Retention of Volunteer Fire-fighters at Integrated fire brigades

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Definitions
BMT Brigade Management Team
Composite brigade The New Zealand equivalent to a CFA Integrated brigade
Integrated brigade Brigade comprising of volunteers and appointed career staff
OIC Officer In Charge
VFBV Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria
VUFBA Victorian Urban Fire Brigades Association
Introduction

As Secretary of the Frankston Fire Brigade I am heavily involved in the recruitment of volunteers. This can be a very time consuming task and I was concerned that the brigade was spending many hours continuously recruiting new members. A testing procedure has been implemented at Frankston to determine an applicant’s suitability before being registered, which has seen our retention rate rise; however we continued to see many members leave within the first 12 months.

Because of this continuous recruitment I began to look at the retention of our volunteers and how we could best support & nurture our current volunteers to retain them long term. I inquired as to what literature was available to assist brigades in retaining volunteers, in particular volunteers at integrated brigades, and surprisingly there had been very little research undertaken. I therefore decided that I would research this topic and produce information that would assist the Frankston Fire Brigade, the CFA and other volunteer organizations.

To draw upon experiences not only from within Victoria, I applied for a Victorian state government study grant to allow me to travel to New Zealand (the New Zealand service was selected over other fire services due to the similarities to that of the Country Fire Authority) where I visited several Composite (Integrated) brigades to speak with their leaders and to view first-hand the operations and management of these brigades. I also meet with members of the New Zealand Fire Service regional staff to investigate strategies that where being delivered at a regional / national level. At a CFA level I spoke with members of Integrated brigades to determine what, if any, strategies & concepts have been implemented within Victoria to successfully retain volunteers at Integrated brigades.
**Project purpose**

The CFA objective “CFA will have the capability to efficiently manage community demand for its services in a manner that provides a safe, appropriate, effective and timely response” can only be achieved through a strong and effective brigade. However without a strategy to retain volunteers, brigades will be ineffective and struggle to meet this CFA objective.

Most brigades have the problem of losing volunteers in the first few years after they join. So if we can implement better strategies and tactics, we may retain more volunteers. And this is the main purpose of this research – reduce the need to continuously train new volunteers, and allow brigades to better train and manage the volunteers they have. The research will focus on integrated brigades but the outcomes will benefit all volunteer organizations as the underlying issues are similar.

The objective of the research is to;

- Investigate strategies that various Integrated brigades have used to retain volunteers and whether or not these processes have proven to be successful
- Investigate how management at Integrated brigades have contributed or prevented the retention of volunteers
- Collate a list of the findings that may benefit the Frankston Fire Brigade, the CFA, and other volunteer organizations.
**Research findings**

**Objective 1:** Investigate strategies that various Integrated brigades have used to retain volunteers and whether or not these processes have proven to be successful.

The issue of keeping volunteers for the long term is one that all brigades have needed to deal with, however no formal strategies were in place by any of the brigades that were part of the research. Rather, the issues were dealt with in an informal manner by the leaders of the brigade – a list of these informal methods have been collated and are discussed as part of the findings for objective 3.

**Objective 2:** Investigate how management at Integrated brigades have contributed or prevented the retention of volunteers.

The way in which management affect the retention of volunteers can be categorized into three areas. They are; the decision making process, the management styles of the volunteer leaders, and having a designated volunteer leader.

- **Decision making**
  
  To aid in the retention of volunteers, a brigade should ensure that decisions made are in the best interest not only of the community they serve, but also the volunteers of the brigade. A BMT that tries to make major changes to the operations of a brigade will risk loosing members – volunteers that feel that they are unable to determine their own future are unlikely to stay. Ideally all major decisions should be voted on at a brigade meeting.

  Furthermore, a BMT that is predominately career staff may, albeit unintentional, make decisions that are not supportive to the volunteer culture. Therefore the BMT should include, at minimum, an equal representation of volunteers to staff.

- **Volunteer OIC**
  
  For the purpose of personnel management and volunteer leadership, Integrated brigades should consider the appointment of a Volunteer OIC. This person would be endorsed by the Brigade’s officer in charge and would be a volunteer that is capable of leading & representing the volunteers. The volunteer OIC would most likely be from the operational leaders, however as the role is more about managing and representing the volunteers, the Volunteer OIC may be selected from positions such as Chairman/President, Secretary or an ex-Officer.
Management style of volunteer leaders

The selection of volunteer managers / officers is a process that needs careful consideration. The appointment of an inappropriate person can have a negative effect on the brigade. Volunteer leaders need to have the ability to work with people and strongly represent their members - aggressive and domineering attitudes will only lead to ill-feelings within the ranks and will lead to a decline in membership.

This issue is relevant to all brigades, but is of particular importance at Integrated brigades. At these locations the selected people are required to deal with not only the normal volunteer issues, but also the complexities of union influence and industrial relations problems.

Objective 3: Collate a list of the findings that may benefit the Frankston Fire Brigade, the CFA, and other volunteer organizations

Integrated brigade issues

- Structured training plan
  As an integrated brigade will be a busy urban brigade with members having many other commitments, brigades need to ensure there is a structured, effective training plan in place. If volunteers continuously attend training sessions that are worthless, they are likely to either stop attending training, or leave the brigade.

- Participation in specialized training
  As volunteers of integrated brigade may not get the chance to participate in initial emergency response / firefighting (as this will normally be undertaken by the career staff) brigades need to ensure that volunteers get the chance to follow particular areas of interest. Encourage volunteers to undertake specialist training that will assist not only the brigade, but also the wider firefighting community. By gaining specialist skills a volunteer will feel that they can contribute to the brigade / organization. However, do not force members to do training courses – let the individual choose the direction and speed.

- OIC needs to be prepared to work / meet with both sides
  Brigade OIC’s need to ensure they have considered the volunteers when making decisions about the overall operations of the brigade. The disregard for history, culture and expectations of volunteers can have long term effect.
• Understanding the benefits of career staff
Volunteers need to understand the benefits of having career staff; this is of particular importance when dealing with a volunteer brigade that is to become Integrated. Many volunteers will see the introduction of staff as a hindrance to the operations of the brigade (and therefore resign) instead of considering the benefits of career staff.

• New careers staff
New career staff that have not been a volunteer firefighter may not understand the culture and history of a volunteer based organization. Therefore these newer staff members should try and gain an insight into the volunteers – work with them, talk with them and begin to understand the volunteer culture.

• Encourage the new volunteer
New members will always feel uneasy around the brigade; however for a volunteer at an integrated brigade this may be worse – a big station, lots of calls, and the presence of career staff can all be very intimidating. Make the newer volunteer feel welcome and ensure they understand that they can contribute to the overall operations of the brigade.
The appointment of a mentor will also ensure the new member becomes a valued member of the brigade. The mentor will be a source of information for questions about the brigades operations and can ensure the new member is made to feel welcome.

• Recognition from peers
All too often an integrated brigade fails to stop and commend members for the outstanding job that has been done. Take the time to congratulate a member for a great job done. This can be of more benefit if coming from the Brigade OIC, senior career staff on duty, or upper management.

• Get support / recognition from community.
Recognition by the community of the work done can be a morale boost for volunteers. However as the community see the career staff at the fire station; volunteers at an integrated brigade often go unrecognized. Raising the profile of the brigade will in turn get the recognition for the volunteers - though members need to understand that to gain respect they must maintain a high standard and a professional approach to appearance, training and personal conduct.
• Empower crews to take the initiative
With all the skills and leaders that are present at integrated brigades, newer volunteers may find it easier to let someone else do the work. Empower members to use initiative and undertake tasks that would normally be done by the leaders – this may include projects and training where the member is a subject matter expert. The empowerment of new members will make the leader’s role easier and give the new volunteer a sense of belonging.

• Have social functions – and include the families
An integrated brigade can be all business and no play – so having social activities will keep members interested. Furthermore, encourage families to attend social functions to ensure that they also feel part of the brigade. A volunteer with the support of their family is more likely to stay as a member.
The inclusion of the career staff will also benefit the brigade. By socializing together, the career staff and the volunteers may begin to better understand their counterparts. However it does need to be recognized that for some staff the fire station is only a place of employment and not a place to socialize – therefore ask the staff to attend, but don’t be offended if they do not attend.

• Diversity of membership
Due to the large number of members, all of who will have various backgrounds, difference of opinions will always exist at fire brigades. However, add to this the complexity of paid and voluntary members, issues will no doubt arise. So ensure all members take the time to recognize the background, desire and expectations of others.

• Effective use of volunteers
The effective utilization of volunteers is a concern for all brigades, but is of utmost importance for integrated brigades. Integrated brigades are usually very busy – both on and off the fireground, and successfully managing this can be a challenge. Solutions intended to help manage volunteers can have negative effects on volunteers if not implemented correctly. Too little involvement will see volunteer’s loose interest whilst overuse will see volunteers ‘burn-out’. Other ‘solutions’ that have caused ill-feeling by the volunteers include the use of neighboring brigades before the local volunteers, the use of volunteers to only clean up at fire calls or having volunteers only standby at station.
Another issue to consider when dealing with volunteer time commitment is the workload for administrative duties. Where possible this needs to be reduced, this maybe through the use of station / region staff or by spreading the workload across a number of volunteers (consider using non operational volunteers).

- Duty crews
  As mentioned above, the burn-out of volunteers, particularly at Integrated brigades can be a real concern - so managing the time commitments of the volunteers is the key to retainment. The use of duty crews have proven successful at many busy brigades. Whilst the structure and frequency of duty crews differ between brigades, the positive effect on volunteers is evident.
  The benefits of using duty crews include - members know that they can relax when not rostered on (but still attend if they desire), can plan other commitments in advance as they know when they will not be expected to participate in brigade activities, and ensure that all members contribute.

- Expectations & commitment
  Expectations and the required commitment need to be understood. Failure of members to fully understand these concepts will have serious effects on volunteer retention.
  The expectations of the brigade needs to be communicated to new volunteers – the membership of an integrated brigade can be time consuming and it can be a lot of hard work, but a person wishing to join needs to know these facts. It is better to have a person leave at the beginning than to have them go through the entire training and then leave after 12 months.

- Existing volunteers to conduct recruitment
  The passion and desire to recruit new members to the brigade is stronger for volunteers – they are the members who are dedicated to the long term viability of the brigade, whereas the career staff are more focused on the promotion and work location aspects. Because of these different motivators, recruitment would be best undertaken by the volunteers – they are the people to excite and stimulate prospective members.

- Separate areas within the fire station
  As much as the staff and volunteers at an integrated brigade need to work together, they will also need separate areas on the fire station. There are times
when staff and/or volunteers will need to utilize an area away from the other. These would include such activities as staff training, social activities, brigade meetings, volunteer recruitment sessions and staff meal times. The different areas of a fire station should not be used to segregate the career staff and volunteers, but rather give both groups a place to conduct business relevant to their situation.

- **Fire station for all to use**
  The fire station is a public place and thus all members should feel they are welcome on station. Situations where volunteers are made to feel uneasy, or not welcome, at the station need to be reported and actioned upon. The intimidation of volunteers not to attend the station can have an effect on the retention of volunteers – a volunteer that feels they are not welcome is likely not to remain as a member.

- **Specialist appliances**
  As mentioned earlier, volunteers of integrated brigades may not get the chance to participate in initial emergency response / firefighting as this will normally be undertaken by the career staff. Therefore integrated brigades should look at taking on specialized role within the fire service - this may include salvage operations, lighting, hazmat or communications. A specialized role will allow both operational and non-operational volunteers to assist the community and therefore give job satisfaction to members who may otherwise not get a chance to respond.

- **Career staff union issues**
  For many years there has been conflict between the volunteers at integrated brigades and the union representing the career staff. This conflict stems from perceived threat of the volunteers wanting to take over the career staff’s role and the opinion that if the volunteers weren’t at these brigades then more career staff would be employed. Whilst the attitude of the unions can not be controlled by the brigade, the BMT needs to limit the impact on the volunteers.

- **Ensure volunteers don’t get used between management and union**
  In times of industrial dispute the brigade needs to ensure that the volunteers do not get drawn into the issues. Cases where this has occurred have ended with long term membership problems of the volunteers.
General volunteer issues

- Turning out to calls by recruits
  Getting a recruit trained and being able to turnout needs to be at the forefront of any decisions in regard to their ongoing training. Whilst everyone understands that a new member must have the skills to turnout, the importance of being able to respond to calls should not be under estimated. The excitement and sense of purpose will greatly assist the retention of volunteers.

- Ensure members get on courses
  Once a volunteer has the basic skills to turnout, keeping them interested is the next challenge. Brigade management teams need to ensure that members have the opportunity to undertake courses – a member that feels their skills aren’t being utilized will be likely to leave the service.

- Where needed, have 1 on 1 discussions
  BMT’s need to be aware of any issues that may be preventing a volunteer from turning out. A quiet 1 on 1 discussion may prevent the lose of a good member, so take the time to meet with the volunteers whose commitment appears to be dwindling.
  Where needed, encourage members to take leave of absence rather then resigning. Loosing a member for a month or two is preferable to them leaving completely, for all the time and effort that has gone into their development will be lost if they resign.

- Equipment and facilities
  To enable volunteers to undertake their required duties the fire service needs to supply suitable equipment - this maybe in the form of new vehicles, modern stations, or effective fire fighting gear. A volunteer who is prepared to give up their time should be rewarded with suitable gear and equipment.
  Also, the fire service needs to ensure that the fire station is an inviting place to work from, and is in the right location. Having a modern fire station is of little benefit if it is not user friendly, or is in a location that volunteers have trouble accessing.
• Wants verses needs of a brigade

Not withstanding the above issues, members need to understand the requirement to fundraise – there is a difference between items that are wanted and items that are needed. The fire service will supply the basic equipment needed to provide the protection to the community, however the funding for items wanted by the brigade to enhance their service delivery will needed to be raised by the brigade. No fire service will have the finances to supply all the equipment that a brigade may desire.

• Utilization of volunteers

Maximizing the number of volunteer firefighters that are available to respond is one of the main goals of a brigade. However, with the modern society dictating an ever changing volunteer workforce to call upon, BMT’s must look at non-traditional methods of getting volunteers onto the vehicles. The utilization of volunteers from other brigades who may work (or attend a school) in the local area can begin to solve some of the traditional daytime response issues. A planned approach to having volunteers respond with brigades other than their own can have many benefits – the volunteer will get a varied experience thus increasing their knowledge, the local brigade will have more volunteer firefighters to call upon, and the brigade where the volunteer is registered has a firefighter with more experience. With this type of arrangements there are some issues that need to be addressed in the initial planning. The additional training, the supply of turnout gear and the issuing of a pager are just some of the consideration. Also, the creation of a ‘day’ and ‘night’ group of volunteers needs to be closely monitored as not to create a situation of ‘us’ and ‘them’

• Generation Y

Dealing with the next generation of volunteers will always be a management issue; for their outlook on life, their beliefs and there expectations will be different - and Generation Y is no exemption. Modern BMT’s need to be able to recognize Gen Y issues then adequately deal with them, for failure to do so will see a brigade without the up and coming members. There has been many studies undertaken into Generation Y and BMT’s would be well advised to take the time to read up on this. A BMT needs to keep up with the ever changing world and have plans to successfully mange it.
• Recruitment

Recruitment of volunteers is a vital part of any brigade, but rather than taking on all that apply, brigades should evaluate the type of member they actually need. Statistics will show that people who are 25+ will be most likely to remain a member long term, whilst school aged members are available more often. Furthermore, brigades need to be cautious of people who “just want to try fire fighting” or are only becoming a volunteer to aid their chances to join the career staff. These people will require the normal training but what will be the gain for they are likely to leave with the first year.

The frequency of recruiting also needs due consideration by brigades for regular recruiting will have more benefits than a process whereby people are taken in only when the brigade numbers begin to fall. Regular recruiting not only assists in succession planning, but also the introduction of ‘new blood’ will result in a lift in the overall morale of the brigade.

To aid in recruitment, brigades should also consider the introduction of Junior fire fighters. This group of young people may require special consideration and dedication, however there are substantial long term benefits in having a junior fire brigade.

• Loss of income policy

The high level of training that is now required to be a fire fighter can become a hindrance to the recruitment and retention of volunteers. Whilst most people will freely give up their time to help protect their community, they may be less inclined to attend training sessions to gain and maintain their skills.

The introduction of schemes whereby volunteers are paid when attending specialized training course can be of great benefit. The concept of paying volunteers to attend fire calls has long been surrounded with political, historical and financial restraints. However, a loss of income policy would not be as susceptible to as many restraints and would assist brigades with the recruitment & retention of volunteers. See appendix 1 for a copy of the New Zealand Fire Service ‘Loss of income Policy’.
Research conclusion

This research was not intended to deliver all the answers as to how to solve the issues associated with Integrated brigades – like the communities we serve, the issues faced by brigades vary drastically from one to another. No single research will have all the answers; it is the role of Brigade Management Team to look at the issues within their brigade and implement strategies and tactics that suit their situation.

What has been achieved is the production of a guide that Brigade management teams can utilize. If a brigade is experiencing high volunteer turnover this research may be able to give an insight into the issues associated with being a member at an integrated brigade.

In finalizing this research there are several recommendations that I believe needed to be considered. There are;

- Integrated brigades should prepare a formal strategy to deal with retention issues.
- The VUFBA & VFBV continue to hold forums for Integrated brigades.
- The VUFBA & CFA continue to investigate the position of captain / volunteer OIC at integrated brigades.
- The VFBV & CFA investigate the possibility of the creation of a “loss of Income” policy for volunteers undertaking specialized training
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- CFO Bill Ellis – Waitakere Fire District
- SO Owen Pennell – Henderson Fire Brigade
- CFO Larry Cocker – Manukau Fire District
- SO Shane Prince – Birkenhaed Fire Brigade
- George McQuillan & Andy McOnie - Hamilton Fire Brigade
- ARFC Keith McIntosh – Bay Waikato region
- CFO Ron Devlin – Tauranga Fire District
- SO Peter Baylis – Tauranga Fire Brigade
- SO Chris Hurley – Greerton Fire Brigade
- SO Simon Gibson – Seaview Fire Brigade
- SSO Rob Sullivan & SFF Barry Ollerenshaw – Avalon Fire Station
- Secretary Andrew Heath – Eltham Fire Brigade
- Ex Captain Peter Collins – Cranbourne Fire Brigade
- Ex Lieutenant Frank Beukelman – Springvale Fire Brigade

Finally, the production of this report, including the visit to New Zealand, would not have been possible without the support of my family – Melissa, Lachlan & Andrew.
Introduction
The New Zealand Fire Service recognises the valuable contribution by volunteer firefighters. This policy recognises that volunteers may, and do, incur loss of income while undertaking training and other approved non emergency business directly associated with their participation as volunteer firefighters.

Policy
The Fire Service will reimburse volunteer firefighters where they incur loss of income resulting from attending training required by the Fire Service as directly associated with their role as a volunteer firefighter. And from time to time when undertaking advice/representative roles or additional tasks over and above what would be considered normal operational duties (for example, National Functional group meetings, Regional Operating Committee attendance).

Volunteer Firefighters are not eligible for reimbursement for undertaking the normal duties associated with their roles as a volunteer firefighter or for attending conferences or competitions.

Reimbursement for the completion of an ‘advice/representative role’ will be by agreement between the volunteer and the Fire Region Manager or National Headquarters Senior manager. No evidence of loss of earnings will be required. The Fire Region Manager and volunteer will agree a rate based on the secondary rate indicated below.

Where a self-employed volunteer undertakes training or other approved non-emergency business, and has to employ another person to cover for them during their absence the volunteer should provide a tax invoice, along with their expense claim for reimbursement for the costs of the additional person for an amount no greater than the volunteer would have been entitled to under the standard or secondary rate as applicable (see appendix C). No taxation will be deducted from NZFS payment to reimburse the business and GST can be included on the tax invoice.

Volunteer Firefighters who are unemployed (or receive a benefit) are not eligible to claim for loss of income for training courses.

Amount to be Reimbursed
Reimbursement may be claimed for attendance at:
- Fire Service training courses at the standard rate below.
- Specific user groups and project committees at the secondary rate when acting in an advisory/representative role.

Reimbursement for loss of income may be made on the following basis:
- Standard rate: Up to a maximum of $20.20 per hour or $161.53 per working day (gross).
- Secondary rate: Between $20.20 and $26.26 per hour, or between $161.53 and $210.00 per day (gross).

These rates will be reviewed annually at 1 July.
Actual income lost may include overtime and weekend earnings, provided that this time would otherwise have been worked by the claimant.

Where a volunteer takes annual leave to undertake volunteer firefighting training, they will be entitled to claim the loss of wages reimbursement as above to ensure no long term disadvantage is sustained.

**Submitting a claim for the Standard Rate**

The first time a volunteer submits a claim they must attach a completed and signed IR330 tax form (Note: As the NZFS is not the volunteer’s main source of income, the tax code used should generally be secondary employment). Subsequent claims only require a further tax form if there has been a change in the volunteers personal tax status.

In submitting a claim the following must be included:

a) In the case of salary and wage earners, a signed statement on the employers letterhead, certifying the amount of actual income (including overtime) lost (use sample letter A & B).

b) In other cases of reimbursement claims (e.g. self-employed) a signed declaration that loss has occurred and the amount incurred (use sample letter C);
   - where $161.53 for each working day (or $20.20 per hour) is being claimed, that the loss is equal to or greater than that amount
   - where an amount less than $161.53 for each working day (or $20.20 per hour) is being claimed, that the amount claimed is equal to the amount lost.

All documentation submitted in support of a claim for loss of income may be subject to audit and verification.

Claims must be submitted to the Senior Regional Training Officer.

The Senior Regional Training Officer is responsible for verifying the claim. Providing the above criteria are met, the Senior Regional Training Officer will recommend the reimbursement be met and forward the claim to the Fire Region Manager for approval.

Where the Chief Fire Officer is eligible to submit a claim for loss of income, the claim should be submitted directly to the Fire Region Managers. Under no circumstances should the Chief Fire Officer authorise their own claim.

**Provision of dependent care costs**

Where a volunteer is required to attend a training course and requires dependent care provisions to be made, the claim is to be made on the expense claim form with attached verification documentation i.e. an invoice. This form is to be submitted to the Chief Fire Officer/Senior Regional Training Officer and is only claimable for those people who are not seeking reimbursement for loss of income.

Where a volunteer is away overnight whilst attending a training course, and as a result requires alternative care for a dependent they will be entitled to claim the dependent care daily rate on production of an invoice for costs incurred.
For clarity: dependents in this context relates to children under the age of 14 years or adults requiring fulltime medical care or supervision and are part of the immediate family. Family for the purpose of this provision includes; children; spouse or person living in a recognised de-facto relationship, parent, or other relative such as grandparent, grandchild and relations by marriage.

Reimbursement for dependent care costs may be made on the following basis:

Standard rate:
• Up to a maximum of $5.50 per hour or $45.00 per working day (gross).
• and upon provision of an invoice from the care provider, in conjunction with the standard expense claim form.
• These rates will be reviewed annually at 1 July.

Scope of Policy

This Policy applies only to members of New Zealand Fire Service volunteer fire brigades.

Key Personnel and Roles
Chief Fire Officers of volunteer brigades or Senior Regional Training Officers are responsible for verification of claims (other than their own) submitted under this policy.

Fire Region Managers or National Headquarters Senior Managers are authorised to approve payments in terms of the above, if justified. Payment remains at their discretion and must be met from within the appropriate budget cost centre.

Fire Region Managers and/or Chief Fire Officers and/or Senior Regional Trainers are responsible for their volunteer training budgets and planning.

Coding
Payment must be coded to the appropriate cost centre and account code.

Other Sections
This policy should be read in conjunction with the NZFS Travel Policy.

Accountabilities
Fire Region Managers and Chiefs Fire Officers are responsible for the operation of this policy.

Human Resource Consultants and the Finance Department are responsible for providing support and advice to Fire Region Managers and Chief Fire Officers in respect of both the application of this policy and taxation.

Manager HR Services and Senior Advisor Remuneration and HR Information are responsible for the maintenance and updating of this policy.

Assistance
For further assistance or advice please contact:
• Finance Department
• Manager HR Services or HR Consultant
• Senior Advisor Remuneration and HR Information