

Recruiting Law Enforcement Officers for the 21st Century

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Abstract

The profession of law enforcement is currently facing a crisis in the recruitment and retention of new employees. The law enforcement profession is integral in maintaining peace and order in this nation. It is the first line of defense between good and evil. It demands high quality, intelligent people who can perform in all kinds of environments. To have declining recruitment is an issue that needs to be addressed directly and with immediacy. This paper examines the current trends of falling recruitment numbers. It will also address the probable reasons for that decline and provide some actionable items to address the issue.

Recruiting Law Enforcement Officers for the 21st Century

Law enforcement is struggling with the recruitment of quality candidates. This is due to a combination of five challenges that the profession is currently facing. Those five challenges have been identified as social pressures and political actions, economic climate, working conditions, generational differences, and the lack of relevant marketing and recruitment strategies.

Literature Review

According to Hyland with the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018), from 2013 to 2016 the number of law enforcement officers in the United States decreased by 23,521 while the population increased by 7,171,430. These are scary statistics when you consider that violent crime increased by 7% during that same time period according to the FBI Uniformed Crime Report (2017). The importance of recruiting solid quality law enforcement officials is more important than ever. Research has indicated that social pressures and political actions, economic climate, working conditions, generational differences, and the lack of relevant marketing and recruitment strategies have led to the recruitment challenge in this profession.

Social Pressures and Political Actions

According to Langham (2017), “too often in today’s media law enforcement–related issues have negatively dominated the headlines” (para. 27). As a result, many believe that law enforcement’s image has been tarnished. According to a Gramlich and Parker survey (2017),

“about 8 out of 10 officers (81%) who work in departments of 100 or more sworn officers say the media generally treat the police unfairly. Just 18% of officers disagree. About 4 out of 10 officers (42%) *strongly* agree that the media are unfair to police” (para. 2).

This perception could be contributed to social movements such as Black Lives Matter and the “Ferguson Effect”. According to Langham (2017), the recent Black Lives Matter social movement has caused society to reevaluate their perceptions of law enforcement and their role in social injustices. This can also be seen with the “Ferguson Effect” in which the actions of officers are routinely recorded and scrutinized by the general public. The majority of the time the actions are reasonable, necessary, and lawful but those facts are often left out of the media coverage. According to Langham (2017), many police agencies are failing to uphold public expectations which frequently leads to bad press. The wide span of media coverage causes an isolated event in one area of the country to negatively impact the entire profession.

These issues and perceptions have forced individuals to look at their interest in seeking a career in law enforcement. These perceptions create a significant challenge in recruiting a diverse workforce that represents the communities we serve. We must be Magnus leaders and hold each other accountable in an effort to promote law enforcement in a positive manner. We need to battle the status quo to recruit the effective individuals necessary to carry on the positive roles of law enforcement. Our agencies need to be promoting law enforcement by targeting the desired workforce.

We can counteract this by developing recruiting teams within our agency. Recruiting teams need to be comprised of individuals who possess high levels of emotional intelligence. Members of the recruitment team need to be proficient in understanding the needs and wants of future generations and sought after applicants. These teams would be responsible for promoting

the agency and should be an accurate reflection of the organization. We need to challenge antiquated systems and modernize our recruiting efforts. Gone are the days of simply using classified ads, city websites and Facebook. Recruiting teams would be responsible for developing and disseminating the information promoting the agency. This information will need to be shared on our city websites, and other platforms that will target our desired recruiting group. Social media outlets can be utilized to promote your agency such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. The information on these sites should promote the agency and personnel in a positive manner. The information needs to grab the attention of the target audience and show the benefits and rewards of being a law enforcement officer.

Law enforcement could also work on a better relationship with the media. Law enforcement needs to utilize the media to help promote us in a positive light. The media can be used to push positive stories about law enforcement. The interactions could include medical saves, interactions at community events, interactions showing our human side, and some training events. This will allow the public to see the positives law enforcement can do to assist the community, and how new personnel can be involved.

Economic Climate

As law enforcement agencies struggle to find qualified candidates to hire, the economic impact of this goes beyond the salary offered to an employee. The organization needs to create an environment within their agency tailored to the candidate they are trying to hire and market the job opportunity in a way the candidate will obtain it.

As the unemployment rate in the United States continues to remain low, the hiring pool of qualified applicants in law enforcement continues to decrease. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), the unemployment rate in the nation was 3.6% in April of 2019 and it is

forecasted to continue to decrease across the country. With a low unemployment rate, it will lower the hiring pool which will increase pay in private sector jobs.

Private sector jobs are often appealing to law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers are frequently recruited by private companies and offered more pay, better hours, less stress, less risk, and less liability than their public service career. Private sectors can increase pay and benefits much easier and quicker than a government agency can when there is a shift in the economy and unemployment rate. Law enforcement agencies often can't offer more pay as they are governed by union contracts, county boards, or city councils. The governing boards are often looking for ways to reduce their budgets by cutting money, which often means do more with less.

According to Meade (2016), "As you are evaluating a potential officer for hire, that candidate is also evaluating you and your agency. It is truly a buyer's market" (para. 5). Law enforcement agencies might not be able to offer more money or change the economic impact that is caused by outside factors. These organizations can, however, look inside their organizations to make them look appealing to the few qualified candidates that want to get into the law enforcement profession. Law enforcement organizations can be competitive with the outside private sector jobs, by creating positive environments within the organization by looking at the generational traits they are trying to hire. For example, if hiring Millennials you could create an environment in the organization focused on working together on a community engagement team and recognizing employees often for small accomplishments. If hiring a person from Generation Z you could create an environment that promotes independence and freedom as a police officer, offer more personal time off, and provide cutting edge technology within the organization. Some other things that organizations could market to new hires are take-home squad cars, retirement

options at an early age, tuition reimbursement and paid time off. They could also focus on the freedom of creativity and the diversity of daily work with an emphasis on how their work can make a difference in larger social issues impacting the world.

When recruiting and hiring law enforcement officers in today's job market, economy, and generation, organizations need to change the way they market their job opening. The pool of candidates continues to get smaller and less qualified, but by tailoring your organizational needs to the candidate you are looking for you will have success in competing with the private sector jobs that are recruiting and hiring the same quality candidates.

Working Conditions

Law enforcement work environments can vary greatly depending on location, staffing shortages and the number of calls for service. Police work is physically and mentally demanding especially when compared to other professions and an agency's work environment can place additional stress on its officers.

Issues with equipment, problems with other officers and civilian staff, quality of supervision, shift work, and an officer's identity within the department are all factors that can increase stress on an officer. These factors are key as more research is being conducted within law enforcement and there are findings that indicate routine work environment can play an important part in the increase of mental health distress.

Work environments can be positive and not cause added stress for officers. Morale is a large part of police work and by providing a positive, effective work environment an agency can improve morale and quality of services its' officers provide. When an agency has strong leadership, it can reduce the effects of stress which improves morale and the overall work product of its law enforcement officer.

According to Maguen et al. (2009), it has been shown that a positive work environment within a law enforcement agency can help reduce negative incidents in an officer's home life. It's important that our new recruits understand how the work environment can affect their mental health. According to Blue H.E.L.P. (n.d.), for the past 3 years suicide has exceeded all line of duty deaths combined. It is the responsibility of leadership within the organization to examine options that provide a positive work environment so they can minimize the stress of the profession. A positive work environment is imperative to recruiting and retaining officers who can add to the success of the profession.

To reduce stress and improve job satisfaction, law enforcement administrators can provide flexible schedules and limit denying time off to officers for significant family events. If an agency cannot pay officers the top of the pay scale, it should try to provide the best equipment available as recruit candidates want to work with state-of-the-art equipment. Agency work environments can also be improved by providing in-service training and by acknowledging great work.

When considering leadership subsystems and the importance of credible leadership agencies need to cultivate strong leaders as too many supervisors cannot and have not walked the walk. Proper and adequate supervision, or the lack of it, must be addressed. The lack of supervision and accountability can lead to officer and agency scandals. To recruit and retain quality law enforcement officers, agency administrators can provide positive work environments where their officers are appreciated and their quality work is acknowledged.

Generational Differences

When looking at recruitment issues that face law enforcement today, the profession needs to consider current and emerging generational aspects. With a current workforce made up of

several generations spanning Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials, the law enforcement profession must be proactive in attracting future recruits from Generation Z.

When considering how law enforcement must market themselves to Generation Z, it is important to consider some sobering numbers cited by Wooten (2018): 61 million Gen Z are about to enter the workforce and 60% of them want to change the world. The importance and weight of that statistic must be considered. From a recruitment standpoint, agencies must be willing to market themselves to this generation and reach them on their desired platforms.

When dealing with any kind of generational issues with respect to recruiting, it must be remembered that the most needed and desirable traits and characteristics of high-quality law enforcement officers transverse all generations. Possessing all of the values around the inner bezel of the Moral Compass is not confined to one generation or another (Normore et al., 2014). What is important from a recruiting aspect is how we tailor our approach to draw the very best candidates from this emerging generation. To accomplish this we must educate ourselves on things this particular generation finds important. The agency that proves successful in that endeavor will have no problems in recruiting and growing the future leaders of tomorrow who have a solid bearing on the outer azimuths of the Moral Compass (Normore et al., 2014).

When we dissect what makes Generation Z tick, we learn of a myriad of different factors to consider when attempting to recruit people from this group. This generation values a work/personal life blend. They are not interested in working endless hours simply as a “sprocket” of a large machine even if it means significant financial gain. They do, however, desire to be “important” in the process. This generation craves career development and they want to be developed into leaders within an organization. If they are not having these needs fulfilled in an organization, they have no problem “jumping ship” to another agency. Generation

Z is not interested in putting their head down and “plowing forward” through their careers.

While they think about their financial future at an earlier age, they are not willing to sacrifice personal life balance for the sake of the “company”. Generation Z, as a group, is not restrictive in their thinking and they believe they are capable of accomplishing anything.

While it appears, at first glance, that Generation Z possesses several negative dynamics, there are several positives that can be gleaned from this research. The larger challenge is how the law enforcement profession markets themselves to this generation to attract the very best applicants who can be molded into future Magnus leaders.

Marketing Strategy

The public safety profession, as a whole, struggles with marketing. They are non-profit organizations so their focus isn't on generating revenue. Likewise, they provide a service that is expected and demanded by the community that they serve. There simply isn't a need to market the product or the service that they provide. However, with the recruitment crisis that the profession is currently facing, the need to be good marketers is more important than ever.

Currently, most organizations have spent very little time on recruitment efforts. The extent of their marketing consists of posting the job opening on their website with limited information on the hiring and timeline associated with the process. They may also submit the job opening to the state licensing agency to assist with some exposure and marketing. However, very few agencies attend job fairs, produce recruitment videos, have recruitment teams, or follow any legitimate marketing strategy.

The need to create a marketing strategy that is focused on the generation that's being recruited is imperative. In today's day and age, it's Generation Z. As previously stated, Generation Z values diversity, work/life balance, financial stability, hard work, culture, and

equality. Public safety needs to exploit those values in their marketing publications and show how this profession can fill all of those needs.

The next phase of the marketing strategy needs to address delivery platforms. Generation Z has grown up in a digital world where social media is an important and valued source of information and communication. Public Safety professionals must start using social media to reach, influence, and inspire this generation to get interested in law enforcement. Administration and leadership need to adapt to their needs and be more progressive and innovated in their approach and delivery.

According to Chuck Wexler, Executive Director of the Police Executive Research Forum (cited in Morrison, 2017) “Today’s young people considering a job in policing expect agencies to be quicker, more nimble and transparent in their hiring processes and decision making” (p. 4). It’s imperative that agencies work hard to streamline their process and reduce the time from application submission to job offer. This can be very difficult for public safety professions because the hiring policies, procedures, and processes can be very rigid and time-consuming. Leadership needs to work to improve processes to make it more efficient to secure quality applicants.

Conclusion

This case study provides a framework for law enforcement agencies to utilize technology and social media to successfully recruit personnel who will accomplish building trust and legitimacy in the communities they serve. In our professional experience we have seen a decrease in the number of qualified applicants applying for open positions. The recruitment of quality personnel is vital for agencies to provide the service that the public expects in the 21st

century. The need for authentic leaders who are open to progressive and innovated recruitment strategies are key to reversing this dynamic.

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