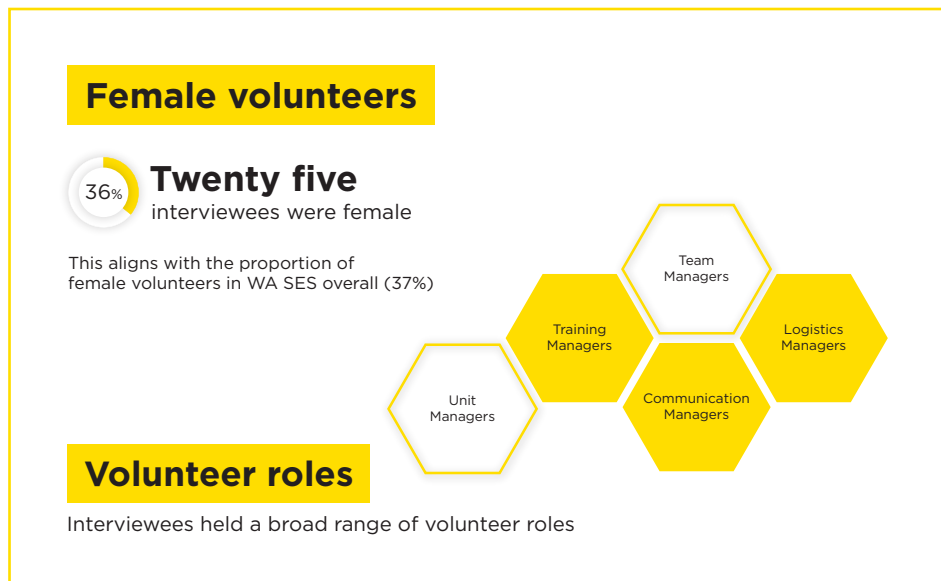
This research is already informing DFES volunteer recruitment. It has assisted in the design and content of their volunteer recruitment website www.dfes.vol.org.au, as well as informed the development of the Volunteer Recruitment Roadmap and the associated support materials. It has guided the messaging and approach to DFES’ 2019 volunteer recruitment campaign, and contributed to the development of training and workshops for District Officers and other staff on volunteer management.

Nationally, the research findings can inform organisational practices in volunteer recruitment, retention and wellbeing. As is being implemented in WA and other states, targeted recruitment messages that emphasise the role of the SES as community supporters are important. Recruitment messages should also showcase the friendship and support that SES volunteers experience within their local unit, which provides volunteers with a sense of community and belonging. For example, joining the SES might help newer members of a community to build social connections with existing members. Similarly, recruitment campaigns could also showcase the teamwork of SES volunteers as they tackle challenges. Finally, emphasising the opportunities to overcome personal barriers and learn new skills is a key selling point for a prospective SES volunteer. Embedding these

END-USER STATEMENT

“The research conducted by the team has already provided invaluable support to DFES in developing a suite of resources to support volunteers across all our services in their recruitment and retention efforts. The research is providing new insights into the motivation of volunteers and has also raised volunteer interest in targeted recruitment strategies. The project is already providing good guidance relating to the development of recruitment, and we believe it is relevant across the emergency services nationally. We are looking forward to the ongoing release of information and resources from the project.”

**- Jennifer Pidgeon, Manager Strategic Volunteer and Youth Programs
Department of Fire and Emergency Services,
Western Australia**



▲ Figure 2: VOLUNTEER ROLES AND THE PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS.

key messages in recruitment materials may attract new volunteers who value community assistance and teamwork, which could potentially improve retention.

Similarly, this improved understanding of volunteer expectations could inform the content of the recruitment messages to attract more volunteers. This aligns with the findings of previous research that clear role expectations are very important for volunteer retention (Kragt *et al.*, 2018). The findings from the interviews highlight that many volunteers have fairly vague expectations or no expectations at all for their volunteer experience. Targeted recruitment and carefully designed on-boarding processes may help to shape the expectations of the incoming volunteers. It is important that the signals create realistic rather than exaggerated expectations, otherwise new volunteers may feel they are not getting what they signed up for.

This research suggests that retention could be improved by undertaking activities within the units that promote integration

of volunteers into the unit and build and foster unit cohesiveness. It found that many volunteers derive meaning from their roles as members of their unit, especially later in their tenure. Improving the interactions between unit members could be achieved by incorporating team building activities, providing training on conflict resolution, and encouraging unit managers to involve members in decision making. Improving the recognition of volunteer contributions and skill development is another retention strategy that should be considered.

Indeed, the research showed that engaged volunteers particularly enjoyed the personal growth they experienced through training and overcoming challenges, achievements that units could celebrate and recognise as a team.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of the interviews have informed the design of a large-scale quantitative survey that all SES volunteers in WA were invited to participate in, in October/November

2018. A second survey will be launched at about the same time in 2019. Together, the quantitative and qualitative research findings will enable a better understanding of volunteer experiences and can be used to help improve SES volunteer recruitment and retention nationally. The findings of the interviews and implications for recruitment, on-boarding and retention will be communicated to a broader group of stakeholders in the emergency services sector via publications, presentations and online workshops.

FURTHER READING

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▲ Above: THIS RESEARCH IS EXPLORING HOW VOLUNTEERS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE. PHOTO: NSW STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE

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Hazard Notes are prepared from available research at the time of publication to encourage discussion and debate. The contents of *Hazard Notes* do not necessarily represent the views, policies, practises or positions of any of the individual agencies or organisations who are stakeholders of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

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