

Enhancing volunteerism by adapting to changing world

Adrian Birch

Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project, La Trobe University, Victoria

For almost 30 years following World War 2, Australia enjoyed economic prosperity and stability and fire agencies reported high numbers of volunteers. In the early 1970s, high unemployment and high inflation suddenly emerged and have remained dynamic ever since. In response, governments and industry have restructured the economy in a variety of ways, some of which have eroded people's ability to volunteer as firefighters.

The Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project at La Trobe University conducted 28 studies over the last 6 years to better understand the problem and help enhance the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Why do people volunteer as firefighters?

Volunteers most commonly report that they are motivated by the desire to "make a difference" and "give something back to the community". Volunteers, particularly in younger age groups, are also motivated by self-enhancing desires to learn new skills, meet new friends and experience adventure.

Why don't more people volunteer?

Lack of information

Even in rural communities, many people outside brigade circles have little understanding of what is involved in fire service volunteering or the need for volunteers.

The impact of work and business on volunteering

Work and business commitments are the most commonly reported barriers to volunteering, nominated by about 80% of volunteers.

Self-employed people are 4 times more likely to volunteer than employed people but represent just 7% of the population. They attend twice as many call-outs during business hours as do employed people

Age and stage of lifecycle

16-17 years-olds are keen to join, but rates of joining drop markedly from the age of 18 as young people gain their independence and need to become established in work, education and housing. Young adults have higher rates of turnover as they move house more frequently. Rates of volunteering drop further during the child-bearing years, but resurge in middle-age as people become established in life and have the capacity to pursue new challenges.

Gender

Traditionally, firefighting has been male-dominated, with about 85% of volunteers being male. Female volunteers experience harassment and bullying more often than males, and are more likely to experience difficulty with the fit of PPC or using equipment. About 40% of women report **difficulty reaching equipment** on some trucks compared with 6% of men. However, in recent years modern social attitudes and improvements in equipment and PPC have enabled an increase in the proportion of females.



Good leadership can reduce resignations

Most former volunteers report having left for reasons beyond anyone's control: moving from the area; the demands of work and family; poor health or old-age. **However**, a quarter of ex-volunteers report having left because of dissatisfaction with the volunteering experience. Most described *dissatisfaction* related to discrimination, harassment, bullying, favouritism, exclusion, incompetence or poor leadership.

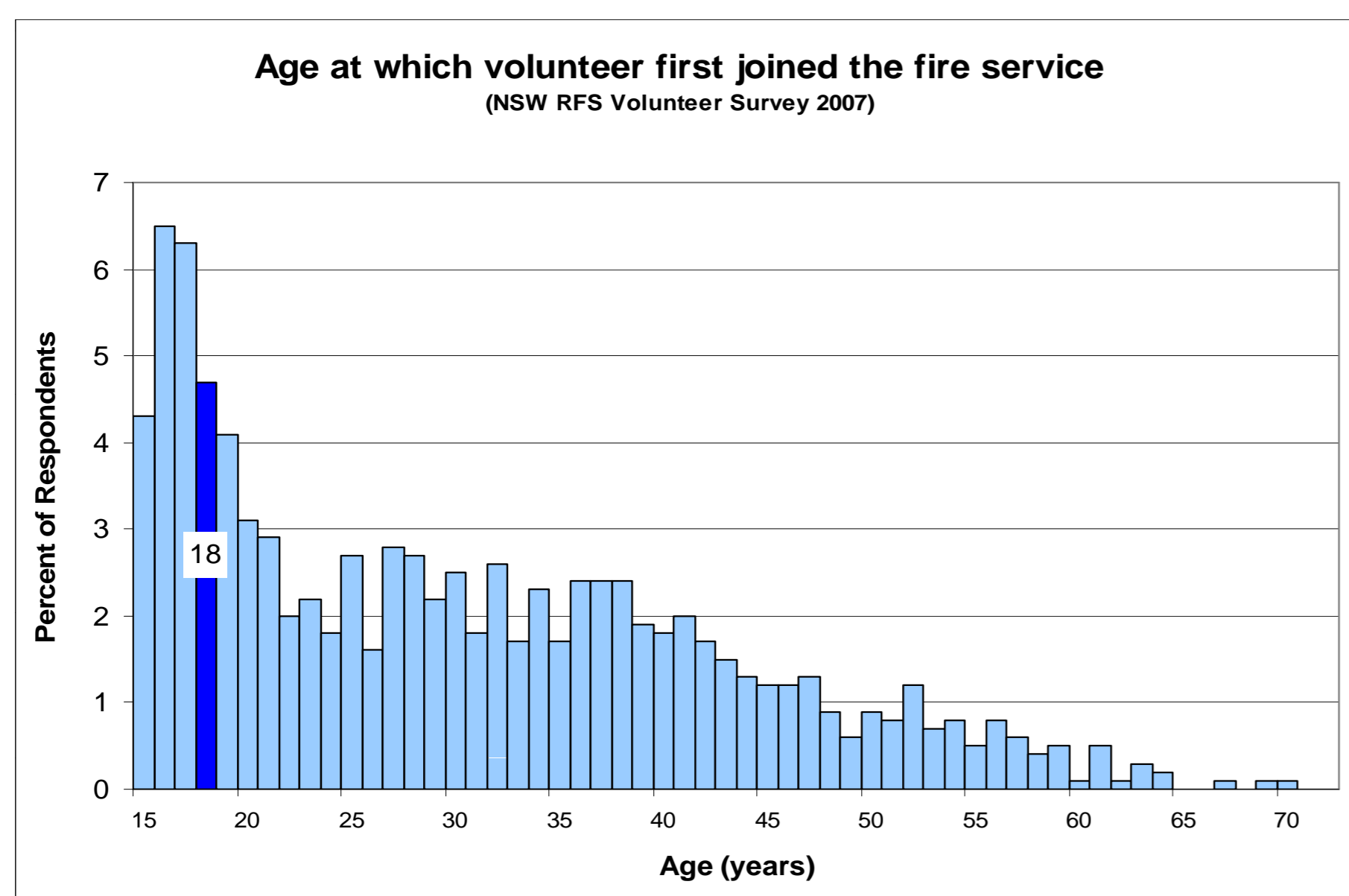
Good leadership skills can help to minimise poor behaviour among volunteers, create a welcoming atmosphere and inspire brigade members.

Career staff who supervise volunteers must also have appropriate training and skills in volunteer management and be willing to actively support and mentor volunteer brigade leaders. Good managers can ensure that regional offices are effective in supporting volunteers.

About two thirds of volunteers would prefer district officers to be more consultative of brigades when making decisions affecting those brigades.

Implications for enhancing recruitment and retention

- Actively inform the community about the volunteer firefighter role
- Ensure that equipment, PPC and brigade culture suit the broadest possible diversity of volunteers (gender, age, cultural background etc.)
- Train brigade leaders and fire agency managers in leadership to improve the volunteering experience
- Ensure that volunteers don't over-commit at the expense of family or work



Some volunteers don't balance brigade and family

Fire agency staff observe that some volunteers have difficulty balancing family and fire brigade priorities. Analysis of survey responses from volunteers indicate that increased conflict between volunteering and family obligations reduces volunteers' sense of satisfaction and their commitment to continue volunteering.