



IMPROVING THE RETENTION AND ENGAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS IN EMERGENCY SERVICE AGENCIES

Annual project report 2014-2015

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Cover: ACT SES volunteers in action.

Photo: ACT SES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2014 we presented the framework of our BNHCRC project “**Improving the retention and engagement of volunteers in emergency service agencies**” across four themes. This year’s report provides the “bricks and mortar” of our operations thus revealing a firm shape of the developing research.

The first theme recognises the evolving landscape of ‘the volunteer’ in today’s emergency service. The people who sign up for, and turn out to training and callouts are a jumbled mosaic comprising many different personalities, needs, expectations and desires. No longer can we rely on a homogenous set of personal traits and values, brigades and units are now populated with a mix of generational identities, ethnicities, educational backgrounds and socio-economic identities. This study intends to provide a better understanding of who the ‘volunteer’ is and what it is they value. The research within this theme has seen steady progress; following on from a comprehensive literature review, the next stage of the research involves collecting survey responses and establishing focus groups in the NSW State Emergency Service (SES). The outcome of the study will produce a complete values audit package that could be used by other emergency services to better understand the motives of their own volunteer workforce.

The second theme addresses one of the most frequently expressed concerns by volunteers about their organisation, that is poor leadership, specifically at the level of the Brigade Captain and Unit Controller. Our Leadership Development Program introduces a leading theory of motivational leadership borrowed from psychology. In 2014 we offered the program as a pilot to volunteer leaders of the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) and NSW SES. Data collected showed that leaders were able to adopt a more autonomy supportive leadership style after the training. Furthermore, the volunteers working with them are more satisfied with their volunteering job and less likely to leave when they have their basic psychological needs fulfilled. More research is required to substantiate the data. The findings of the pilot study were presented at the Forth World Congress on Positive Psychology in Florida, USA. We expect to hand over the program to the emergency service agencies in 2017.

The third theme looks at progress of gender diversity in the Australian emergency services. We are keen to examine this issue from a causal perspective to try to understand the important elements which may be shaping or constraining gender migration in emergency service agencies. A review of publications related to gender in the emergency services is in preparation and input from stakeholders is being sought.

The forth theme that aimed to examine best practice in cadetship programs has been discontinued due to a refocus of end-user interest.

Dr Michael Jones

Project Leader



END USER STATEMENT

In the past year, two of the projects associated with this research have made substantial progress. Mr Calcutt's literature review was circulated to end users, which provided the cluster with a better understanding of the basis of his research. This project is now ready to commence data collection. The 'Motivational Leadership – Leadership Development Program' was piloted with NSW RFS and NSW SES volunteers and will be offered to other emergency service agencies over the coming year. It is anticipated that end user involvement will increase for all projects over the coming year.

Robert Dugdale

Acting Manager, Volunteerism, Country Fire Authority, Vic



INTRODUCTION

High turnover of volunteers in the emergency services creates high operating costs (recruiting, training and equipping volunteers) as well as reduced organisational effectiveness.

Through the application of grounded qualitative research, experimental design and Participatory Action Research, three core volunteer issues are addressed in this project:

- **Retaining volunteers beyond their initial training period**
Improving volunteer retention enables a more efficient and strategic utilisation of training resources to meet a larger variety of response capabilities. Retention also helps to ensure that emergency response is in readiness across the spectrum of emergency service capabilities.
- **An increase in the skills acquisition of emergency service brigades and units across Australia**
An increased skills acquisition means that each unit or brigade will be better equipped to handle its own emergencies, ensuring faster and more efficient deployment, and results in reduced impacts on federal funding (paying for rescue workers to travel across Australia to assist in emergency situations). A larger volunteer core also means that work can be distributed more evenly among unit members, permitting volunteers to maintain a work-life balance during emergency situations, instead of feeling an obligation to take every shift due to the absence of other qualified volunteers.
- **Increasing the value proposition**
Reducing the turnover of volunteers will increase the return on investment, relieves budgetary constraints, and returns value to the community and the State.

In the anticipation of adding significant knowledge towards the issues identified above, we have developed the research into four themes:

Theme 1: Valuing volunteers-Reconciling volunteer expectation and experiences in emergency services

Theme 2: Redesigning leadership –Self-determination theory

Theme 3: Gender diversity – Understanding the causal factors

Theme 4: Emergency management cadetship programs – An examination of best practice (discontinued)

The following pages report on changes, progress and stages of completion for each of the themes.



THEME 1: VALUING VOLUNTEERS—RECONCILING VOLUNTEER EXPECTATION AND EXPERIENCES IN EMERGENCY SERVICES

Volunteers are the lifeblood of Australian emergency services and constitute a highly unique workforce. The ready availability and effective utilisation of a skilled volunteer workforce is vital to mitigate the human, financial and environmental losses from a variety of natural disasters. An increase in the severity of catastrophic flood and fire events raises new and serious emergency management challenges for Australia.

Australian emergency services face a range of contemporary challenges, including the ongoing availability of a skilled volunteer workforce. A growing number of studies have reported a generational shift in the patterns of volunteering from altruistic/collective to egoistic/reflexive motives, with potential implications for sustained volunteer commitment into the future.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taking an individual values approach, this research aims to understand the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, and the main reasons for volunteer turnover. Values are the enduring principles and beliefs that guide and motivate personal and group attitudes and behaviours.

- RQ1: What are the distinctive shared values of Australian emergency services volunteers?
- RQ2: To what extent and in what ways do these shared values impact on volunteer expectations of and commitment to emergency services organisations?
- RQ3: In what ways can the formal values of emergency services organisations be better aligned with volunteer values in order to maximise workforce satisfaction, commitment and retention?

Research methodology

Utilising a well-established values evaluation framework, the study will seek to identify the distinctive and dominant personal and shared values that motivate volunteer participation in emergency services, and to evaluate the importance of individual, group and organisational values alignment for volunteer satisfaction, commitment and retention.

The research will utilize mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methods and will be undertaken in two stages. In the first stage of the study (from June to December 2015), as an organisation-specific case study, researchers will seek to determine the distinctive and dominant personal and shared values of the NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES) volunteer workforce. In the second stage of the study (from December 2015 to June 2016) researchers will actively engage with several SES volunteer units in order to explore local strategies to address values conflicts and misalignments. Work is underway to extend the first part of this research into other agencies. The WA Department of Fire and Emergency

Services (DFES) and ACT SES are among two of the various agencies which have expressed an interest.

From mid-2015 a series of (more than twenty) one hour focus group meetings will be conducted with SES units across NSW at which participants will be invited to complete an anonymous values survey, followed by a group discussion and ranking of priority shared values. It is proposed that the focus group consultations will coincide with the regular weekly meetings of units and will occur during a time of low operational activity.

In stage two of the study (from December 2015 to June 2016) expressions of interest will be sought from several (at least three) different local SES units willing to engage in a series of participatory action research (PAR) investigations. The PAR interventions will involve the development and application within each participating unit of unit-generated strategies to intensively explore and evaluate alternative operating models that directly address specific value mis-alignments that have emerged from stage 1.



Photo: William Calcutt pictured with Lyndsey Wright, Contract Research and Education Manager BNHCRC.

Anticipated outcomes

A dearth of information on a range of issues concerning the resourcing of a vital national function was originally identified by McLennan and Esmond in 2008 and 2009 respectively (1, 2). These knowledge gaps mean that Australian emergency services agencies currently have limited understanding of the systemic drivers and complex forces that influence the availability of an essential resource (the volunteer workforce), and as a consequence agencies are constrained in their capacity to develop evidence-based strategies to positively influence volunteer satisfaction, commitment and retention.

The application of a basic values framework to identify the distinctive and dominant shared values and systemic drivers that motivate volunteer participation in Australian emergency services has significant potential to redress the current information gaps on a unique volunteer workforce. The identification of differences and even conflicts between individual, group and organisational values will highlight the reasons for volunteer satisfaction and commitment, with broader relevance to human resource management and organisational studies literature.

Through the conduct of a case study utilising the NSW SES the research promises a complete values audit package that could be used by other emergency services to better understand the motives of their own volunteer workforce.

From a practical end-user perspective this research offers substantial quantitative and qualitative information on the values, motives and expectations

of distinct volunteer sub-groups (by age, gender and region), with potential implications for:

- The targeting of potentially suitable volunteers at the recruitment stage;
- The structure of training and the mix of theoretical and practical skill development;
- The composition and organisation of teams and the management skills of leaders; and
- A more systematic approach to the organisation and deployment of volunteer capabilities.

Changes since the annual report 2014

The former title of this theme was '*Understanding and managing the interaction between individual and group motives and different organisational structures-Volunteer Expectations & Experiences*' and was changed to reflect the insights gained in the literature research and in consultations with end-users which evoked the need to refine the research strategy.



Photo: Bill Calcutt amongst BNHCRC funded PhD students in Wellington, New Zealand. Photo courtesy BNHCRC.

Progress

Bill Calcutt manages the project which is the basis of his PhD study. He is the recipient of a BNHCRC scholarship and is supervised by Dr. Michael Jones and Assoc. Prof. Andrew Sense.

- In March 2015 in-principle agreement was reached with the NSW SES to proceed with a SES-specific case study, subsequently confirmed by a letter of support from the NSW SES Commissioner.
- In early June 2015 the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Wollongong approved stage 1 of the research.



- In June 2015 an extensive literature review was circulated to end user representatives seeking their input.
- Plans are now well advanced to commence an anonymous survey of the dominant values of NSW SES members.

Conferences and presentations (W. Calcutt)

- Research poster at the BNHCRC & AFAC Annual Conference, 2-5 September, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Research presentation before Higher Degree Research Committee, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong, November 2014. The research project was subsequently approved for a PhD.
- Three minute thesis presentation at BNHCRC Research Advisory Forum in Sydney, April 2015.

THEME 2: REDESIGNING LEADERSHIP-SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Effective leadership is a critical success factor for any organisation. However, in the place of defective or absent leadership in for-profit organisations, an employee may be willing to trade labour for income, and in so doing, will submit to authority. This is not the case in volunteer-based organisations. In the emergency services where most people volunteer their time, and where a leader is most likely to be a volunteer also, tolerances for poor leadership do not endure and contribute to a significant loss of volunteers (2-4).

MOTIVATIONAL LEADERSHIP - LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The Leadership Development Program (LDP) is drawn from self-determination theory (SDT), which is a psychological framework that engages with the fundamental needs humans have towards self-motivation.

This program was developed by a team of interdisciplinary academics at the University of Wollongong in 2014 for specific use with and by emergency service volunteer leaders. The program was piloted with volunteer leaders from the NSW RFS and NSW SES in late 2014 and was funded by the University of Wollongong, through a Global Challenges Seed Grant (35%) and the BNHCRC (65%).

The LDP provides contemporary “hands on” leadership training to enable volunteer leaders in the emergency services to understand their own leadership deficits and possibilities, to provide them with skills to motivate their subordinates and to refine a program of enhanced leadership training for creating the next generation of emergency service volunteer leaders.



Photo: LDP team members, from left to right: Dr Joakim Eidenfalk, Vivien Forner, Nicholai Popov, Dr Senevi Kiridena, Dr Dominique Parrish and Dr Michael Jones.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: How can leadership be developed through the application of SDT?



- RQ2: How effectively is followers' engagement and retention increased as a result of an SDT intervention on their leaders?

Research methodology

The LDP is of 48 weeks duration and consists of a training and research component. The training consists of:

1. a one day workshop focusing on knowledge development and awareness raising,
2. on-the-job application of the learning supported by online content and
3. a one day 'wrap up' session to reinforce knowledge and practice and consolidate learning.

Research data is collected by surveying leaders and their direct reports at several periods during the program to evaluate the effectiveness of the LDP and investigate whether the leadership intervention can affect positive changes in both the leaders' leadership style (leader reported) and their direct reports' perceptions of the leader and reported job satisfaction (intention to leave, job satisfaction, basic psychological need satisfaction).

In 2015 two additional theoretical perspectives have been introduced for research purposes: Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) and Social Capital (SC), which are anticipated to offer deeper insights into the type of behaviour among volunteers that has been associated with improved retention and engagement. Nicholai Popov, doctoral student in the Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong will head research into OCB and SC as part of this program.

Empirical research suggests that organisational members working in teams with higher levels of performance engaged in more OCB than those working in units with lower levels of performance (5). OCB is a valid measure of volunteer performance in non-profit organisations (6) and is viewed as a predictor of turnover intention (7). By promoting OCB through a specifically tailored LDP and measuring changes in this behaviour over time it is anticipated that this project will demonstrate increases in OCB.

SC is a valuable resource derived from the close interpersonal relationships among organisational members, which can be mobilised for purposive actions. SC is a valuable asset to organisations because it solves issues associated with coordination, improves cohesiveness and facilitates the flow of information among organisational members (8). Increases in SC are also associated with reduced turnover rates (9, 10).

Anticipated outcomes

While existing research points to the benefits of leaders applying the principles of SDT and that leadership training in its application may result in increases in OCB and SC, it is necessary to test these assertions. By confirming correlations between leadership training in SDT and increases in OCB and SC, this LDP is expected to deliver effective outcomes to the emergency service agencies by: (a) extending the period of time volunteers typically serve the organisation and (b) reducing overall turnover intention.

This program will continue to be refined and validated until handover to the emergency services agencies in 2017, where we expect it will provide valuable input into existing leadership programs with demonstrated outcomes.

Changes since the annual report 2014

The research project was initially titled “*Redesigning Leadership–Self-determination theory and emotional intelligence*”. After completion of the pilot program, greater engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of the developed model, ‘emotional intelligence’ was removed as a specific research component, as it is inherent in the framework and is not a component which can be isolated for independent evaluation.

This program has evolved since its inception prior to pilot testing. The LDP was evaluated after the pilot and the refined goals now include determining the longitudinal stability of the SDT intervention (from 18 weeks to 48 weeks), as well integrating two additional research measures: OCB and SC.



Photo: Participants and presenters at the completion of the first LDP training workshop at the University of Wollongong, 22 November 2014.

Progress

- The LDP was delivered between September and November 2014 to 30 leaders from the NSW RFS and the NSW SES.
- Research findings volunteer leaders:

Of the leaders who attended the leadership development program, 18 completed the survey both before training and after the training. In summary, through attending the program leaders learnt to adopt autonomy supportive over coercive approaches to leading their volunteers.
- Findings direct reports (volunteers who work with the participating leader):

A total of 45 volunteers completed the survey on at least one occasion. The survey measured the extent to which their three needs were being

satisfied in their volunteer job: turnover intention, job satisfaction and the extent to which their manager provides autonomy supportive leadership. In summary, volunteers who's needs are satisfied (competence, relatedness and autonomy) and who's leaders take an autonomy supportive (vs controlling) approach are more satisfied with their volunteering job and are less likely to want to leave.

- The pilot study was originally planned as an experimental time series design that would allow a comparison of the intervention outcomes to a control. However a low response rate and high rate of drop out on the repeated measures resulted in insufficient sample size to be able to analyse the results in a robust manner. Therefore more data is needed to enable additional analysis and causal inferences to be drawn.
- Evaluation of the program and comments made by the participants together with observations by emergency service staff who attended the second workshop, highlighted the value of the program and associated benefits to the emergency services.



Photo: LDP workshop at the Sydney Business School, University of Wollongong, 22 November 2014.

Conferences and presentations

- Michael Jones presented a research poster at the 2014 AFAC conference in Wellington NZ in September 2014.
- Nicholai Popov presented his research proposal before the Higher Degree Research Committee, Faculty of Business University of Wollongong in March 2015. The proposal was subsequently approved for a doctorate degree.
- Vivien Forner, one of the University of Wollongong LDP team members who has formal training in psychology, presented the research outcome of the pilot program to the Forth World Congress on Positive Psychology, 25-28 June in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, USA.



- Michael Jones will be presenting the use of SDT as a method for retaining volunteers at the 2015 International Business Conference in New York City, August 2-6.

Promotion and media

- The Leadership Development Program was officially launched on Friday night 19 September 2014 with a welcome by
 - Professor Tim Marchant, acting Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Wollongong,
 - The Hon. Gareth Ward MP, Member for Kiama (currently Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier for the Illawarra and South Coast)
 - Greg Newton, Assistant Commissioner NSW SES
 - Bronwyn Jones, Director of Membership and Strategic Services NSW RFS

And a keynote address by

- Major-General Brian (Hori) Howard AO MC, ESM (Ret'd), Honorary Chairman AEMVF 2002-2011,

followed by a dinner with participants and presenters.

- The Illawarra Mercury published a news article 'Keeping volunteers motivated' on 20 September 2014
- Dr Michael Jones conducted several radio interviews including: I98 FM, ABC Illawarra, and ABC South Coast.
- The University of Wollongong, Global Challenges blog published a post 'UoW project helping emergency services retain their volunteers' on 16 October 2014: <https://www.uowblogs.com/globalchallenges/2014/10/16/uow-project-helping-emergency-services-retain-their-volunteers/>



THEME 3: GENDER DIVERSITY—UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSAL FACTORS

In a study reported almost a decade back, Beatson and McLennan (11) used reports concerning gender issues in emergency services (both paid, and volunteer based) to conclude that: (i) women were under-represented in Australian volunteer-based fire services, (ii) they faced significant barriers to volunteering and (iii) were likely to experience both passive and active discrimination. Also of interest is the work of McLennan, Birch, Beatson and Cowlshaw (12) in which they reviewed research conducted by the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project pertaining to the recruitment and retention of women volunteer fire-fighters. They found that the upper echelons of management in most emergency service organizations were largely populated by males. This project seeks to develop an understanding of the underlying causal factors that contribute to the gender imbalance in emergency services and to leverage this understanding to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations concerning interventions that might redress the situation.

Research questions

- RQ1: What are the key factors responsible for gender imbalance in these organisations?
- RQ2: What specific interventions might these organisations deploy to redress gender balance, and improve both the attraction and retention of female volunteers?

Clearly, answers to RQ1 will directly lead to the formulation of interventions that address RQ2.

A number of initial hypotheses might be formulated to address RQ1:

- HYP1: Organizational structure contributes to gender imbalance.
- HYP2: Organizational culture contributes to gender imbalance.
- HYP3: Gender imbalance is self-perpetuating (i.e., organizations that are imbalanced in the first place remain so).

Research methodology

Comparative case studies are likely to generate insights relating to HYP1. Data about voluntary emergency service organizations in other geographies that have achieved greater gender balance might provide pointers as to which organizational structures work (especially if these organizational structures are significantly different to those in the target organizations of this study).

Organizational culture (the focus of HYP2) is often manifested in organizational and social norms. Focus groups can help surface such norms, which are often tacit. These norms can then be held up to scrutiny (using the focus group mechanism) to identify those that might have a causal connection to gender imbalance.



Anticipated outcomes

This project will lead to the following outcomes:

- A detailed understanding of the factors contributing to gender imbalance in volunteer-driven emergency service organisations.
- A set of specific interventions to redress gender imbalance.
- The integration of these interventions into a comprehensive gender mainstreaming program.

Changes since the annual report 2014

When a networking opportunity presented itself last year with the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC), authors of an emergency kit for women in rural, regional and remote areas in Australia (13), our team had anticipated the possibility of a pilot study into determining the role of women in emergency services in these areas of Australia. However, this direction proved unsustainable in the course of time.

Progress

- A literature review related to gender in the emergency services in Australia is presently being compiled by research assistant Dr Hui-Ling Wang. Cluster end-users will be asked to provide input for this report which aims to target gaps for future research.
- Valerie He, 4th year honours student in the School of Management, Operations and Marketing will research the phenomena of "Glass Ceiling Effect", a term referring to the barriers women face from reaching senior management positions (14), for her honours research in 2015. She will use semi-structured interview questions to survey male and female volunteers in the NSW SES.
- We are in the process of seeking wider consultation with BNHCRC stakeholders to determine how to serve the needs of the organisations in terms of addressing gender diversity.



THEME 4: EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT CADETSHIP PROGRAMS—AN EXAMINATION OF BEST PRACTICE

This project was discontinued in the course of 2015 due to a refocus of end-user interest.

Progress

- Dr Michael Jones travelled to Perth in August 2014 and held discussions with leaders of successful cadetship programs in WA: Busselton Volunteer Marine rescue Group, Denmark High school, Mandurah SES, Roleystone Bushfire Brigade and the WA DFES. The research data has now been collated and is currently being prepared for publication as a “best practice – case study” report. It will touch on both positive and negative elements of cadet management and will inform managers of cadet programs across Australia of some of the do’s and don’t’s of engaging and managing cadets.



PUBLICATIONS LIST

- Calcutt, W 2015. Research Poster 'Volunteer Expectations & Experiences', BNHCRC & AFAC Annual Conference, 2-5 September, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Jones, M 2015. Research Poster 'Redesigning Leadership', BNHCRC & AFAC Annual Conference, 2-5 September, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Calcutt, W 2015. Valuing Volunteers–Reconciling volunteer expectation and experiences in emergency services, literature review (15).
- Forner, V.W. *et al.* 2015. 'Positive Leadership Education and Practice: A Self-Determination Theory based Leadership Development Program', paper presented to Fourth World Congress on Positive Psychology, Florida, 25-28 June (16).
- Calcutt, W 2015. Emergency services volunteering: understanding the dynamics of discretionary participation in an essential public service (17).



CURRENT BNHCRC TEAM MEMBERS

Dr Michael Jones	Project Leader
A/Prof Andrew Sense	Chief Investigator
Mr William Calcutt	PhD Candidate
Mr Nicholai Popov	Doctoral Candidate
Ms Valerie He	Honours Candidate
Dr Hui-Ling Wang	Research Assistant
Dr Yoke Berry	Project Manager

ADDITIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Website

Our website <http://www.uowblogs.com/evp/> has been regularly updated since its launch last year and was an effective tool during the Leadership Development Program 2014 for communication, sharing of workshop notes and online learning. The home page was viewed close to 500 times.

Newsletter

Under the title 'EVP News Brief' (EVP: Emergency Volunteer Project) the team published a newsletter in October 2014 and January 2015. Currently we are evaluating the benefit of producing a regular newsletter.

Cluster engagement

Effective collaboration between universities and organisations is a challenge for all parties despite good intentions. Pertuze, Calder (18) suggest best practices for 'industry-university' collaboration. Although directed towards industry for one-on-one partnerships, we identify with some of the strategies such as establishing a strong communication routine. Since the last teleconference with cluster end-users on 14 May 2015 we have taken stock of how we relate and engage with stakeholders and we are determined to improve our procedures. Starting in August, the project leader will personally visit some stakeholders to progress our ongoing working relationships.



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