

When joining is not enough: Profiles of emergency services volunteers and the intention to remain

Darja Kragt¹, Patrick Dunlop¹, Marylene Gagne², Djurre Holtrop¹, Aleksandra Luksyte²

¹School of Psychological Science, University of Western Australia, ²UWA Business School, University of Western Australia

In this study, we examined how meeting the initial expectations of new volunteers when they join an emergency service is related to their intentions to remain with that service. A survey of 539 emergency services volunteers revealed that the new volunteers whose expectations matched what the volunteering role could deliver tended to participate in more volunteer activities and had a stronger intent to remain a volunteer. By contrast, when new volunteers had either too few or too many expectations, they were more likely to express turnover intentions after one year of service.

In Western Australia, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) currently supports over 26,000 volunteers across six services. However, these services can be exposed to high levels of volunteer turnover, with annual rates as high as 23 per cent.

Costs of turnover include:

- \$710 to recruit and train a new emergency services volunteer in Australia (McLennan, 2004)
- Threats to the capacity to deliver emergency services.

We sought to understand why emergency services volunteers leave their volunteer roles using **Psychological Contract** theory.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT



“The obligations, rights and rewards that a volunteer believes he or she is owed in return for continued work and loyalty to a manager, group, team or organisation”

Similar to a written contract, but:

- Is *implicit* rather than explicit,
- Can be shaped by experiences the volunteer has before, and during, the volunteering experience
- Can be **unique for every volunteer** rather than standardised for all volunteers

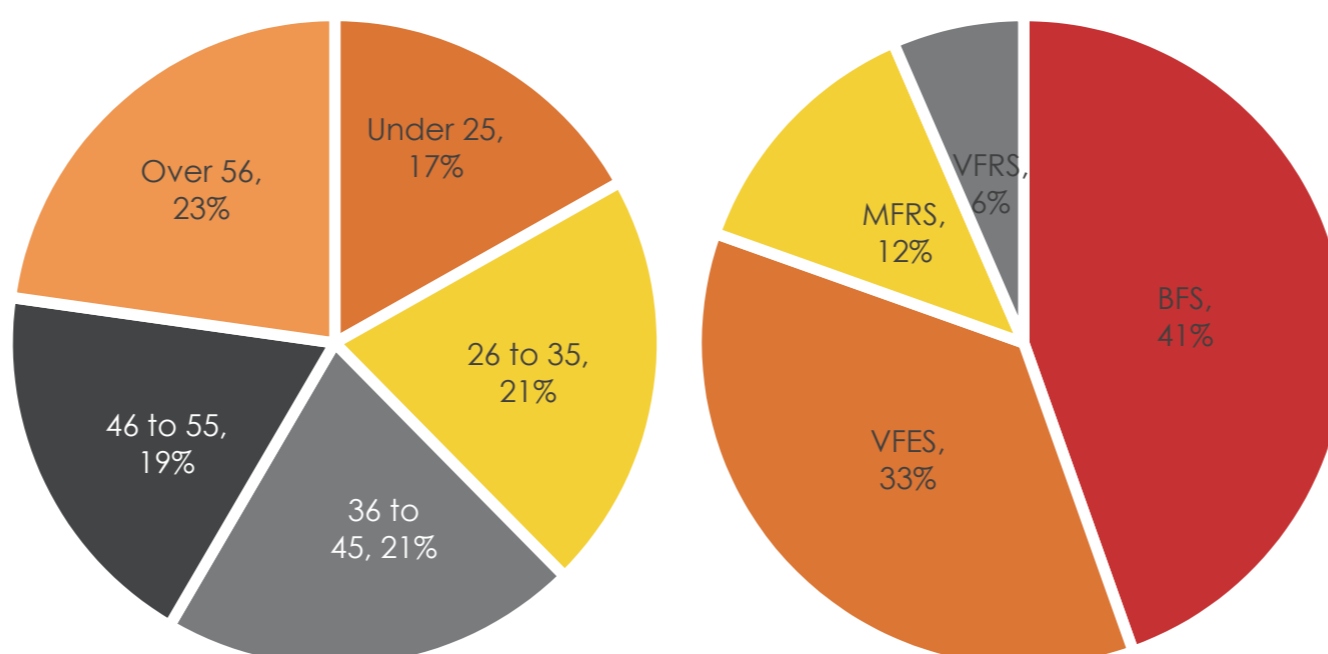
If volunteer expectations are not met, then the psychological contract is breached, which can lead to turnover.

UNDERSTANDING VOLUNTEERS' EXPECTATIONS

To prevent breaches in the psychological contract, we must understand what volunteer expect, and whether those expectations are being met by the role.

First Year Volunteer Survey

We analysed the responses of 539 volunteers (28% Female) completing their first-year survey.



AGE GROUPS

- Reasons they joined the service, and
- Expectations about what they would be doing once part of the service

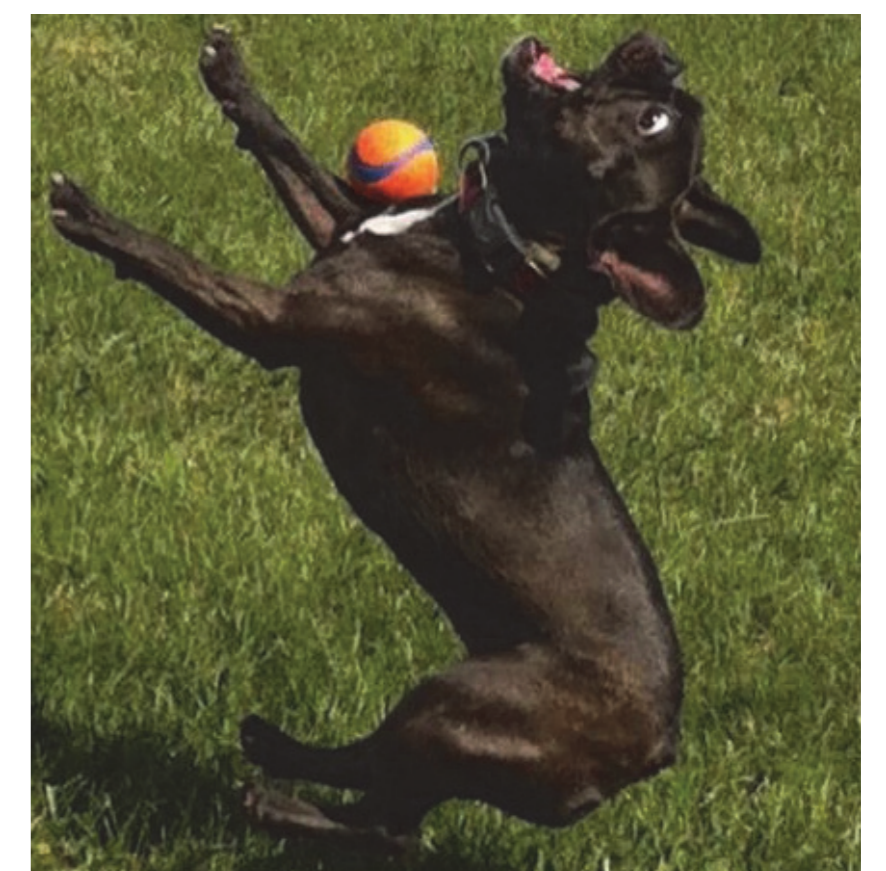
We found 3 'profiles' of volunteers

1. Focused



- 57% of volunteers
- Clear understanding of what the role involved, and what was required
- Most positive experiences with volunteering
- Intended to remain for longer

2. Over-enthusiastic



- 13% of volunteers, mainly younger
- Over-estimated what the role would involve
- More interested in status, reputation, and career growth
- Still had positive experiences with volunteering
- Intended to remain for a long time (but unrealistic)



3. Disengaged /Lost

- 30% of volunteers
- Tended to be older, and from regional areas
- Wanted to help the community, but otherwise lacked a clear view of why they joined
- Less likely to remain

CONCLUSION

Providing realistic expectations to volunteers about what the role involves may be vital for reducing turnover.