

**The Bill Blackwood
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Recruiting and Retaining the Younger Generations

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ABSTRACT

Recruiting and retaining both Millennial and Generation Z applicants is of critical importance to law enforcement agencies. Agencies, large and small, are chronically understaffed. Vacancies created by both growth and by attrition as the current workforce ages out exceed the number of qualified applicants for those positions. Law enforcement agencies that wish to thrive in the future must adapt now in order to maintain police forces at sufficient levels.

It is the position of this researcher that those who currently occupy command positions within departments should adjust current practices in order to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of quality candidates from younger generations. This change will require a dynamic shift in current hiring and operational practices and procedures along with modifications to departmental policies that address applicant eligibility. Law enforcement agencies looking to attract officers in the future need to identify key components of job satisfaction for younger generations and plan to meet those needs. This paper is designed to inform the reader of critical factors that influence decision making when members of the workforce under the age of 35 are deliberating about a career in law enforcement. This paper also addresses the issues facing departments and provides direction to those departments wishing to continue to complement their current force levels.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges facing law enforcement agencies across the United States is the continued recruiting and retention of sufficient numbers of qualified applicants. Many law enforcement agencies around the United States are facing staffing shortages (Langham, 2019). As the current workforce ages out, agencies must appeal to the younger generations to fill the ranks. However, the number of qualified applicants for entry-level positions is not sufficient to replace losses due to retirement, much less support an agency's growth (Langham, 2019). This decline in the number of applicants is attributed to a general lack of interest in a career in law enforcement. While delving deeper can lead to an understanding of the reasons why interest in the field has decreased, it does little to provide concrete solutions or suggestions for best practices for agencies wanting to attract qualified candidates just entering the workforce.

Many organizations have failed to jump the digital divide to best reach new generations of technologically savvy applicants (Rand, 2010). Law enforcement agencies need to find the messaging needed to attract and hold the attention of potential applicants. Agencies who managed to fill their ranks with new recruits at the beginning of the century will be looking to fill the same positions again when those officers start reaching retirement age as we approach the year 2020.

Agencies need to address the changing preferences and expectations of the younger generations. For the purposes of this paper, unless otherwise specified, both the millennial generation and Generation Z will be combined and referred to as the under 35 generation. The older generations often make hiring decisions and may have difficulty successfully evaluating millennial applicants due to a difference in value

systems. For example, Generation X command staff see commitment to a career path and loyalty to a particular agency as positives. A stable work history is a good indicator that the prospective employee will remain with the agency for enough time to be worth the initial cost of training and integration. The under 35 generation, on the other hand, does not appear to see any down side to switching from job to job or even changing careers. Nearly 60% of the under 35 generation indicated they have changed jobs at least once in their careers (Pew Research Center, 2010). They do not view having multiple jobs in the same calendar year as a black mark on their resume.

According to Alsop (2008), Millennials are a generation that have grown up with great expectations for their personal and professional development and expect the workplace to be more adaptive to their needs. They desire rapid advancement; flexible work hours and positive feedback for performing routine functions of their jobs. The under 35 generation expects to be promoted based on their performance rather than seniority with a department. They become impatient with the seniority-based systems of promotion and will quickly leave an organization if they perceive a better opportunity elsewhere (Alsop, 2008).

These career expectations along with the under 35 generations' lack of hesitation to be vocal about their expectations and unmet needs can be interpreted negatively. The under 35 generation are often characterized as having an untoward sense of entitlement by those not born in the same generation (Levenson, 2010). While the under 35 generation might not be the ideal candidates in the eyes of the older generation, they are currently the largest pool of potential applicants. The under 35 generation have now surpassed Generation X to become one of the largest segments of the work force (Pew

Research Center, 2010). If organizations are to succeed, managers need to adopt leadership and management styles that align with the values and complement the work styles of younger employees (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). These organizations should use targeted recruiting practices in an effort to attract more applicants from the younger generations.

POSITION

There is an ongoing law enforcement recruitment crisis that is likely to increase in severity if the assessment that Millennials and the younger generations are now far less likely to stay at their jobs or with a specific agency until retirement is correct (Smith, 2016). Agencies need to consider how best to appeal to a potential under 35 generation candidate. Law-enforcement agencies typically lack the resources and expertise to collect and assess data needed to develop strategies for their own personnel planning needs (Rand, 2010). To resolve this, we must consider what we know about desires for personal lives and their professional lives generally expressed by those in the target age range. To most of the under 35 generation, time off is of greater importance than the amount of money they make (Rand, 2010). This makes recruiting by only focusing on the potential salary difficult with the younger generations. We should look into what else a department can offer to a potential applicant aside from a generous salary. A 2010 study by the Rand Corporation recommended offering such non-salary focused enticements as more frequent promotions; visible and well defined career ladders and access for employees to work out facilities. Additional effective salary-focused financial incentives can include increased pay for higher levels of

training or professional certification along with educational incentives such as tuition reimbursement or student loan repayment (Rand, 2010).

Large agencies like the New York City Police Department (NYPD) faced an exodus of baby-boomers who had reached their 20 years of service. In the face of this staffing shortage, the NYPD successfully adopted strategies in an attempt to retain the officers and stem the loss with benefits such as retention bonuses and other incentives (Wilson, Dalton, Scheer & Grammich, 2010). These additional benefits need to be clearly defined in the job posting in order to attract those candidates who may find them appealing. The under 35 generation uses the internet to search for jobs more than previous generations. An agency's generic job posting which does not list all the potential benefits will not be seriously considered by the younger generations.

The under 35 generation places a high value on the work they do which contributes to society and in the recognition they receive for their role in doing so. The younger generations desire jobs that allow them to make a meaningful contribution to society. If they perceive the job has no or even negative effects of the societal good, they are less likely to get involved or remain involved. This is of particular concern considering the current negative perception of law enforcement in media and in the general public.

In 2008, recruits representing forty-four of the nations' largest police and sheriff departments were asked to identify the primary reason for entering law enforcement. Respondents gave the greatest emphasis on job security and to giving back to the community (Castaneda & Ridgeway, 2010). This survey not only shows that the under 35 generation does factor in the social good of a job when making a career choice but

also gives other clues as to why law enforcement had appealed to them. The same recruits rated the potential of saving for retirement, agency-provided health insurance and the opportunity for promotion or advancement over salary benefits when making their decision (Castaneda et al., 2010). Agencies should construct their job postings to focus more on community service, health insurance benefits, job security and opportunities to advance rather than simply emphasizing the starting salary which will appeal more to the under 35 generation.

By reassessing their position on once non-negotiable disqualifiers (drug use, minor criminal history, and physical shape), agencies can attract younger officers to fill their ranks. Many agencies rule out a large number of applicants due to their current policies on past drug use. A fair number of agencies still have a zero tolerance policy for past drug use of any kind. This stringency can stop a promising application in its tracks. Another common disqualifier (for otherwise qualified applicants) can be any minor criminal activity in their distant past. It is becoming more difficult for the general population to meet all minimum qualifications, such as a clean criminal record, little to no drug use, good physical health, and financial stability (Rand, 2010). With the exception of minor traffic violations, minor misdemeanor offences such as minor in possession, curfew violations or shoplifting arrests can be an automatic disqualifier for potential applicants.

A recent survey showed that approximately half of 12th graders had smoked marijuana and one out of four had used some other illegal drug by the time they finished 12th grade (Rand, 2010). This means agencies with a zero tolerance policy on past drug use are now trying to recruit from less than half their original potential pool.

Another factor affecting law enforcement hiring processes is the requirements to comply with diversity requirements mandated by their respective government entities. In one instance, the City of New Orleans, which has had more than 400 openings on its police force, no longer automatically disqualifies applicants who have injected heroin or smoked crack within a certain time-period. Chicago, with close to 970 openings, is reconsidering applicants with juvenile records: formerly considered an automatic disqualification (Williams, 2017).

The trend of obesity and poor physical shape in society has further limited the recruiting pool. Many applicants in the RAND Corporation study, especially females, indicated that physical fitness tests were a concern and affected their decision to apply (Rand, 2010). To address this problem, some departments, like the city of Aurora, Colorado, have stopped using the military-style push up, sit up and running tests for candidates. They now check to see how quickly a potential candidate can get out of a police car (Williams, 2017).

Once hired, departments must now work to retain recruits. The under 35 generation , who are achievement oriented in their lives, are accustomed to receiving feedback in both their personal and professional lives. During their formative years their parents, teachers and peers gave consistent positive reinforcement and feedback. They have come to expect that a supervisor will give them the same level of feedback on their performance regularly. The under 35 generation employee needs include feedback and recognition; a stimulating work environment; job satisfaction; organizational commitment and connectedness (Rand, 2010). This is unlike previous generations, who have generally held a 'no news is good news' attitude in regards to feedback from

supervisors. While receiving sufficient levels of feedback is important to the younger generations, the tone of feedback given is critical as the under 35 generation tend to react adversely to any feedback they perceive as overly critical or mean spirited. It can sometimes seem as though this younger generation possesses an insatiable appetite for praise from others without the ability to receive and benefit from negative feedback.

Balancing necessary critique with praise and finding opportunities to publically recognize quality work is key to maintaining engagement and departmental staffing levels. Millennials are more likely to change jobs and move (Gong, 2018).

Positive reinforcement or recognition can improve performance and increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Rand, 2010). To succeed, supervisors must change current practices and become adept at scheduling more frequent opportunities for informal assessments. During these times, supervisors should provide constructive direction with tact while also praising work done well in order to encourage proper professional growth and development. Lack of feedback can also lead to serious mistakes, which can degrade confidence, morale, and job satisfaction (Rand, 2010).

Younger members of the work force respond more positively to frequent performance evaluations. Departments should consider restructuring the existing systems rather than continuing to rely solely on annual performance reviews, the current norm in the law enforcement profession. Millennials state such positive feedback helps to build their confidence and gives them an increased feeling of security in the workplace (Alsop, 2008).

COUNTER POSITION

Law enforcement agencies throughout the country have had rigid and thorough hiring processes in place for decades. These processes were created to ensure only qualified candidates are afforded an opportunity to become police officers in order to minimize future risk to the community and to the department. The purpose of high hiring standards is to ensure that only the most ethical, capable, and honorable candidates make it onto the force (Wyllie, 2016).

Law enforcement officers are daily placed in situations where they must be trusted to correctly apply the law. Often this action will result in the prosecution of criminal activities. Those hired with minor criminal arrest or minor drug arrest, committed those infractions knowingly (Titus, 2017). The St. Paul police department's new written tests now focus more on personal histories and community engagement, and interviews have been refocused to allow applicants to personally explain incidents that may have previously disqualified them (Williams, 2017). Past histories can often be an indicator of future performance. Relaxing hiring standards can reasonably be expected to result in departments staffed with a lower caliber of officers who have already demonstrated poor decision-making. In contrast, lowering the hiring standards can open the door to highly intelligent candidates who may only lack the physical attributes needed to pass an entrance test.

Recruiters may struggle with recruiting efforts that appeal to one demographic while potentially alienating others. Black recruits who were surveyed by the Rand Corporation indicated in the study that they were considerably less likely than the white recruits surveyed to cite starting salaries as a key advantage or disadvantage or to

finding a job in law enforcement. College graduates were also much more likely than recruits without a degree to indicate that inadequate pay was a major concern for them during their decision process to enter the law enforcement field (Rand, 2010). However, studies have shown that overall most millennials placed less emphasis on salary and more on time off and a good work/life balance (Castaneda et al., 2010). Therefore, by emphasizing more time off and a better work life balance for applicants, a department can make a career in law enforcement more attractive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Law enforcement agencies must adapt to remain competitive in both attracting and retaining candidates from the under 35 generation. Fundamental changes are needed in current recruiting and screening processes and field training programs. All the changes require shifts in the mindset of the older generations who currently fill supervisory positions within the agency.

Make recruiting a priority for the department. In so many agencies, the role as recruiter is delegated to the lower rank and file. The command staff simply view it as a necessary evil to the extent that they post the recruiting website address on the back of the patrol units. Departments need to get everyone in the agency involved in recruiting. A change of mindset from the top on down is needed as both officers and administrators need to view every interaction with the public as a potential recruiting opportunity. How the public perceives the police will weigh heavily on attracting the right candidate.

After increasing involvement, departments should develop messaging and make strategic use of the internet to advance the department's image and make a career with the department more attractive to potential recruits. Increased use of the Internet by the

younger generations has lured agencies seeking to attract officers to adopt social media campaigns as part of their recruiting strategy. The under 35 generation are more likely to go to a department's website before making a decision to apply. Departments need a web presence that promotes the positive aspects of working for the agency. The website needs to demonstrate that the department publically recognizes the positive efforts of the employees. The younger generations want to see the results of their labors and share that with others. This cannot just be left to the municipality's marketing or IT department to ensure the web presence is up to date and presents the message the administration wants to project. Departments also need to explore actively recruiting from the internet as well. Reaching out to qualified applicants on job boards and networking sites like LinkedIn, Indeed.com and Monster.com can bring more applicants who may not have considered the agency before.

Agencies should also clearly demonstrate all of the benefits of the job when hiring. As we have seen, there are multiple non-financial motivators that attract millennials to a job in law enforcement. Agencies should promote socially beneficial aspects of the job along with other benefits like health insurance or educational benefits in order to attract more millennials to the career field. Supervisors should be trained to embrace the need to provide positive feedback to officers on a frequent and regular basis. The best way to implement this is to provide this feedback to all officers including the millennials and both the younger and older generations.

One of the biggest reasons for not joining noted in the Rand Corporation study was the negative perceptions that many candidates have towards law enforcement (RAND, 2010). This perception also extends to their families and friends who can exert

a lot of influence over a candidate when they are trying to decide if the career is right for them. By emphasizing the positive aspects of social engagement and how the police can be a positive force for good can go a long way. Empower and encourage officers to focus on benefits instead of risks when speaking to potential candidates. We need to eliminate the mindset that so many officers have coming out of the academy, which is that everyone is out to hurt them. If an agency wants to solve their issues with recruitment and retention they should rebrand their image via social media and revamp their management program to make themselves more appealing to the younger generations.

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