HAZARD NOTE

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HAZARDS CRC

AUTONOMY, BELONGINGNESS AND COMPETENCE: THE ABCs OF EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER RETENTION

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 investigated 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.

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SUMMARY

Across Australia, emergency services organisations are seeking ways to improve volunteer satisfaction, wellbeing and retention. This research is providing insights and data nationally to help to develop new recruitment and retention strategies for State Emergency Services volunteers. With the research team being based in Western Australia and with the support of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services WA, the study involved a survey of 398 SES

▲ Above: THIS RESEARCH ASSESSED THE SATISFACTION OF VOLUNTEERS' PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND HOW THIS IMPACTS ON RETENTION OUTCOMES IN EMERGENCY SERVICES. PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES WA.

volunteers about their volunteer background, leadership, wellbeing and motivation.

Findings show that satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, belongingness and competence) has a positive effect on volunteer role satisfaction and wellbeing, and reduces volunteers' intentions to leave the service. Volunteers reported feeling high levels of competence and belongingness, but lower levels of autonomy in their roles. Autonomy and belongingness were found to be the more significant drivers of retention, rather than competence. There were also significant differences found between genders and volunteering role types. Women reported feeling less competent compared to men, and non-managers felt less competent and less connected with others compared to managers.

This study proposes several recommendations to increase needs satisfaction for specific volunteer groups. Key recommendations include skill-building activities, adequate support systems and work design changes, ensuring volunteers' freedom and control over their tasks and responsibilities.

CONTEXT

Australian emergency services agencies have expressed a need to improve volunteer retention, which remains a significant challenge. While previous research has investigated various predictors of turnover, it did not consider the individual psychological needs of volunteers. This research investigated the needs satisfaction of volunteers and how it affects their role satisfaction, wellbeing and intentions to remain with the service.

BACKGROUND

Previous research found that interpersonal and group cohesion factors have a significant impact on volunteer turnover (Baxter-Tomkins & Wallace, 2009), thus highlighting the importance of creating an inclusive and cohesive environment to promote volunteer retention. While for-profit organisations rely on financial incentives to retain employees, not-for-profit and volunteering organisations must rely on alternative methods of

encouraging people to continue volunteering.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) argues that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs – *autonomy, belongingness and competenc*e – are essential to psychological growth and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The need for *autonomy* refers to an individual's desire to have the freedom to carry out an activity in their chosen way; the need for *belongingness* refers to an individual's need to relate and connect

with people around them; and the need for *competence* refers to the extent to which an individual feels capable of performing effectively in their role.

Previous research has shown the strong influence of autonomy and competence on volunteers' intentions to leave (Haivas, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013; Gagné, 2003). When these needs are satisfied, job satisfaction increases and the chance of an individual leaving an organisation decreases (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2016; Gagné, 2003). The current study investigated the effects of needs satisfaction on retention outcomes within an emergency volunteering context.

## BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH

This project investigated the recruitment, retention, diversity and wellbeing practices impacting on State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers in Western Australia. A Cultural Assessment Tool (CAT) survey was conducted to assess volunteers' overall experience.

The CAT survey was conducted with a sample of 398 WA SES volunteers, from 53 SES units, between September 2018 and February 2019. The sample group comprised 37% women and 62% men (with 1% preferring not to say), with an average age of 46.1 years (standard deviation of 15.5 years), with a fifth of respondents being unit managers. This survey included questions about volunteer background, leadership, wellbeing and motivation. Overall, the survey sample was representative of the SES volunteer population in WA at the time.

In the survey, respondents were asked whether they have ever felt like leaving the service and why. These qualitative responses were coded thematically. Almost 64% of volunteers indicated that there was at least one point in time where they considered leaving. When reflecting on this, 70% indicated that, at the time, they felt there were issues with their unit environment or culture, while 20% had felt that their group was not cohesive and 8% felt as though they had little autonomy in their role. Importantly, however, these individuals ultimately chose to remain with their service.

To investigate this further, researchers analysed survey responses to assess whether or not volunteers' basic psychological needs – autonomy, belongingness, and competence – were being satisfied in their roles, and whether this differed between genders or ages. Finally, researchers investigated needs satisfaction and its effect on four retention outcomes: role satisfaction, intentions to remain, learning and vitality.

Volunteer needs satisfaction

40% Autonomy

75% Belongingness

81% Competence
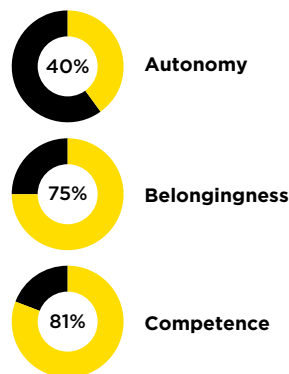
▲ Figure 1: PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED WITH FEELING AUTONOMOUS, WELL-CONNECTED AND COMPETENT.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

After examining the needs satisfaction of SES volunteers, researchers found that most surveyed volunteers felt competent and well-connected with other volunteers. This is a positive result, as feeling socially connected with others has been shown to influence role satisfaction, thriving and turnover intentions within this emergency volunteering context. However, volunteers did not feel they had much autonomy in their roles. Specifically, volunteers often felt like they had to follow other people's commands and that, if they could, they would do things differently.

Group differences in needs satisfaction

When examining group differences, women rated similarly to men on feeling autonomous and connected with other SES volunteers (see Figure 2, page 3). However, despite women feeling that they were good at the things they did in their role, they largely felt unsure about their ability to accomplish and master the most difficult tasks in the SES, leading to lower levels of feeling competent overall.

When comparing unit managers with non-managers (see Figure 2, page 3), managers reportedly felt more competent and connected with other volunteers compared to non-managers. However, managers and non-managers felt similarly low levels of autonomy. Where they differ in belongingness ratings, managers felt like they mixed well with other people and had close friends in the SES, while non-managers did not feel this as strongly. Comparing competence ratings, non-managers felt somewhat less confident in their ability to accomplish difficult tasks than managers. Differences in feelings of competence could be attributed to level of experience, thus, the lower levels of

confidence could be a key issue to target with non-managers in training activities.

No significant differences were found when examining the relationship between needs satisfaction and unit location or age, however certain trends were observed when examining specific survey items. For example, volunteers older than 45 years of age typically felt more connected with other volunteers than their younger counterparts. Similarly, volunteers between the ages of 56 and 65 felt the most competent. However, this is somewhat expected considering that older volunteers often had longer tenures in the SES, resulting in higher levels of feeling competent.

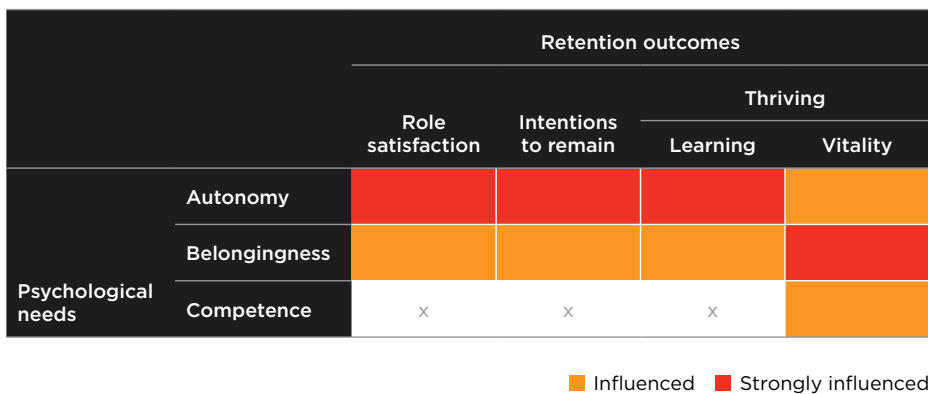This study also examined the relationship between volunteers' needs satisfaction and four retention outcomes – role satisfaction, intentions to remain, learning, and vitality (see Figure 3, page 3). Learning and vitality were included as two measures of thriving: a psychological state where an individual believes they are continuously learning and developing in their role, and that their role is

Psychological needs satisfied – genders and managerial role types

■ Men ■ Women ■ Unit Managers ■ Non-Managers

Autonomy
17%
20%
24%
17%

Belongingness
64%
64%
80%
61%

Competence
73%
60%
83%
67%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
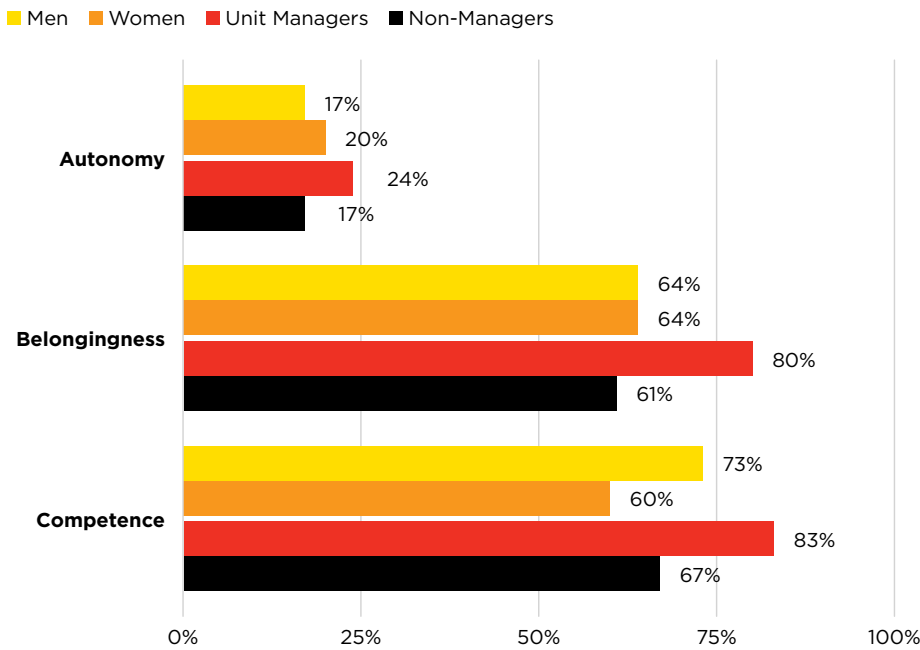
▲ Figure 2: PERCENTAGES OF MEN, WOMEN, UNIT MANAGERS AND NON-MANAGERS WHO AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED THAT EACH PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED WAS SATISFIED IN THEIR VOLUNTEERING ROLE.

Influence of needs satisfaction on retention outcomes

		Retention outcomes			
		Role satisfaction	Intentions to remain	Thriving	
				Learning	Vitality
Psychological needs	Autonomy	Strongly influenced	Strongly influenced	Strongly influenced	Influenced
	Belongingness	Influenced	Influenced	Influenced	Strongly influenced
	Competence	X	X	X	Influenced

■ Influenced ■ Strongly influenced

▲ Figure 3: THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NEEDS SATISFACTION AND FOUR RETENTION OUTCOMES, INDICATING WHICH OF THE RETENTION OUTCOMES WERE SIGNIFICANTLY INFLUENCED BY THE SATISFACTION OF EACH PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED.

a vital source of energy for them (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005).

Overall, autonomy and belongingness were found to be significantly linked with all four retention outcomes. Autonomy had the strongest association with role satisfaction, intentions to remain, and learning. This highlights how crucial autonomy is to volunteer retention and suggests that volunteers are more likely to be satisfied with their roles, more likely to stay with the service, and more likely to feel like they are continuously learning and developing, if they are helped to feel more autonomous.

Results also suggested that belongingness

has significant influence on all volunteer retention outcomes, most significantly on volunteers' vitality. Volunteers may be relying on the benefits of social connectedness and camaraderie in order to feel fulfilled, energetic and psychologically satisfied within their roles.

Contrary to previous research (Haivas, Hofmans & Pepermans, 2013), competence was only significantly associated with vitality, not with volunteer turnover intentions. This result suggests that the feeling of capability significantly impacts how energetic and alive volunteers feel in their roles. However, feeling competent may not necessarily be sufficient for influencing volunteer turnover intentions,

of which autonomy and belongingness have the stronger influence.

These results support the qualitative data collected about why people have considered leaving the SES. Few people cited feelings of incompetence as a reason they felt like leaving. However, similar to the survey results, feeling autonomous and connected with other volunteers is highly valued by volunteers and should be improved in SES units to promote volunteer retention. Furthermore, even though women and non-managers reported feeling less competent, this may not necessarily result in these volunteers leaving, however it may present an ongoing challenge that keeps these volunteers coming back.

HOW COULD THIS RESEARCH BE USED?

This study investigated the level of needs satisfaction among SES volunteers and the influence of these needs on retention outcomes (role satisfaction, intentions to remain, learning and vitality). Overall, the volunteers in the sample reported feeling high levels of belongingness and competence, but low levels of autonomy. Based on these results, there are several practical recommendations that can be implemented by volunteer managers, so that they can better tailor their management and training practices to satisfy the needs of specific groups.

Volunteers reported feeling low levels of autonomy, which was shown to be a significant influencer of all four retention outcomes. Therefore, volunteer managers should consider how autonomy could be promoted in their highly regulated environments if they want to improve volunteer retention:

• While it would be hard to allow autonomy in operational duties due to standard procedures, **autonomy should be encouraged in non-operational tasks**. For example, volunteers in one SES unit have re-organised the way the unit is run. Instead of a typical executive committee consisting of several members largely responsible for all organisational tasks, every member of the unit was given responsibility for a small part of the unit's operations. This has had a positive impact on volunteer retention and recruitment. In another unit, volunteers are more involved with the delivery of training, whereby an individual is responsible for planning and facilitating a training session for a particular

topic. Both examples illustrate how increasing volunteer autonomy can be accomplished by allowing volunteers to participate in the everyday activities of their units. By allowing volunteers to assign themselves new tasks, volunteers are also given a sense of ownership over their duties and responsibilities. Sharing the workload of administrative and training duties also allowed volunteers to obtain new skills and development opportunities. This will likely lead to an increase in confidence in their abilities, which is particularly important to non-managers and women, who feel less competent than their experienced or male counterparts.

- Where autonomy isn't possible (for example, in operational procedures), **the crucial need to follow procedures should be made clear to volunteers** for them to fully accept and endorse these procedures. Any **feelings of frustration regarding the lack of autonomy in operational duties should be acknowledged and discussed** between volunteers and their managers.

Belongingness was a key concern for non-managerial volunteers. Satisfying the need for belongingness is an important step that should be addressed in the volunteer onboarding phase:

- **New recruits should be paired together** in a buddy system, allowing newcomers to have shared experiences together.
- **Pairing newcomers with mentors** will also help foster bonding and team cohesion, as it encourages older and newer volunteers to mix.
- An inclusive unit environment can also help improve social connectedness. **Allowing volunteers to speak up and contribute in decision-making processes** within the unit will help them feel like their input is valued.

- **Social functions involving volunteers and their families** might encourage a sense of camaraderie and community within the unit.

Feeling competent was a key issue for women and non-managerial volunteers. While this may be due to lack of exposure or experience, various methods could be considered to improve their overall confidence:

- **Experienced volunteers could mentor less-experienced volunteers**, which provides newcomers with a role model that they can aspire to and a support person they can rely on for task and social support.
- Allowing women and non-managerial volunteers the **opportunity to master difficult tasks in training sessions**, with sufficient feedback and guidance, will also allow their confidence to be built and their misconceptions be challenged and corrected.

Through the provision of adequate training, social support, and development opportunities, it is likely that volunteers' psychological needs will be satisfied, which may result in them being more likely to stay within the service and organisation over time.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Opportunities to extend this study would include regularly repeating the study to track any changes over time. To address this, findings from the CAT 2018/19 survey were used to inform the design of the follow-up CAT 2019/20 survey, intended to highlight areas of the volunteering experience that have improved, or have stayed relatively the same, in addition to uncovering which areas are in need of further improvement. For future research, it is advised that specific interventions, as outlined in the section above, be carried out in units to target needs that require improvement. By measuring the needs of the volunteers before and after interventions, the effectiveness of the

FURTHER READING

Baxter-Tomkins T & Wallace M (2009) Recruitment and retention of volunteers in emergency services, *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, 14: pp.39–49.

Deci EL & Ryan RM (2000) The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11: pp.227–268.

Gagné M (2003) The role of autonomy support and autonomy orientation in theengagement of prosocial behavior. *Motivation and Emotion*, 27: pp.199–223.

Haivas S, Hofmans J & Pepermans R (2013) Volunteer engagement and intention to quit from a self-determination theory perspective. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43: pp.1869–1880.

Kragt D, Luksyte A, Dunlop P, Holtrop D, Gagné M (2019) Motivations, experiences and emotions: Being an SES volunteer, *Hazard Note* 65, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

Spreitzer GM, Sutcliffe K, Dutton J, Sonenshein S & Grant AM (2005) A socially embedded model of thriving at work. *Organization Science*, 16: pp.537–549.

Van den Broeck A, Ferris DL, Chang C & Rosen CC (2016) A review of self-determination theory's basic psychological needs at work. J*ournal of Management*, 42: 1195–1229.

intervention can be assessed. This will help determine whether the intervention improved the needs satisfaction of volunteers and, as a consequence, their overall volunteering experience, which will benefit the volunteers in addition to improving the service they provide to the organisation and public overall.