

Teamwork and collaborative work practices in fire management agencies: A study of incident management teams (IMTs)

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Background

There is wide acknowledgement that high-consequence domains (HCDs) need to effectively 'manage the unexpected' and so achieve consistently safe, reliable, and economically efficient outcomes. Even minor lapses or mistakes can lead to losses that are untenable to the community. In Australian bushfire management, it is the Incident Management Teams (IMTs) which are charged with minimising losses and keeping the community abreast of the situation. This study addresses a call for more effective teamwork and collaborative work practices within and between emergency Incident Management Teams (IMTs).

Research questions

- Within and between IMTs, what are the teamwork and collaborative work practice indicators of effective IMT performances?
- To what extent is IMT teamwork and collaborative IMT work practice supported by organisational structures and processes?
- How might IMT teamwork be modelled?
- How might IMT performance be optimised through the development of new practices?

Methodology

Data is being gathered during simulations and actual incidents using state-of-the-art digital audio and video techniques. The research focuses on the interactions of those performing key functional roles within IMTs (i.e., Incident Controllers, Planners, Logistics and Operations Officers). A major national questionnaire this year will complete the data collection phases.



Videoring an IMT briefing at Erica during the 2006 Gippsland fires



An IMT in action during a Vector Command simulation at CFA's Diamond Creek headquarters

Research activities during 2006-2007

This bushfire season was particularly active. Interviews were conducted with experienced fire management personnel in stakeholder agencies, and observations were conducted during simulations at:

- Tumut (NSW)
- Alexandra (VIC)
- Gisbourne (VIC)
- Diamond Creek (VIC)

And during live incidents at:

- Gippsland (VIC)
- Kelleve (TAS)
- Huon (TAS)

Results and expected outcomes

Analysis of the observational data is continuing and emerging findings will be presented at the Bushfire CRC/AFAC Conference 2007 in Hobart, and at the Human Dimensions of Wildfire Conference in Colorado in October 2007.

Data is being coded for artefact use, communicative strategies, teamwork indicators, and collaborative IMT work practices. This will enable the researcher to:

- a) identify connections between IMT teamwork strategies and ways of organising for high reliability (HRO); and,
- b) consider what this might mean for training interventions.