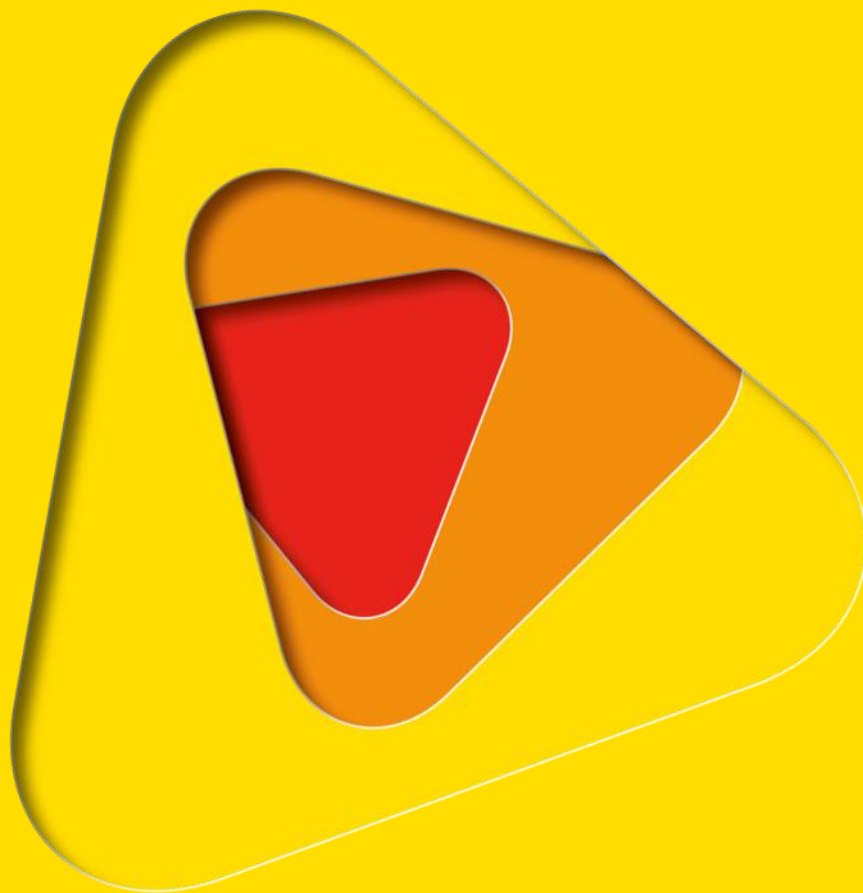bushfire&natural
HAZARDSCRC

ORGANISATIONAL SOCIALISATION OF VOLUNTEERS IN AN AUSTRALIAN EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCY

Non-peer reviewed research proceedings from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC & AFAC conference
Sydney, 4 – 6 September 2017

Dr Michael Jones and Yoke Berry
University of Wollongong
Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

Version	Release history	Date
1.0	Initial release of document	04/09/2017

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In many OECD countries, emergency response to accidents and natural disasters is heavily reliant on volunteers trained in areas of fire, rescue, medical care, and relief. Australia is no exception. Australian communities, the government, and businesses rely on the hard work and dedication of tens of thousands of volunteers to keep Australians and their property safe from the impact of fire and natural disaster. However, while incidents of natural disaster are on the incline, volunteers, those who are capable of and willing to serve their communities in times of crisis, are on the decline.

A wealth of literature has examined retention of volunteers and how to address it. However, while it is acknowledged that volunteer turnover occurs at various stages of the volunteering life cycle (recruitment, training, socialisation, performance, and retirement (Alfes, Shantz, & Saksida, 2015; Cuskelly & Boag, 2001)), little attention has been paid to turnover during the critical socialisation stage, when turnover presents the greatest cost to the organisation: after resources have been devoted to training the volunteer, and before they have returned on the investment by performing.

This article presents a predictive model of volunteer retention, which maps socialisation, expulsion, and self-exclusion based on social fit. The model is derived from an inductive examination of the processes of volunteer turnover during the socialisation of emergency service volunteers in Australia. Using a grounded theory approach, through 17 focus groups and 63 interviews with 137 volunteers across seven locations, the study identified the processes of volunteer turnover during the socialisation stage. The model predicts that during this stage, volunteers either stay or leave their respective units based on the level of their social fit with existing peers. This model contributes to theory by categorizing volunteer turnover according to the stages of the volunteering life cycle, and to practice by drawing attention to the need to consider social fit prior to investing in new volunteer training.

Irrespective of being a volunteer or paid staff member, the process of joining an organisation, followed by participating in it and eventually leaving it, is known as organisational socialisation (Figure 1). This model is discussed below.

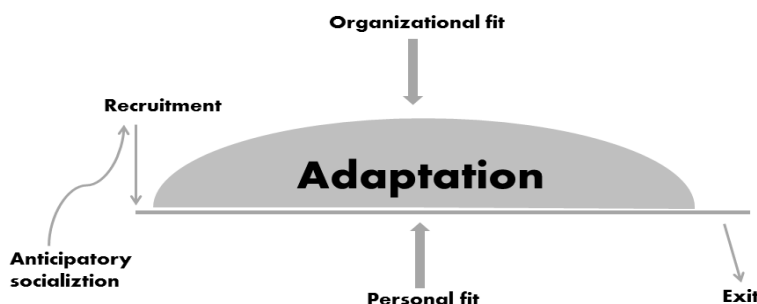FIGURE 1 - GENERAL MODEL OF THE SOCIALISATION PROCESS FOR AESA VOLUNTEERS

ANTICIPATORY SOCIALISATION

Anticipatory socialisation describes the period prior to joining the organisation, from expectations starting in early childhood until that moment of entry (Kramer, 2010). Research shows that a large percentage of volunteers join their chosen volunteer organisation through the influence of family and friends.

RECRUITMENT

The volunteer-based AESAs consist of local units or brigades that are largely autonomous and are run by the volunteers themselves. Career staff are in charge of the administrative and managerial structure of the organisation (Headquarters and regional centers).

The local units manage their own recruitment predominantly through media campaigns and personal contacts (Baxter-Tomkins & Wallace, 2009; Esmond, 2009). Most hold an information night for prospective volunteers to explain the work of the organisation (Hatcher, 2015). The recruitment procedure is in stark contrast to corporate organisations that seek career staff for specific roles that have detailed selection criteria. Some of the larger regional units however can be more selective in their recruiting.

THE OPERATIONAL UNIT

The period following recruitment, when the volunteer enters the operational unit, is termed adaptation (Figure 1 and in more detail Figure 2). The volunteer makes sense of the volunteer interactions in the unit, learns about what is expected and what the organisation's rules and values are (organisational fit). It is at this point where the volunteer's needs are negotiated and evaluated by the organisation, for example in terms of specific roles that the volunteer would like to fulfill (personal fit) (Kramer, 2010).

New recruits arrive mostly for the same values and reasons – e.g. to help their community through a current emergency or the one they have just experienced. Upon joining, they are usually grouped together and inducted into the organisation through shared training experiences and social events. The initial training period may take up to 12 months and occurs in virtual isolation to the larger population (not in all units) of the main body of volunteers who are of relatively longer standing. Members cannot go to emergency incidents before the induction is complete and some members in larger units have never been called up.

Facing the longer-term volunteers, recruits are hit with a 'trial by personality' where they measure themselves against the character of the unit based on its amalgam of individual traits and characteristics and the unit culture (Figure 2).
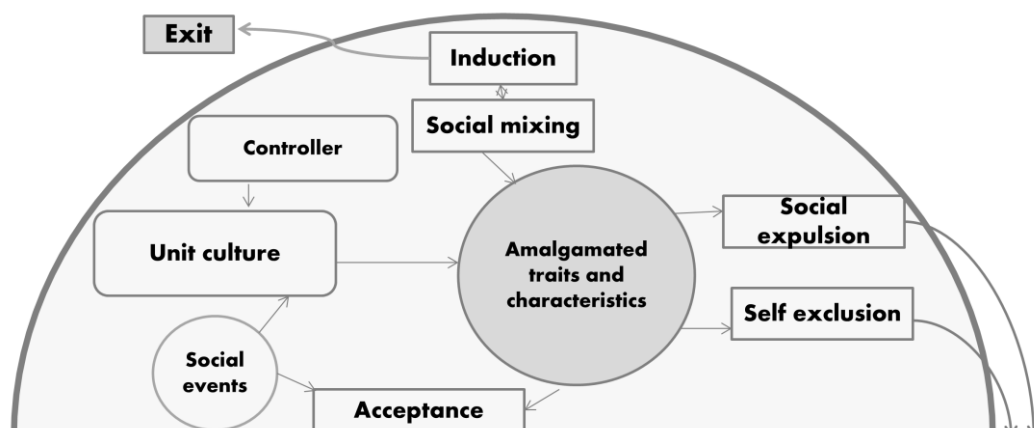

FIGURE 2 - MODEL OF THE ADAPTATION PROCESS FOR VOLUNTEERS IN AN ES AGENCY. IT REFERS TO THE ADAPTATION CURVE (SHADED AREA) IN FIGURE 2.

SOCIAL MIXING

Recruits and longstanding unit members are introduced to people in different walks of life and age and the shared experiences of weekly training nights, call-outs to road crashes, floods and storms often under wet and cold conditions for long hours and the occasional social event may lead to social cohesion within the unit.

In Figure 3, we propose a model of a unit's social cohesion (mixing) that, when nurtured well, leads to long term commitment to the organisation.
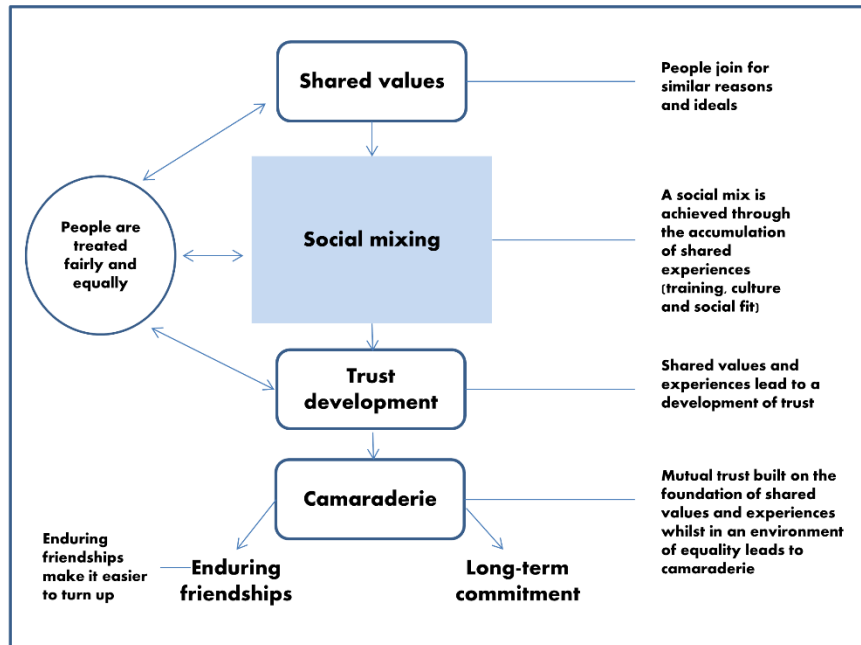
FIGURE 3 - MODEL OF THE SOCIAL COHESION OF A AESA UNIT

With time the volunteers take on a psychological ownership of the unit which leads to loyalty and long term commitment to the organisation (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). However, breaches of trust or inequality can often make the difference between staying and leaving the unit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

//

REFERENCES

Alfes, K., Shantz, A., & Saksida, T. (2015). Committed to Whom? Unraveling How Relational Job Design Influences Volunteers' Turnover Intentions and Time Spent Volunteering. *Voluntas, 26*(6), 2479-2499. doi:10.1007/s11266-014-9526-2

Baxter-Tomkins, T., & Wallace, M. (2009). Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers in Emergency Services *Australian Journal on Volunteering, 14*, 39-49.

Cuskelly, G., & Boag, A. (2001). Organisational Commitment as a Predictor of Committee Member Turnover among Volunteer Sport Administrators: Results of a Time-Lagged Study. *Sport Management Review, 4*(1), 65-86. doi:10.1016/S1441-3523(01)70070-8

Esmond, J. (2009). *Report on The Attraction, Support and Retention of Emergency Management Volunteers*. Retrieved from

Hatcher, A. (2015). *Recruitment of volunteers. Queensland State Emergency Service*. Paper presented at the AFAC15-New Directions in Emergency Management, Adelaide, South Australia.

Kramer, M. W. (2010). *Organizational Socialization. Joining and Leaving Organizations*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press.

Pierce, J. L., Kostova, T., & Dirks, K. T. (2001). Toward a Theory of Psychological Ownership in Organizations. *The Academy of Management Review, 26*(2), 298-310.