

Engaging volunteers in an emergency management organisation

Ranse and Carter present a focus group study that aims to identify the factors that assist in successfully engaging and retaining volunteers in the St John Ambulance organisation in Australia. 

ABSTRACT

The recruitment and retention of volunteers is a perennial and significant concern for emergency management organisations. This research aimed to identify factors associated with the successful engagement and retention of volunteers in an emergency management organisation. Six focus groups were undertaken with participants from both rural and metropolitan areas of one Australian jurisdiction. A number of themes were identified for the volunteer's reasons to join, leave and stay in a volunteer emergency management organisation. The notion of retention should not be a focus for organisations; rather volunteer emergency management organisations should implement and enhance strategies to engage volunteers.

Introduction

The Australian community relies on the role of emergency management organisations for their protection and welfare, particularly in circumstances of disaster. In 2006, 175,000 Australians aged 18 years or over volunteered for an emergency management organisation. In total, these dedicated volunteers each contributed approximately 150 hours per year, or a significant 26 million hours combined (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Some consider 175,000 to be lower than actual numbers of emergency management volunteers and suggest that 400,000 is a more accurate reflection of true volunteer numbers (Gledhill, 2001). The volunteer sector has increasing pressures to provide a service to the community. Howard (2003) suggests that many volunteer emergency service organisations have concerns regarding training, legal matters, funding and recognition. These four key issues, along with building partnerships and the ability to recruit and retain volunteer members underpin the strategic direction of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF, 2005) and could be argued as a concern for this sector.

Motivations to volunteer are complex and multi-faceted (Esmond, 2005). Such motivations transform over time, as initial motivations to join an organisation do not necessarily represent the motivations of a volunteer to remain engaged with an organisation. Volunteers join emergency management organisations for differing reasons. The primary motivators for joining included: learning, using and enhancing skills, helping people and giving back to the community (St John Ambulance Australia – Western Australia, 2004). Additionally, gaining a sense of achievement is also a motivating factor to join an emergency management organisation (Fahey, et al., 2002; Fahey et al., 2003),

The retention of volunteer members is a perennial and significant issue for many emergency management organisations in Australia (Fahey, et al., 2003; Gledhill, 2001; McLennan & Bertoldi, 2005). The poor retention of volunteers results in a reduction in skill and experience and the loss of valuable operational and corporate knowledge. Similar to motivations to join a volunteer emergency management organisation, volunteers cease to engage with organisations for varying reasons. Such reasons include a lack of personal time (Fahey, et al., 2002) and the inability to access appropriate resources (Fahey, et al., 2002).

The establishment and maintenance of human and physical resources to support volunteers and enhance the volunteer perception of self-worth is essential to the engagement and subsequent retention of volunteers. A number of key strategies to enhance volunteer engagement in emergency management organisations have been suggested, such as, providing training that is interesting and practical (Aitken, 2000), as well developed and delivered training is seen as a retention tool for some emergency management organisations (Fahey, et al., 2003) and poorly delivered and inflexible training will result in the loss of volunteers (Fahey, et al, 2003). In addition to training in core business skills and knowledge, training should include extended skills and attributes such as leadership and coordination skills (Aitken, 2000). However, it is important that effective training is not considered the only tool for retaining volunteers (Fahey, et al, 2002). Equally important is promoting a community focus, improving internal communications, providing timely access to

appropriate resources and providing access to regional and/or contact staff (Aitken, 2000). Additionally, having access to member rewards and recognition systems that represent the contemporary volunteer is essential (Aitken, 2000; McLennan & Bertoldi, 2005).

Building on the notion that the engagement of volunteers will result in their retention, Aitken (2000) suggests that more research is required to determine what makes a successful volunteer [fire] brigade. This is a topic of interest for many emergency management organisations. The St John Ambulance Australia National Board of Directors in June 2006 deemed that the engagement and retention of volunteers was one of the top three member development priorities for the organisation (personal communication).

Whilst previous research has focused on the rationales for members joining and leaving volunteer emergency management organisations, this research aims to identify factors associated with the successful engagement and retention of volunteers in an emergency management organisation. This will provide organisations with a greater understanding and insight into volunteers' motivations for remaining engaged, possibly resulting in improved membership development and management which meet the needs of volunteers, emergency management organisations and ultimately the communities in which they provide a service.

Methodology

Design

This research was exploratory and descriptive in design using focus groups as a means of data collection.

Setting

St John Ambulance Australia was the volunteer emergency management organisation who participated in this study. St John Ambulance Australia is a charitable humanitarian organisation that focuses on building community resilience through a number of programs and activities. The Operations Branch focuses on volunteer event and emergency first aid, youth development through its cadet program and member development. The operations branch is active in all States and Territories of Australia with over 10000 members.

Population and sample

The population for this study were active member of St John Ambulance Australia who volunteer in Operations Branch activities, also known as First Aid Services in some jurisdictions. The samples were members of three rural and three metropolitan divisions from the one Australian state. Divisions are operational units consisting of members who provide clinical care at public events. Additionally, some divisions consist of support personnel who do not provide clinical care, but contribute to the operations of the division by other means. Rural divisions were defined as a division at least 100km from a major metropolitan area. A major

metropolitan area was defined as a city with a population base of greater than 500,000 people.

Participant recruitment

Individual divisional managers from within the one jurisdiction were contacted to gauge their interest in their division participating in a single focus group. If interested, potential participants within the division received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research and when it would be conducted at their division. The research was undertaken at the regular meeting times and venues of participating divisions. The selection of divisions was based on the convenience of the geographic location of the divisions, availability of the researchers and the availability of the division.

Data collection

Focus groups were utilised as the method for data collection. Six focus groups were conducted; three with metropolitan divisions and three with rural divisions. Each focus group had between 8 and 18 participants, was approximately one hour in duration and was electronically recorded. Focus group sessions used semi-structured interviewing techniques. Three key questions were asked:

- Why did you join?
- Have you ever considered leaving? If yes, why?
- Why did you decide to stay?

In addition to focus groups, demographics information was collected from each participant pertaining to; gender, age, years as a member and if the member had previously been a cadet [member under the age of 18] within of the organisation.

Data analysis

Participant narrative was transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. Thematic analysis was undertaken by the individual researchers using a highlighting approach as outlined by van Manen (1990). Following individual analysis, themes were compared for commonalities. Comparisons of individual themes enhanced the validity and reliability of the data analysis process. Demographic information was analysed using descriptive statistics.



St John Ambulance volunteers.

Protection of human participants

This research project was approved by the St John Ambulance Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants' voluntarily provided written consent to participate and could withdraw at any stage. Individual names and the names of divisions are not used throughout this manuscript to protect participants.

Findings

Participant demographics

A total of 81 members participated in this research. Demographics were similar between both the rural and metropolitan focus groups (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Participant demographics

Demographic	Rural	Metropolitan
Total number of participants	33	48
Age (in years)	36 (13-66)	34 (17-58)
Gender - Male	19 (58%)	35 (73%)
Were previous a cadet member - No	22 (67%)	35 (73%)
Years as a member	8 (1-35)	10 (1-38)

Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis identified three main themes associated with being engaged in a volunteer organisation: reasons to join, leave and stay. Each main theme had a number of sub-themes (see table 2).

TABLE 2. Thematic analysis

Main Theme	Sub Theme
Reasons to join	Community Service Skills Friendship Different to work
Reasons to leave	Administration Politics Time Access to Training
Reasons to stay	Dynamic training Community respect Growing other members Unique experiences Family Fear

Theme 1: Reasons to join

Participants outlined various reasons and motivations for joining a volunteer emergency management organisation. Participants stated that providing a community service, developing and maintaining skills, building friendships and engaging in an activity different to their daily work were all reasons for joining.

Participants outlined a keenness to provide a service to the community and pursued a volunteer emergency management organisation for this opportunity.

... you do give up your time, you are out there amongst the community. (Focus Group 3)

... I just wanted to do work in the community and I think St John actually provides [that opportunity]. (Focus Group 4)

... the motivation of wanting to help people. (Focus Group 1)

Participants joined as a means of maintaining their knowledge and skills learnt during a first aid course. Additionally, participants outlined a desire to learn more advanced skills and knowledge to enhance their practice.

I had completed a first aid certificate at work and wanted more experience. (Focus Group 2)

I did my first aid course and it [volunteering] sounded interesting. (Focus Group 1)

... it allowed me to gradually increase my first aid skills. (Focus Group 4)

... you find that first aid is just the first step and you're just hungry to learn more. (Focus Group 3)

Commonly, members that were new to a community [town or area] joined a volunteer emergency management organisation to forge new friendships.

[I wanted to build] a new network of friends, this was one way of doing it. (Focus Group 5)

Many felt that an emergency management organisation provided an avenue for disconnect from their work and family activities. Participants recognised a strong distinction between work, family and participating in St John activities.

I wanted to escape my usual day to day occupation and do something that required a different part of the brain to work. (Focus Group 5)

It's like another hobby. You've got a different thing that you can do from your business degree or whatever else you do. (Focus Group 3)

Theme 2: Reasons to leave

Motivations to consider leaving or disengaging with a volunteer emergency management organisation were due to administration requirements, politics, time and accessing training. Administration volume and requirements were often discussed amongst managers of divisions and/or those with managerial activities.



Medical volunteers.

... [I was] spending too much time doing admin and going to meetings ... I think it could be simplified. (Focus Group 5)

I'm supposed to be retired. But the paperwork is getting more and more severe. (Focus Group 6)

... [there is] not adequate state and regional support. (Focus Group 2)

Most participants discussed the politics of being involved in a volunteer emergency management organisation. The politics included aspects of intra-divisional, inter-divisional and buying into the management of the region or state.

I was there to do first aid, not to play politics and I'd just had enough (Focus Group 6)

... middle management [regional staff] ... the communication that we get is ... a carrier pigeon would be better. (Focus Group 1)

Every day you get an email from State Headquarters saying you've got to do this, you've got to do that. (Focus Group 5)

Some participants outlined the need to make choices as to how they would contribute to the organisation. Often members were unable to give as much as some others, this was primarily due to work or family commitments.

Family pressures tend you get you thinking about it more than anything else. (Focus Group 5)

... it's such a small group of people and there's a lot of work ... sometimes it can be too much for family. (Focus Group 6)

Participants outlined their ability to access training as a cause of some frustration. Some training activities were limited to major centres, meaning that members outside the metropolitan area found it difficult or impossible to participate.

There is nothing outside of the metro area ... plus I do shift work ... on weekends I can't go to do training ... (Focus Group 6)

It's hard to go to a two hour course [in a metropolitan centre], it's going to take you six hours travel to get there ... (Focus Group 6)

Theme 3: Reasons to stay

The most extensive discussion was on the topic of remaining engaged within a volunteer emergency management organisation. The subthemes identified in this discussion included: having dynamic training, having community respect, growing other members, gaining unique experiences, being part of a family and fear of what will happen if they resigned.

Dynamic training was discussed frequently within all focus groups as a rationale for remaining engaged. Dynamic training provided new skills to learn and environments to practice them in.

... hands on training. (Focus Group 3)

... didn't just learn out of a book ... [this division] does realistic simulations ... it challenges people. It takes you out of your comfort zone ... keeping training challenging and interesting keeps people fresh. (Focus Group 2)

Participants stated that being associated with a volunteer emergency management organisation was viewed as being both professional and caring. Participants received community respect just by being at an event and not necessarily undertaking any duty out of what they consider the ordinary.

... [it a great feeling] at the end of the day when somebody walks past and says thanks mate ... (Focus Group 5)

... the look on the little girl's face when she gets the magic bandaid on the finger ... that look is priceless, absolutely priceless. (Focus Group 5)

I'm doing it to help people in the community so if they fall over they've got someone their. (Focus Group 3)

Participants felt mentoring and guiding the development of members provided personal satisfaction.

... it's about supporting and developing young people, and the people that haven't had the opportunity to do it before ... (Focus Group 4)

Participants outlined experiencing 'things' that they would not normally experience if they were not engaged in a volunteer organisation. They viewed such organisations as providing unique experiences, such as; liaising with members of the public, assisting in responding to a crisis situation, managing various injuries and illnesses and being part of major international events.

I like going to situations that I wouldn't ordinarily visit ... I got behind the scenes at the Olympics ... I've been at rave parties ... and those places I would not normally attend. (Focus Group 1)

I find it's [being involved] gives me a lot of confidence to step outside my comfort zone. (Focus Group 4)

A volunteer emergency management organisation was seen as a family, with like-minded people convening



Volunteer firefighters.

for a common cause. Each division shared a common purpose and cause – to service the community. However, the character between divisions differed greatly. The 'St John Ambulance Australia' family provides a strong social setting for members. Their interaction often extends beyond core activities.

It's a family, It's a team. (Focus Group 2)

We're friends, we're family. (Focus Group 5)

It's a very social group here, we go camping and we have social nights ... (Focus Group 6)

I see a lot of them more as family than I do as acquaintances or co workers. (Focus Group 4)

... all of my family have moved away, [being involved with St John Ambulance Australia], it's like having an extended family ... (Focus Group 1)

Participants outlined their fear of leaving the organisation, primarily on the premise that if they are not doing the 'work', then who would? This fear was highlighted in operational and managerial aspects of the organisation.

I got pushed into the role of superintendent because nobody else wanted it (Focus Group 5)

Who else is going to do the job? (Focus Group 4)

Limitations

The experience of the participants in this research may differ from those in other divisions, jurisdictions or volunteer emergency management organisations. There

are limitations in the use of focus groups, such that participants may not be willing to share their experience in a group. This may result in participants outlining what they think the researchers want to hear and/or what is socially acceptable.

Discussion

This research demonstrated similar reasons for joining a volunteer emergency management organisation as outlined in the literature, such as, wanting to give to the community, maintaining and expanding skills (Fahey, et al., 2002; Fahey, et al., 2003; St John Ambulance Australia – Western Australia, 2004). Additionally, it highlighted the value placed on gaining friendships and having an activity different to work as a reason to join. Similarly, reasons stated for leaving the organisation were similar to that in the published literature, such as a lack of personal time (Fahey, et al., 2002) and the inability to access training resources (Fahey, et al., 2002). Additionally, this research added that politics at all levels of the organisation and administrative burdens for those with management responsibilities were a rationale for considering disengagement.

Previous to this research, the focus of volunteers remaining engaged with emergency management organisations had focused on training aspects, such as ensuring training is flexible and well developed (Fahey, et al., 2003). Whilst this was revealed in this research, it was not the sole motivator for continued engagement. The direct questioning of: 'if you considered leaving -

why did you decide to stay?' highlighted that volunteers remain engaged for a number of reasons, such as: community respect, growing the skills and knowledge of other members, gaining unique experiences, belonging in a family feel environment and having a fear of leaving as this results in an unknown of who will conduct the 'work'. Volunteer emergency management organisations should foster these sentiments and build strategies to enhance engagement in these areas.

Training should be dynamic, interactive, flexible and accessible equally to all members. This should include alternative delivery methods, including distance education and e-learning, so rural members are not disadvantaged in progressing their skills and knowledge. A balance between training, meetings, socialising and serving the community is necessary. Individual volunteers should be considerate of their interactions with members of the public and event stakeholders as this may affect the community respect for volunteer emergency management organisations. Organisations should provide unique experiences for members in areas that they would not normally participate in their normal social circumstances. It should be acknowledged that whilst all divisions, or family units, have a common cause – their characteristics are somewhat different and should be fostered. For example, if a member from one division was to attend another division they would most likely experience a varied 'family' dynamic and functioning. The notion of being fearful to disengage should not be a concern of members as there will always be someone willing and able to undertake the 'work' of the organisation. Managers and leaders of volunteers should develop strategies to ensure members do not feel this fear, so that members can move on from St John with dignity.

In conclusion, it is unrealistic to retain all members in a volunteer emergency management organisation for extended periods, as personal circumstances and motivations change over time. However, if members are positively engaged with an emergency management organisation, when their circumstances change and they wish to volunteer again, or when recommending an organisation to friends or family, they will consider the organisation in which they were positively engaged as their organisation of choice.

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