

Recruitment and Retention of Police Officers in These Challenging

Times: Is it Different Now?

Jacob Lawson

Fayetteville Police Department

Abstract

The positive recruitment, selection and placement of high caliber personnel should be the intent of any good recruitment and selection process. Positive recruitment and selection will assist a law enforcement agency in achieving its mission through reduced attrition, fewer disciplinary problems, higher morale, improved community relations and increased efficiency and effectiveness. Dean, Shaw, and Vella (2021) suggest law enforcement agencies across the nation are facing a current recruitment and retention crisis. This paper explores current recruitment and retention strategies by focusing on what attracts millennial recruits and what keeps them happy. This paper also examines historical trends in law enforcement generations to see if recruitment and retention needs have changed over time.

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Introduction

The hiring and retention of employees in various workforces is a topic that has been studied for generations. The law enforcement profession is no different. The recruitment process for law enforcement agencies is vital to attract and retain quality officers that will remain at their agencies for a lifelong career. Haberfeld (2006) suggests recruitment and selection of qualified applicants are two of the five vital components that make up the “pentagon of police leadership”. If a police agency has openings to fill, it should look for applicants that possess qualifications and knowledge to improve the organization. To understand what attracts applicants to the law enforcement profession, we must first examine generational personalities. Swanson, Territo, and Taylor (2012) describe four generations of recruits entering law enforcement including the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. Each generation is unique and some of the recruitment strategies for each have changed over time.

The Silent Generation is comprised of people born between 1925 and 1945. People of this generation are generally thought of as loyal, security conscious, and conforming (McCafferty, 2003). A high percentage of these individuals were married, and they believed in the “American way of life.” Recruiting these individuals into law enforcement careers did not present unusual challenges because of the structured lives they lived as veterans of World War II (Swanson et al., 2012). Obviously, the individuals from this generation have long since retired from careers in law enforcement, which brings us to the next generation.

The Baby Boomers are well into the retirement stages of their lives, as well. Individuals from this generation were born between 1946 and 1964. A population explosion occurred during this time as a result of millions of men returning home from World War II. The boomers experienced the turbulent 1960's, which included rock and roll, military service during the Vietnam War, and civil rights demonstrations (Swanson et al., 2012). These individuals were generally better-educated and more liberal than their parents from the Silent Generation. With the increased experimentation of illegal drugs, police departments were forced to make decisions about hiring those who challenged conventional values. "Police departments did not hire boomers who admitted, or were discovered during the character/background investigation, to having used drugs. This eliminated some otherwise outstanding candidates, some of whom experimented with drugs while in the military" (Swanson et al., 2012, p. 393). Law enforcement supervisors were annoyed that their subordinate boomers asked "why things had to be done a certain way" (Swanson et al., 2012, p. 393). We will discuss how the "why" aspect is important later in this paper.

The third generation we will examine is Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1980. Today, Xers comprise the most seasoned officers and supervisors in police departments across the nation. These individuals are "more ethnically diverse than boomers, grew up in families where both parents worked, and were the first generation of 'latch-key' children" (Swanson et al., 2012, p. 393). As Xers entered law enforcement, two characteristics that needed attention were noticed by their supervisors: their "propensity to innovate occasionally made them somewhat resistant to supervision" and "their strong self-reliance and individuality led some patrol division Xers to emphasize a single or small number of duties, such as DUI enforcements, neglecting their broader responsibilities" (Swanson et al., 2012, p. 394). As they progressed

through their careers into supervisor roles, Xers' many skills and perspectives made for diverse administrations in police agencies.

The fourth and last generation we will examine is Generation Y. Babies born in this generation between 1981 and 2000 are often called millennials. They grew up with parents who micromanaged their lives while trying to shelter them from the evils of the world (Akin, 2020). The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, school shootings, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and social media are events that helped shape their lives. "Raised is an era of gaming and rising modes of instant communication, social media network sites have become a staple for Yers" (Swanson et al., 2012, p. 395). Millennials place an increased value on their time off from work. This is a shift from previous generations where work often overshadowed personal life (Langham, 2017). Currently, the majority of law enforcement recruiting efforts are targeting millennials (Langham, 2017).

Problem

When thinking about generational differences, I am reminded of the old adage, "kids these days". This is not a concept unique to the currently oldest generation in the workforce, the baby boomers, and the youngest generation in the workforce, Generation Y. I have heard stories from members of the Silent Generation discussing how baby boomers were lackadaisical and had no direction in their lives. Likewise, baby boomers have more recently described millennials the same way. I believe this is a viewpoint that has been around for generations. When thinking about recruiting millennials as the next generation of officers, we need to not only look at their needs and wants that are unique to them, but also needs and wants that have remained constant through the generations.

Historically, police agencies have had positions that were easy to fill. The number of applicants far exceeded the number of open positions. For example, when I applied with the Fayetteville Police Department in March of 2005, there were over 125 applicants that sat down in that cafeteria to take the written entrance examination. I looked around the room, and I thought to myself there was no way I would score high enough to be selected for one of the five open positions. However, by the grace of God, I was fortunate enough to be selected. In comparison, the last entrance examination administered by the Fayetteville Police Department in April of this year had seventeen applicants. “Fewer people are applying to become police officers, and more people are leaving the profession, often after only a few years on the job” (Wexler, 2019, p. 7). Wexler (2019, p. 29) explains one of the reasons for this trend is the breakdown in the traditional police recruiting pipeline. Traditionally, people leaving a military career naturally gravitated to a secondary career in policing in the civilian world. Military veterans receive specialized training that aligns with that of a police officer which makes them attractive applicants. However, fewer people are enlisting in the military which makes the pool of candidates from this pipeline seem to dry up (Wexler, 2019, p. 29). This is a trend affecting agencies of all sizes from every corner of the nation. For example, the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department had approximately 4,700 applications in 2010. In 2019, that number dwindled to approximately 1,900 (Lehman, 2020). Rural areas are not immune, either. Jefferson County, Colorado reported applications plummeted seventy percent in 2019 (Lehman, 2020). Overall, eighty-six percent of the police chiefs nationwide reported a shortage of police officers, with nearly half stating the problem had worsened within the last five years (Lehman, 2020).

Complicating the situation is the fact that a growing number of current officers are becoming eligible for retirement. A Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) survey in 2019

found that approximately 8.5 percent of current officers were eligible for retirement, and 15.5 percent would become eligible within five years (Wexler, 2019). Also discovered in the survey, more officers are leaving their departments, and in many cases, leaving the policing profession well before retirement age (Wexler, 2019). I feel that this can be partly attributed to generational differences. The officers from the Silent Generation were accustomed to having a sense of loyalty to work at the same agency for their whole careers. Today's officers comprised of millennials are more likely to spend their careers at a multitude of agencies.

The fact that police work itself is evolving is an important factor that complicates the situation (Wexler, 2019, p. 7). Today's police officers must be comfortable with and understand multiple forms of technology. From body worn cameras and mobile computer terminals to social media, officers must utilize forms of technology to efficiently complete their daily tasks. In addition, officers must all wear many hats. They are being asked to solve many social problems including untreated mental health disorders, homelessness, and substance abuse to name a few (Wexler, 2019, p. 7).

This threefold problem, diminishing sources of applicants, increasing causes of attrition, and broadening police responsibilities, is illustrated well by Grammich's (2010) Bucket Metaphor and Demand for Police Officers (see Appendix A for more information and an illustration on this metaphor). In this metaphor, the size of the bucket is the absolute need for police officers. City population, size of service area, number of calls for service, and kinds of calls for service could all be factors in determining this "size". The water level is the actual number of officers working for the agency. This level can rise and fall with accession and attrition. The authorized or allocated level of officers, representing the number of officers for which an agency is budgeted, is usually between the current level of officers and demand for

them (Grammich, 2010). The unmet demand is the difference in the size of the bucket (need) and water level (actual number of working officers). We will now shift our focus to strategies to stop the bucket from leaking and fill the water level.

Solution

The solution to solve the problem of police recruitment and retention is complex. If it were easily solved, we would not be forced to put so much effort into researching strategies to fill vacancies. The following solutions will focus on the current generation of millennials that is the target of police recruitment and retention. Some of these solutions are exclusive to millennials and some are timeless through the generations.

One way to reach quality police officer applicants is to invest in establishing a brand. Commercial branding has been used for product advertisement for decades. This is a strategy that has been underutilized by law enforcement agencies. When you hear the phrase, “Be all you can be”, most everyone recognizes that the United States Army is being advertised. Also, everyone knows that M&M’s “melt in your mouth, not in your hands”. Police agencies need to establish a brand that is easily recognizable. If an agency does not take control of the narrative and market its qualities through successful branding, external forces such as media perceptions may dominate the narrative.

Streamlining the application process is another strategy to attract millennials to the law enforcement profession which is suggested by Wexler (2019). Tech-savvy millennials will be disinterested in a traditional application that is in paper form. The Fayetteville Police Department’s application process is completely digital and web based. Once an application is

accepted, a recruiter is assigned to immediately contact the applicant by telephone. This helps develop a professional relationship, which is desired by many of the new recruits.

Langham (2017) suggests that more than sixty percent of law enforcement officers were drawn to the profession by family members or friends that were already police officers. I believe this means that an agency's sworn officers are its greatest recruitment tool. The recruitment can happen from all levels and divisions of the agency. Recruitment literature, including business cards and flyers, should be given to all officers to have with them ready to take advantage of a recruitment opportunity at a moment's notice.

Recruitment literature needs to be digital, as well. Langham (2017) suggests many agree that millennials are looking online for prospective careers. This form of advertisement is relatively cheap and can reach an enormous audience. The content of an agency's website needs to highlight the public service aspect of the work (Langham, 2017). In previous generations, recruitment videos highlighted thrill seeker activities such as the special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team. Millennials are more concerned with making a difference in the community and having a purposeful career. Current recruitment literature and media should reflect that.

One of the more controversial strategies in recruiting millennials into a law enforcement career is lowering qualifications. Langham (2017) suggests that millennials tend to exhibit some changing attitudes when it comes to what is socially acceptable in a law enforcement applicant. Many agencies are relaxing the requirements when it comes to levels of education, previous drug usage, and tattoos (Collins and Pane, 2016). Their study found that educational requirements were set-aside in Louisville, Kentucky, where applicants no longer need at least sixty hours of college credit to submit applications. Collins and Pane (2016) also found that the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board adopted new guidelines to allow for prior use of Adderall,

a prescription drug commonly used to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and recreationally used by young people, if the use was not extensive. This relaxing of disqualifiers is often subjective and open to interpretation by those officers conducting background investigations. At the Fayetteville Police Department, the tattoo policy was changed in 2020. Until then, officers could not display any tattoo on their body while on-duty. The policy change allows for officers to display tattoos between the wrist and collar bone if they are deemed to not be offensive by the Chief of Police. I believe that relaxing some of these requirements is not the same thing as lower the standards, and it can help to include many millennials in the recruitment pool that would historically be excluded.

Wexler (2019) suggests that agencies need to monitor workforce trends and collect and analyze staffing data to stay ahead of current and future changes. Another vital component of the analysis is exit interviews (Wexler, 2019). Wexler (2019) suggests that since most voluntary resignations occur within the first five years of an officer's career, agencies need to understand why they left to develop strategies to address the issues that led to the departure. Since 2012, the Fayetteville Police Department has developed annual recruitment planning and analysis reports. The purpose of the recruitment plan is to attract and select the best qualified candidates for employment with the department. The Fayetteville Police Department strives to have a sworn workforce that represents the community we serve. The more representative an agency's demographics is, the more trust is fostered by the community it serves (Wexler, 2019). The annual recruitment analysis report identifies the current workforce demographics, including sex, race, and age. It also identifies the progress of the recruitment team from the previous year.

The Kansas City Police Department (Missouri) is another law enforcement agency that studies its recruitment and retention analysis. In 2019, Chief Richard Smith commissioned a

recruitment and retention study to assess why officers were initially attracted to their department, why they stayed, and why they left. The study was conducted by the Dolan Consulting Group, led by retired Chief Harry Dolan of the Raleigh, North Carolina Police Department. The Dolan Consulting Group surveyed all department members, and they received a response rate of thirty-five percent from both sworn and non-sworn members. (Dolan, 2019). When asked why they wanted to become police officers, the study showed the top two answers: positive personal interaction with existing law enforcement officers, and recommendations to explore the career by a person in the individual's life. When asked why they stayed at the Kansas City Police Department, the respondents reported the top two answers: they felt they made a difference in the world, and they saw law enforcement as their calling (Dolan, 2019). I believe the study shows intrinsic motivation as a strong predictor as to why an individual wants to become a police officer and remains one. A sense of purpose and a feeling that their job has importance for the betterment of society is far more important than obvious external rewards such as salary and bonuses. Many of today's police officers are willing to change careers if they feel their work is not important and worthwhile. Gone are the days when officers tend to stay at one agency for the duration of their careers. If they do not feel like they are making a difference at their current agency, many will transfer to another department.

Another proponent of intrinsic motivational value is Daniel Pink. He argues that in humans, motivation is largely intrinsic, and the aspects can be divided into three parts: autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2009). Autonomy can be described as our desire to be self-directed. It increases engagement over compliance. While supervising new officers, we should not "micro-manage", but trust our officers to have discretion to make the right decisions. Mastery is the urge to develop skills. A great leader looks for ways to facilitate employees to get

better at something that matters. Purpose is the desire to do something that has meaning and is important. As previously mentioned, this aspect is very important to millennials in the field of law enforcement. At the pinnacle of the process, autonomy is the bi-product of purpose and mastery working together (Pink, 2009).

Often when we think about the purpose of a task, we forget to explain the “why” because we get caught up with “how”. As previously mentioned, the “why” is a very important concept to the millennial new to policing. Simon Sinek (2009) explains “why” is not just a word, it is a powerful concept. He further explains how law enforcement agencies guided by this concept will succeed in retaining officers. Law enforcement agency mission statements are a great way to explain your “why”. Many agency mission statements have themes of public safety and customer service. My department’s mission statement is no different: “This department, through progressive thinking, credible, efficient, and responsive actions, will provide our citizens with a safe and healthy community in which to live and work. We will provide impartial enforcement of all criminal and traffic laws. We will strive to interact and form a partnership with the citizens to provide education so they can learn ways of reducing opportunities for crime to occur.” When officers view every task with this in mind, they are more likely to feel a sense of purpose.

When discussing how to attract applicants, Sinek (2009) surmises two ways: you can either inspire the carrot or manipulate the stick. The manipulation often includes monetary attractants, such as sign-on bonuses or incentives. Regardless of the type of manipulation, it is important to remember these are short-term solutions. A more sustainable solution is establishing a positive culture to “inspire the carrot” (Sinek, 2009). I once heard a seasoned police executive sum up this belief with the phrase, “pay gets them in the door, but culture keeps them there.”

Conclusion

Since the dawn of this great nation, there has been a need for law enforcement officers, and unfortunately, this will always be a necessity. As law enforcement leaders, we cannot choose what kind of calls for service our officers respond to; however, we can determine what officers respond to them. Recently, there has been a steady decline in the number of law enforcement applicants. Some have even referred to this as a crisis. The communities we serve deserve to have quality officers that represent their values and needs. The selection of these officers is determined by processes of recruitment and retention. Currently, members of Generation Y, or millennials, are the target of law enforcement recruitment and retention efforts. Millennials possess characteristics, such as being tech-savvy and placing a higher value on their time off, that are unique to them. They also desire a feeling that their jobs have importance and purpose. This characteristic has been constant through the generations of law enforcement officers. Recruitment and retention efforts should focus on both the characteristics unique to millennials and the those that have been constant. If law enforcement leaders develop recruitment and retention plans with this focus in mind, they should have an easier time in recruiting millennials to serve their communities for lasting careers.

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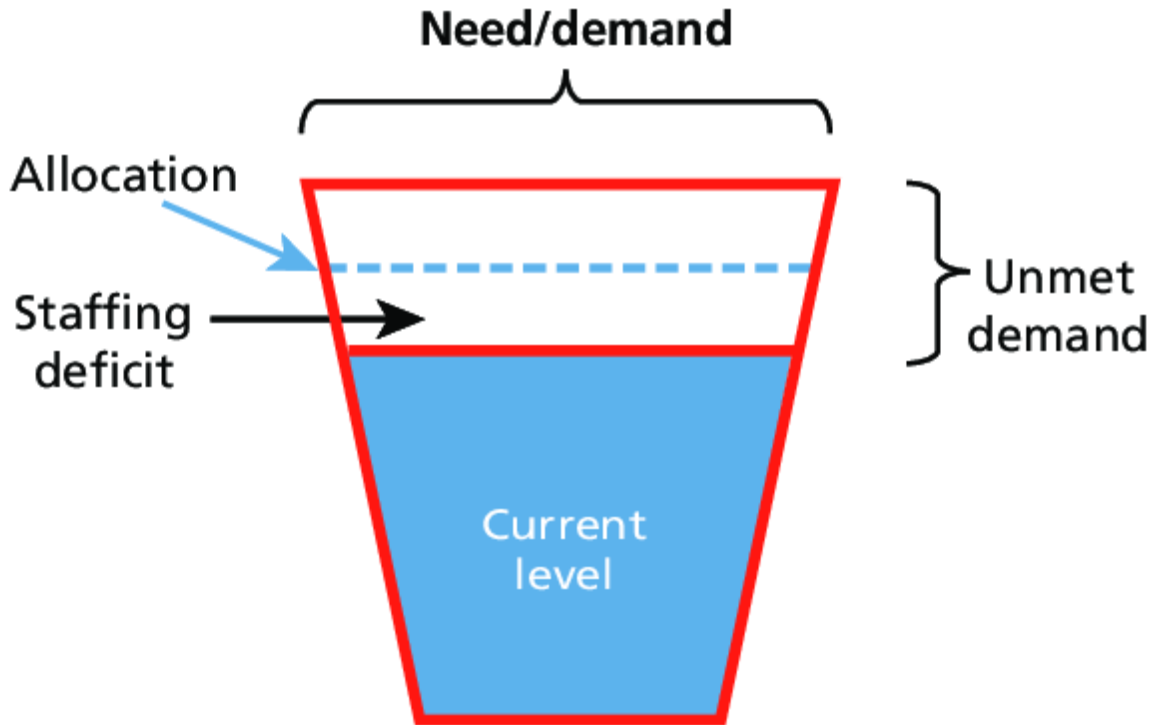
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Appendix A

The Bucket Metaphor and Demand for Police Officers by Clifford A. Grammich (2010)



RAND MG960-1.1