Volunteerism: Facing the Challenge

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The Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project:

Carry out research in collaboration with, and on behalf of, Australasian volunteer-based fire services so as to ensure adequate numbers of volunteers to meet community protection needs
Symptoms of problematic issues?

- Declining brigade memberships in rural communities
- Low brigade memberships in new communities
- Scarcity of volunteers for turnouts 9-5, Monday-Friday

Underlying causes?
Economics, and Demographics!

Economics:
- Globalisation of the economy
- Changes in the Australian economy (decline of the manufacturing and agricultural sectors)
- Changes in the nature of work (privatisation, self-employment, casualisation)
Demographics:

- Population movements
- An ageing population
- Changes in the compositions of “families”

BCRC Volunteerism Project Research:

- The NSW “Grain Belt” community survey
- The CFA study of new volunteers
- The surveys of women volunteers in (a) the SA CFS, and (b) the ACT RFS
And the message is that there are four issues needing attention!

Involving:

- Something old
- Something new
- Something borrowed
- And something blue
Something old?
--The average age of volunteers is HIGH!

And probably getting higher!
CFA age data 2001 & 2006
And this is why (in part, at least!)

(1) Interest in volunteering by age

Interest in volunteering in a firefighting role
by Age

(2) Availability of people, by age

Distribution of Age in the Population of the Survey Area
ABS Census 2001
(3) Interest in volunteering adjusted for the number of people available

Interest in a firefighting role adjusted for people available in each age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>% of persons relative to the population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-69</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-74</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-79</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-84</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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(4) Interest in volunteering compared with available people

The gap between interest in volunteering and proportion of the population is widest between ages 35 and 44

- Population of survey area (Census 2001)
- Interest in volunteering for a firefighting role (NSW Grainbelt Survey 2005)

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WHY?  
--Family Life Cycle Factors

People in the 35-45 years age bracket are likely to be:

- Married
- With children of an age requiring high-level parenting
- Paying off a hefty mortgage
- Consolidating career/business/farm
- Doing other volunteering—child/family related

So?

- Review youth activities—Juniors, Cadets
- Demands on volunteers
- Brigades and families
Something **new?**
Are communities increasingly demanding, unforgiving, and cynical?

Evidence?

- Threats of litigation
- Criticism of service
- Declining brigade memberships
Or just a “new world”?  

- Corporatised and “professionalised” agencies, → alienation from communities?  
- Brigades “left behind” 

Something **BORROWED**? 
State-of-the-art technology!!!
But what about volunteer management?

The Pyramid:

Numbers

Volunteers

Paid Staff
The Upside-down Pyramid?

Resources Devoted

Paid Staff

Volunteers

Ask:

• Most senior person with responsibilities only for volunteer management?
• Content of agenda items at Board meetings?
• Percentage of budget devoted to volunteer management?
Something blue?  
--Some brigades do NOT welcome “the new and different” volunteer!

• Cultural and linguistic diversity?  
• Women in operational roles?  
• The dysfunctional brigade?
A benediction?

1. It’s a new world
2. The local brigade is the key
3. Brigade managements need help
4. Agencies need to work on how to provide more assistance to Brigades
5. Agencies may need to review the resources they devote to volunteer support and management—including educating communities about their volunteer brigades