

The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

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Recruiting a Qualified Police Officer

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ABSTRACT

Recruitment has long been a means for projecting a positive image of an agency to potential applicants in an effort to encourage the person to join the agency. Every agency has some form of recruitment to varying degrees. The City of Sugar Land Police Department has been fortunate to experience significant growth. Many new positions have been created enabling the department to hire additional police officers. Like most departments today, the quantity of applicants expressing an interest has reduced which makes the department take a closer look at its recruitment program.

A small pool of qualified applicants is demonstrative of shortcomings in the recruitment process. Does the Sugar Land Police Department need a more aggressive recruitment strategy? In order to assess the current status of the recruitment program at the Sugar Land Police Department, a sample of the current police officers were surveyed and then compared to a sample of Houston Police Officers. The survey indicated that word-of-mouth was the most effective recruitment method to date. Advertisement in the local newspaper did not reach its potential but was shown to be too costly as opposed to recruiting via the Internet. Recruiting at area colleges and police academies showed promising potential.

It is concluded that the Sugar Land Police Department would benefit greatly from a more aggressive recruitment program. The aggressiveness would bring in a greater quantity of applicants allowing the department to better discern qualified applicants. The addition of good qualified police officers will make Sugar Land a better police department.

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Introduction

The City of Sugar Land has an estimated population of 65,000. The City is located on the outskirts of Houston in Fort Bend County, which is one of the fastest growing counties in the nation. This growth requires the police department to continually add positions for police officers to maintain the level of service expected from citizens. As a result, the Sugar Land Police Department has grown to its current staffing level of 103 sworn officers and is projected to reach a minimum of 200 sworn officers in the next ten years. Accordingly, recruitment will play an important role in filling those new positions.

Traditionally, the department has relied upon newspaper ads, walk-ins, and referrals to obtain applicants for police officers. An advertisement in the Houston Chronicle newspaper would list the qualifications for the position and specific dates for interested parties to come to the department to make application. On occasion, people would walk into the lobby of the department to request information about the hiring process. In addition, applicants may be referred by current Sugar Land police officers. The department also solicits applicants by faxing information to surrounding police departments and businesses.

Most of these methods of recruitment are passive because they do not target a specific audience. Although each of these methods does indeed play an integral part in the recruitment process, is it enough? Presently the department is simply posting notices that positions are available. Little effort is being made to actively seek out quality applicants.

There are numerous law enforcement agencies in the greater Houston area. While the prerequisites for application vary among the departments, the desired result is the same; a superior candidate for police officer. With so many agencies seeking the same type of candidate, competition is fierce. A good applicant will have many departments from which to choose.

When a department finds a good qualified applicant, the department must quickly make a job offer or risk losing the applicant to another department (Charrier, 2000).

The primary goal of this research project is to determine if the Sugar Land Police Department will benefit from a more aggressive recruitment program. The project asks the following questions. Which current method seems to be the most beneficial? Which recruitment methods if any are currently under-utilized? Are there methods not currently used which should be newly incorporated? To gather data for this project, a survey was distributed to officers currently employed at the Sugar Land Police Department and the Houston Police Department for their input. In addition Phyllis Ashton, the human resources liaison for the Sugar Land Police Department, was interviewed. The data was analyzed to determine the most successful recruitment to date, the costs of current recruitment methods compared to the success of the methods based upon the survey, and the projected costs of new recruitment methods to be implemented at the Sugar Land Police Department.

Anticipated findings are that the Sugar Land Police Department would greatly benefit from a more aggressive recruitment program and word-of-mouth recruiting would surface as the most successful method for attracting applicants. Advertisement in local media would be revealed as under-utilized. Adding recruiting at area colleges and police academies would increase the number of quality applicants interested in the Sugar Land Police Department.

Recruitment is arguably one of the most important functions in a department. The minimum level of commitment to departmental recruiting will vary depending on the agency size, growth potential, turnover rate, diversity of current employee pool, and budget. Any department can benefit by analyzing their recruiting techniques. Agencies should realize that successful recruiting is an ongoing process and should not be addressed solely when a position

becomes available (National Center for Women & Policing, 2001). Just because an agency receives an acceptable quantity of applicants does not mean the applicants meet the needs of the agency and vice versa.

Review of Literature

In recent years, America has enjoyed a booming economy. The result of this economy is increased competition to recruit and retain qualified employees (Howie, 2001). Many businesses have been forced to reexamine their recruiting methods. P. R. Plumbley states, "Efficient recruitment and placement procedures are a prerequisite to the development of an effective working force" (1974, pg. 10).

Recruiting qualified applicants has become more difficult today because people have more opportunities available to them. People are generally better educated, more mobile, and more selective (Tate, 2000). It is rare that a person will work for the same employer for twenty or thirty years in today's job market. Employees will pursue other job opportunities that may offer better benefits or better suit their lifestyle.

As a result, law enforcement does not draw as many interested applicants as in the past. The problem lies with the independence expected from today's youths. They do not like to be micro-managed. They do not like the rigid structure of most police agencies. More youths are experimenting with drugs or engaging in other criminal activity that eliminates them from applying for police jobs. In addition, the stereotypes of law enforcement dissuade people who would make good officers from applying (National Center for Women & Policing, 2001).

Police agencies have been faced with a decision to either lower their standards for accepting applications or to evolve their recruitment strategies. A majority of departments reject the idea of lowering standards for any reason (Sharp, 1994). It is believed, the long-term

solution lies in identifying ways to help interested parties rise to the accepted level (Brandon & Lippmann, 2000).

Traditionally, police departments encouraged new officers to conform to the militaristic police subculture with little care about their individual needs or desires. The problem with this attitude is that interested persons who were not willing to conform were discouraged from pursuing a law enforcement career. Luckily today the focus has shifted on changing the department to suit the new trends of society. Departments should appeal to the values and interests of members of new generations. Generation X'ers expect their jobs to be stimulating, challenging, and flexible. Knowing the concerns and deciding factors of a potential applicant will enable the department to better develop its recruiting strategy (Charrier, 2000). Businesses today are taking such steps as offering daycare facilities at the job site, flexible work hours to suit a family life, and financial incentives (Jarvis, 2001). Some businesses are even working in conjunction with local colleges to pay for potential applicants to attend courses toward a specialized degree program (Mahoney, 2001).

The management style of the department will greatly affect how a potential applicant perceives the department and how long a newly hired officer will remain with the department. Young people today prefer a participative management style. They are given a sense of self worth and value when a supervisor asks for their input. They are team players. A militaristic management style will dissuade young people from working towards management's goals. Also today's youths do not respect a person solely for their rank. They give respect based on the competency level of a person (Charrier, 2000).

Realizing how much of an impact the department's working environment has on employee recruiting and retention, managers should insure that the department's mission,

philosophy, and management strategy is made clear to applicants and employees (Moriarty & Field, 1994). It is important to select applicants who are best suited for the needs of the department and vice versa. Too often the selection process focuses on the qualifications of the applicant with little thought to the compatibility of the applicant with the department.

A full time recruiter can be a great benefit to a department by assessing an applicant in relation to the department. The recruiter can encourage persons who would be a good fit for the department and discourage those who would not. To accomplish this task, the recruiter needs to know what kinds of people, with what training and what experience, are physically and mentally able to cope with the job offered (Ungerson, 1983). Next, the recruiter must know how to effectively portray the department's image, policies, and opportunities to recruit the best applicants (Hawk, 1967). With this knowledge, a recruiter plays an integral role in developing the optimum recruitment methods.

There are several methods for recruitment advertising; ads in local/national newspapers, trade magazines, television and radio, direct mail, websites, job fairs, and employee referrals are but a few. The consensus is that the most successful tools are newspaper announcements, walk ins, word-of-mouth, and minority publication ads (Sharp, 1994). The biggest problem departments have with selecting recruitment methods is how to best utilize limited resources to maximize the benefit gained (Slater & Reiser, 1988). "The best advertisement is not necessarily the one that wins awards, looks handsomest on a page, or scores highest in the readership reports; it is the one that produces the results you want" (Coss, 1968, pg. 72).

For proper media selection, departments should examine two aspects of the media's circulation. First, the department should select the medium appropriate for reaching the necessary geographic area. Second, the department should select the medium appropriate for

reaching the department's target audience (Hodes, 1982). Once the media is selected, the department then should develop an advertisement geared toward the target audience which prompts qualified applicants to take action (Cook, 1992).

Use of the Internet is a recruitment method becoming more widely used. The Internet has the capability to reach a wider applicant pool. Departments may use the Internet to recruit and to promote a positive image of the department. An added benefit is the ability to post test materials to aid applicants in studying for entrance exams (Brandon & Lippman, 2000).

With any type of recruiting, departments must adhere to current labor laws. The U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission cautions that departments should not rely too heavily on anyone recruitment method, or the recruitment process may tend to favor a particular group of workers. No special treatment may be given to any person or group based on factors such as race, sex, ethnicity, creed, religion, etc. Though well intentioned, some minority recruitment programs discriminate against qualified applicants in an attempt to hire a larger percentage of minorities. Preferential treatment in hiring practices may lead to a court ruling against a department as experienced by the City of Houston ("Discrimination; Minority Recruitment", 2001).

Methodology

This research project is focusing upon the aggressiveness of the recruitment program at the Sugar Land Police Department. The project seeks answers to the following questions. Which current method seems to be the most beneficial? Which recruitment methods if any are currently under-utilized? Are there methods not currently used which should be newly incorporated? One hypothesis is that word-of-mouth recruiting is the most beneficial, recruiting via a newspaper is currently under-utilized, and a greater uniformed presence at job fairs needs to be newly incorporated. To prove this hypothesis, two surveys were conducted and the SLPD

human resources liaison was interviewed. 100 surveys were distributed to Sugar Land Police Officers, and 50 surveys were distributed at random to Houston Police Officers. 55 Sugar Land Police Officers and 25 Houston Police Officers responded to the survey.

The survey asked two multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. The purpose of the survey was to determine how officers are researching job openings in law enforcement and what influences them to choose a particular employer. The data was analyzed to determine the success rate of current and potential recruitment methods at the Sugar Land Police Department. This data was also analyzed by age groupings. The overall results of the SLPD survey were compared to the results of the HPD survey.

Findings

According to Phyllis Ashton, Human Resources Liaison for the City of Sugar Land, placing advertisements in the Houston Chronicle has been the most effective method for attracting police officer candidates. Ms. Ashton bases this opinion on responses she receives on application packets. A one-week advertisement in the Houston Chronicle costs around \$2500 making this recruitment method the most expensive one utilized by the City. Advertisements are posted on the City's web page and job line at no cost. A discontinued recruitment method involved a group of officers who visited career fairs at the University of Houston costing only man-hours. No brochures or any kind of recruiting packet highlighting the Sugar Land Police Department have been printed and disseminated. Ms. Ashton believes word-of-mouth to be the least effective method of recruiting police officers. When asked about the low quantity of current applicants, Ms. Ashton reasoned that several surrounding agencies have lower admission standards, Sugar Land has no basic police academy to train unlicensed candidates, and Sugar Land is not leading on benefits.

The survey of the Sugar Land Police Officers illustrated that the majority were made aware of an opening at SLPD through a currently employed officer and secondly by a friend/relative. The main reason officers chose SLPD was an opportunity for advancement with salary/benefits a close second. SLPD Officers indicated that when looking for a law enforcement job opening the sources researched most often in order of frequency were the Internet, personal/professional contacts, then newspapers (see Table I). The survey results for

Table I

Recruitment Survey Results for the Sugar Land Police Department

Sources Contributing to Present Employment	% of respondents
Officer employed with agency	47%
Friend/Relative	33%
College or High School Recruitment	2%
Brochure	0%
Television	0%
Newspaper	18%
Radio	0%
Internet	7%
Other	15%
Reasons For Choosing Present Employer	% of respondents
Reputation of the Department	29%
Exposure to Law Enforcement	18%
Training	11%
Salary/Benefits	45%
Opportunity for Advancement	51%
Live near your employer	25%
Agency Size	31%
Other	7%
Sources Researched for Job Opportunities	% of respondents
Internet	45%
Personal/Professional Contacts	42%
Newspaper	35%

the Sugar Land Officers were further broken down into age groupings to illustrate the variance in responses among differing ages (see Table II). The survey of the Houston Police Officers

Table II

Recruitment Survey Results for SLPD Broken Down By Officer Age

Sources Contributing to Present Employment	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
Officer employed with agency	20%	40%	42%	67%	33%	17%	88%
Friend/Relative	40%	40%	21%	44%	0%	33%	50%
College or High School Recruitment	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Brochure	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Television	20%	60%	16%	11%	33%	33%	0%
Newspaper	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Radio	40%	20%	0%	0%	33%	0%	0%
Internet	0%	0%	26%	0%	0%	17%	25%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Reasons For Choosing Present Employer	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
Reputation of the Department	40%	0%	11%	33%	33%	33%	75%
Exposure to Law Enforcement	20%	40%	11%	11%	33%	17%	25%
Training	20%	40%	5%	0%	0%	17%	13%
Salary/Benefits	40%	60%	53%	33%	67%	17%	50%
Opportunity for Advancement	60%	80%	42%	56%	0%	50%	63%
Live near your employer	20%	0%	37%	11%	33%	33%	25%
Agency Size	40%	60%	37%	22%	0%	17%	25%
Other	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%	0%	25%
Sources Researched for Job Opportunities	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
Internet	60%	80%	42%	33%	67%	33%	25%
Personal/Professional Contacts	20%	60%	47%	11%	67%	0%	75%
Newspaper	20%	60%	42%	22%	100%	17%	0%

illustrated that college/high school recruitment, newspapers, and current HPD Officers have been equally effective at attracting police officers. The main reason officers chose HPD was the agency size. HPD Officers indicated that when looking for a law enforcement job the sources

researched most often in order of frequency were personal/professional contacts, newspapers, then the Internet (see Table III).

Table III

Recruitment Survey Results for the Houston Police Department

Sources Contributing to Present Employment	% of respondents
Officer employed with agency	28%
Friend/Relative	24%
College or High School Recruitment	28%
Brochure	16%
Television	12%
Newspaper	28%
Radio	8%
Internet	0%
Other	8%
Reasons For Choosing Present Employer	% of respondents
Reputation of the Department	16%
Exposure to Law Enforcement	32%
Training	20%
Salary/Benefits	36%
Opportunity for Advancement	36%
Live near your employer	24%
Agency Size	40%
Other	20%
Sources Researched for Job Opportunities	% of respondents
Internet	22%
Personal/Professional Contacts	43%
Newspaper	26%

Discussion/Conclusions

The Sugar Land Police Department is not receiving enough qualified applicants to establish a large hiring pool. This project seeks to determine if the Sugar Land Police Department needs a more aggressive recruitment policy by answering the following questions. Which current method seems to be the most beneficial? Which recruitment methods if any are

currently under-utilized? Are there methods not currently used which should be newly incorporated? One hypothesis is that word-of-mouth recruiting is the most beneficial, recruiting via a newspaper is currently under-utilized, and a greater uniformed presence at job fairs needs to be newly incorporated.

Based on the survey results word-of-mouth was confirmed as being the most beneficial recruitment method to date. According to Phyllis Ashton, advertisement in the Chronicle was the most effective in bringing in interested parties and word-of-mouth was the least effective. The explanation for this deviation may be two-fold. Ms. Ashton utilized insufficient data to draw her conclusion and/or the Chronicle drew in a large number of interested parties who failed to meet the minimum qualifications for a police officer. In the survey, 18% of Sugar Land Officers were hired after seeing an advertisement in a newspaper while 35% check the newspaper for postings when searching for job opportunities. This indicates that the department's current procedure of placing a one-week advertisement in the Houston Chronicle is not reaching a significant portion of police officers seeking employment. However, additional expense at the rate of \$2500 a week for increasing advertisement in the Chronicle is not very cost effective. Since 45% of SLPD Officers check the Internet for job opportunities and the cost of recruiting via the web is only a matter of man-hours to update the information listed, utilization of the Internet is more cost effective.

Breaking down the SLPD results by age groupings revealed that a large percentage of all ages check the Internet for job opportunities, so the belief that only young people surf the net is not credible (refer to Table II). Since SLPD infrequently visited colleges or high schools for recruitment, only 2% of SLPD officers surveyed were hired after receiving information about the department through this recruitment method. In comparison, 28% of Houston police officers

were hired by HPD after receiving recruiting materials at their college or high school. This demonstrates that this method can be effective for departments. At the cost of only man-hours, this recruitment method should be newly incorporated at the Sugar Land Police Department.

Once a department has succeeded in gaining the interest of a qualified applicant, the department must keep in mind the reasons people chose an employer. As evidenced by survey responses for both SLPD and HPD salary/benefits and opportunity for advancement are important deciding factors (see Table I and III). If a department does not identify the reasons people chose an employer, then departments will be unable to attract and retain qualified police officers.

The Sugar Land Police Department has recently started to use the survey material provided in this research to collect data at open house recruitments. Analyzing this data from applicants will be more accurate than polling current employees. In time, the department will see when any new trends in recruiting effectiveness surface by frequently analyzing data collected from applicants. This will be a useful tool for bringing about any necessary changes in the recruitment program. Only through making changes to the recruitment program can SLPD remain an attractive employer for police officer candidates.

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APPENDIX 1

Recruitment Survey

The purpose of this survey is to determine the effectiveness of current recruitment methods and usefulness of new methods. Please answer the following questions.

- 1) Current Employer _____ Hire Year _____
- 2) Your age _____ sex _____ race _____
- 4) Please check each source which aided you in gaining your present employment.

Officer employed with agency	
Friend/Relative	
College or High School Recruitment	
Brochure	
Television	
Newspaper	
Radio	
Internet	
Other (please list)	

- 5) Please check the reason(s) for choosing your current employer.

Reputation of the Department	
Exposure to Law Enforcement	
Training	
Salary/Benefits	
Opportunity for Advancement	
Live near your Employer	
Agency Size	
Other (please list)	

- 6) When you look for a job in law enforcement, what sources do you research for job openings?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please return this survey to Sgt Michelle Allen with the Sugar Land Police Department. If you would like to know the results of the survey, you may e-mail me at AMA@ci.sugar-land.tx.us.