



Emergency Volunteer Retention: Can a Culture of Inclusiveness Help?

Aleksandra Luksyte¹ & Marylène Gagné^{2,3}

¹ UWA Business School, University of Western Australia ² Future of Work Institute, Curtin University

³ Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

In this study, we examined the effects of a climate of inclusiveness on volunteer retention. A survey of 512 emergency services volunteers revealed that an inclusive climate played a vital role for volunteer retention as it allowed volunteers to connect with each other and it gave them freedom to express themselves professionally. To a limited extent, female volunteers perceived lower levels of a climate of inclusion. However, in inclusive climates, women felt more connected with their teammates when their differences were integrated. Surprisingly, the female volunteers' need to relate to others were less likely to be fulfilled in inclusive climates where they were included in the decision-making process.

The Australian workforce consists of 50.6% women and nearly 30% foreign-born workers.

Emergency services volunteers, however, is far less diverse, with 37.2% of volunteers being women and a documented 8% being foreign-born, with a mean age of 44 years (SD= 16.3 years) as indicated by the recorded demographic data from August 2018.

Turnover rates in emergency services volunteering are significant with 25% in general, with 41% of leavers being women, based on current turnover data from 2018 to 2019.

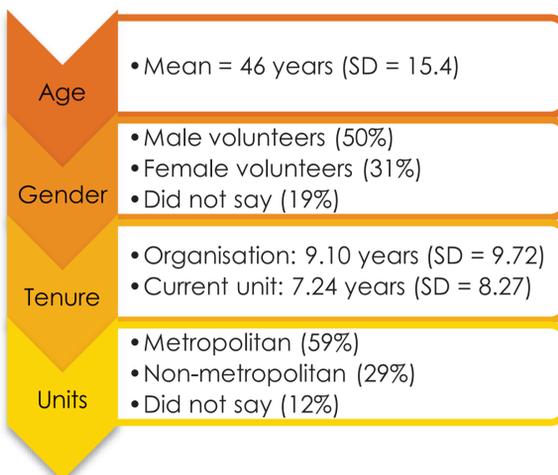
CLIMATE FOR INCLUSION AND FEMALE VOLUNTEERS

One way of attracting and retaining more female volunteers in emergency services is by creating an inclusive climate for all volunteers.

CULTURAL ASSESSMENT TOOL (CAT)

We assessed the climate for inclusiveness through a CAT in the form of an online survey.

From this, we looked at the responses of 512 volunteers (25% of which were foreign-born) from 55 units:



WHAT DID WE FIND?

1. An inclusive climate played an important role for volunteer retention as volunteers felt more connected with each other and they felt free to express themselves professionally.
2. Male and female volunteers viewed the climate differently and experienced different outcomes.
3. To a limited extent, female volunteers perceived lower levels of climate of inclusion than men.
4. Female volunteers felt more connected to their teammates in inclusive climates wherein their differences were integrated.
5. Unexpectedly, however, female volunteers' relatedness needs were less likely to be fulfilled in inclusive climates where they were included in the decision-making process.

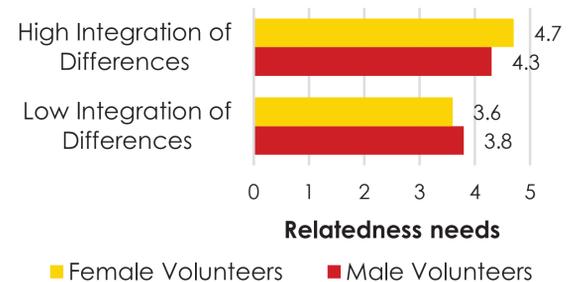


Figure 1: The interactive effects of inclusion climate (integration of differences) and relatedness needs for male and female volunteers.

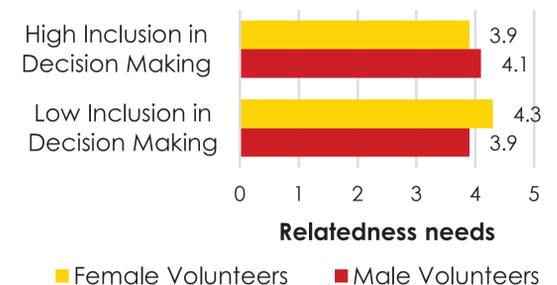


Figure 2: The interactive effects of inclusion climate (inclusion in decision-making) and relatedness needs for male and female volunteers.

WHAT SHOULD ORGANISATIONS DO?

- ❑ Pay particular attention to female volunteers and their integration into their units.
- ❑ Emphasise how volunteering for emergency services will provide one with opportunities to form friendships, in addition to establishing deeper connections with one's communities.

AS ONE VOLUNTEER PUTS IT...

"The impact of the gratitude from the people we assist – I wasn't expecting that to be so positive. The assumption community members make once you are wearing a uniform – you are suddenly considered to be knowledgeable and reliable."

An **inclusive climate** is the extent to which all members, regardless of their demographic and/or cultural background, are **fairly treated, valued for who they are, and are included in decision-making processes.**



Thus, in our research, we sought to understand:

- ❑ Why culture of inclusiveness plays an important role for volunteer retention, and
- ❑ Whether and why female volunteers have different perceptions of inclusivity culture in their units.