

# Emergency service volunteers: a comparison of age, motives and values

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding why volunteers join an emergency service and why they stay is critical to developing more effective recruitment and retention strategies. Subsequently, this study examines the roles of age, motivations and values in satisfaction among New Generation (aged below 35 years) and Traditional Generation (aged 35 years and above) volunteers. The research conducted an online survey of 252 State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers. The results indicate a mix of similarities and differences across the generations. First and foremost though, the primary reasons for joining and staying with the service are the same for both age groups – and those reasons revolve around serving the community. Younger volunteers do have an extended range of reasons for joining and staying but the areas of difference point to stage-in-life considerations as opposed to generational changes. The discussion identifies and examines the key implications for emergency service managers. <sup>R</sup>

## Introduction

Organisations that rely on a volunteer workforce confront various challenges in relation to growing competition for unpaid helpers, the ageing population and declining rates of volunteer participation (Francis, 2011). These challenges intensify in emergency services where operations depend on highly trained, highly committed, risk tolerant volunteers in whom the organisation invests considerable resources (McLennan and Birch, 2009; Rice and Fallon, 2011). In the NSW State Emergency Service (SES) for example, volunteers can be on-call and work in adverse conditions. General training can take 24 months to complete and involves high start-up costs for the organisation. However, many volunteers leave

before or around the 24-month mark. Subsequently, understanding why volunteers join an emergency service and why they stay is critical to developing more effective recruitment and retention strategies.

Researchers are closely examining the factors that feed into satisfaction and dissatisfaction among emergency service volunteers (Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace, 2009; Huynh, Metzger and Winefield, 2012; McLennan, Birch, Cowlshaw and Hayes, 2009; Rice and Fallon, 2011). Certainly, some attrition is unavoidable, such as when volunteers leave due to ill health or relocation. However, the research provides valuable insights relating to potentially manageable factors such as leadership styles, group cohesion, personal conflicts, organisation structures, and connectedness to the service. Notably the work to date tends to focus on interpersonal factors. There is the opportunity to examine personal factors, including personal motivations and values, that affect volunteer satisfaction. Recent work has questioned the possible impact of age and generational differences. Accordingly, this paper examines the roles of motives, values and age in emergency service volunteer satisfaction.

## Motivations

Motivation models of volunteer behaviour contend that volunteering is the outcome of an individual's drive to satisfy functional or reasoned motives. A leading model of the functional motives is Clary *et al.*'s (1998) Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). The VFI identifies and measures six functional motives that variously drive volunteerism. The VFI motives are:

- *Values*: concern for, and desire to help, people in need or important causes.
- *Protective*: relieve one's own personal problems and negative emotions.
- *Enhancement*: increase positive feelings about one's self.
- *Understanding*: learn about the cause, other people, and one's own abilities.
- *Career*: develop and expand career-related skills and opportunities.

- *Social*: align own behavior with that of social referents who volunteer.

The VFI is widely used to assess and compare the motives of volunteers. The results indicate that volunteer motives, and thereby the sources of satisfaction, vary across service contexts (Carlo *et al.*, 2005; Mayer and McNary, 2007; Okun and Schultz, 2003). However, no studies appear to have used the complete VFI to identify the motives that are most important to emergency service volunteers.

**Values**

The related, but distinct, attribute of personal values refers to a person’s underlying beliefs about what is acceptable and desirable, and their enduring goals or sought after end states (Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004; Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987). The Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) developed by Schwartz and colleagues (2001) is widely used in social research (Bilsky, Janik and Schwartz, 2011) and has been recently used to help understand volunteerism (Briggs, Peterson and Gregory, 2010). Relevant to this context, the PVQ includes the Self-Transcendence values of *Universalism* and *Benevolence* and the contrasting Self-Enhancement values of *Power* and *Achievement*, as summarised below.

- *Universalism*: appreciate and protect the welfare of all people in the world.

- *Benevolence*: preserve and enhance the welfare of people close by.
- *Power*: attain social status, prestige, and control over resources or people.
- *Achievement*: attain personal success and recognition for achievements.

Like the VFI, the PVQ could help to understand why volunteers join and stay with an organisation but it has not yet been used in the context of emergency service volunteers.

**Age**

Appealing to younger volunteers is vital to the short and long-term futures of emergency service organisations. The popular media and various scholarly sources suggest that today’s younger adults, especially Generation Y (those currently aged around 18-34 years) are generally more self-oriented and less community-minded than previous generations (McLennan and Birch, 2009). If so, generational difference would mean modifying traditional recruitment and retention practices. However, research with volunteer firefighters suggests that younger volunteers are no less concerned about safety and community than older volunteers but they do have additional stage-in-life needs relating to careers and friendships (McLennan and Birch, 2009). This being the case, modifying traditional practices could be counter-productive. Thus, it is important to clarify if, and in what ways, the motives and values of what this study hereafter refers to as new generation



Image: NSW SES

**NSW SES and NSW Fire Brigade carry out joint training to retain high-level skills.**

emergency service volunteers (people younger than 35 years) differ to those of traditional generation volunteers from Generation X and Baby Boomer cohorts (people 35 years and above).

## Research aims

To extend the current literature, the research described here seeks to better understand the personal and age-related reasons why volunteers join and stay with an emergency service organisation. In particular, the research has two aims:

1. To assess and compare the motivations, values, and satisfaction of New Generation and Traditional Generation volunteers.
2. To examine the relationships between motivations, values and satisfaction for each generational group.

## Method

The research involved conducting an online survey of NSW SES volunteers. Recruitment emails were sent to the SES email accounts of 6,070 current members. Each email contained a secure single-use link to the survey site. The survey obtained 252 completed responses which provided a relatively low response rate of 4 per cent. Informal feedback from two SES units later indicated that less than 10 per cent of volunteers use their SES email account. The sample included 179 (71 per cent) males and 73 (29 per cent) females of whom 153 (61 per cent) were New Generation volunteers and 99 (39 per cent) were Traditional Generation. The reported length of SES service ranged from 1.8 to 46.8 years ( $M = 10.5$  years). Also, approximately 60 per cent of respondents reported working or studying full-time and 45 per cent reported having children living at home.

The online questionnaire included sections that measured functional motivations, personal values and satisfaction with the SES. These sections used scales for which the reliability and validity has previously been established. *Motivations* was measured with the 30-item VFI scale (Clary *et al.*, 1998) and *Values* was measured with the nine-item PVQ to assess *Universalism*, *Benevolence*, *Power* and *Achievement* (Schwartz *et al.*, 2001). *Satisfaction* was measured with a six-item 'Satisfaction with the Volunteer Organisation' scale (Marta and Pozzi, 2008). Responses to the motivation and satisfaction questions were captured on a seven-point fully labelled Likert response scale that ranged from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. Responses to the values questions were measured on a six-point fully labelled Likert response scale that ranged from 'Not At All Like Me' to 'Very Much Like Me'.

The data was prepared for analysis by computing each respondent's mean component scores for the

six functional motives, the four personal values, and satisfaction. Respondents were also sorted into the two generational groups by recoding their age-in-years responses. To address the first aim of the research, descriptive analyses extracted the sample means and standard deviations from each generational group for all of the research variables. Three separate one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA's) were then conducted to examine the generational differences in means for:

- i) the VFI components
- ii) the PVQ components, and
- iii) satisfaction.

The second research aim was addressed conducting four multiple-regression analyses – two for each generation. These regression analyses examined the relationships between motivations and satisfaction as well as values and satisfaction for each generation.

## Results

Table 1 presents the results from extracting the motivation, values and satisfaction scores for the New and Traditional Generation volunteers along with ANOVA results from comparing the sample means.

### Functional Motivations (VFI) and Age

The VFI scores indicate similarities and differences between the motivations of each generational group. The key similarity is that for New and Traditional Generation volunteers, the two highest motivations are *Values* ( $M = 5.8$  and  $5.7$ ) and *Understanding* ( $M = 5.9$  and  $5.4$ ). In terms of differences, the *Understanding* motive is statistically higher for the New Generation group. New Generation volunteers also report significantly higher *Career* and *Protective* motivations. These results indicate that the primary motivations for both generations revolve around concern for, interest in, and the desire to help people. Younger volunteers are also strongly motivated by career and personal functions but these motives do not take precedence over the community well-being concerns.

### Personal Values (PVQ) and Age

The PVQ scores also reveal similarities and differences across the generations. Critically, both groups are equally and most highly oriented towards the self-transcendence values of *Benevolence* and *Universalism*: New Generation volunteers scored means of 4.8 and 4.6 respectively for these values while Traditional Generation volunteers scored 4.6 for both. Meanwhile, the self-enhancement values of *Achievement* and *Power* achieved the lowest scores, albeit that New Generation scores were significantly higher than those of the Traditional Generation. Similar to the motivations results, the personal values results reveal that both generations

are similarly and most highly oriented towards serving the community but younger volunteers are, to a lesser degree, also driven to attain personal success.

**Satisfaction with the SES**

The measures of satisfaction with the SES produced relatively high scores for both groups. With a maximum possible score of seven, the mean score for New Generation volunteers was 5.9 and for Traditional Generation volunteers the mean was 5.6. The difference in the means was statistically significant, indicating that younger volunteers are more satisfied with the organisation than their older counterparts.

**Relationships between Motives, Values and Satisfaction**

*Satisfaction* scores were used in regression analyses to examine the Motivation-Satisfaction and Values-Satisfaction relationships for each generation. The results are presented in Table 2. Overall, the fulfilment of functional motivations is a stronger predictor of satisfaction than personal values. In the case of New Generation volunteers, motivations explain 39 per cent ( $R^2 = 0.39$ ) of satisfaction whereas values explain only 8 per cent ( $R^2 = 0.08$ ). For Traditional Generation volunteers, the difference in explanatory power is not as large, but where motivations explain 32 per cent ( $R^2 = 0.32$ ) of satisfaction, values explain 18 per cent ( $R^2 = 0.18$ ).

Of the VFI motives, *Values* had the strongest influence on volunteer satisfaction. For the New and Traditional generations, this motive recorded the largest beta

coefficient ( $\beta = .220$  and  $.384$ ) and is significantly related to *Satisfaction* at the stringent  $p < .01$  level. In the case of Traditional Generation volunteers, *Values* is the only VFI component that is significantly related to satisfaction. For New Generation volunteers, *Enhancement* ( $\beta = .203$ ,  $p = .005$ ) and *Career* ( $\beta = .118$ ,  $p = .026$ ) also predict satisfaction but the lower beta coefficients indicate that these motives have less influence on satisfaction.

Regarding the PVQ components, *Benevolence* ( $\beta = .524$ ,  $p = .000$ ) is the strongest and only significant predictor of satisfaction for Traditional Generation volunteers. *Benevolence* ( $\beta = .181$ ,  $p = .022$ ) is also significant for the New Generation group but this group also produced significant results for *Power* ( $\beta = -.199$ ,  $p = .018$ ). Notably too, *Power* has a negative beta coefficient which indicates an inverse relationship between desire for social status and satisfaction with the SES.

**Discussion**

The study examined the roles of age, motives and values in emergency service volunteer satisfaction and identified a mix of similarities and differences across New and Traditional Generation volunteers. The two highest functional motivations for both age groups are *Values* and *Understanding*. Also, fulfilling the *Values* function is the primary driver of satisfaction for both groups. Likewise, both age groups are equally and most highly oriented to the self-transcendence values of *Universalism* and *Benevolence*, with fulfilment of *Benevolence* being significantly related to satisfaction among younger and older volunteers. This indicates that, first and foremost, the primary reasons for joining

**Table 1.** Comparison of Motivations, Values and Satisfaction.

		New Generation	Traditional Generation	Comparison of Means	
Motivation	Values	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	F	Sig.
<b>Functional Motivations (VFI)</b>	Values	5.8 (0.8)	5.7 (0.7)	0.84	.359
	Protective	3.7 (1.3)	3.3 (1.2)	4.09	.044*
	Enhancement	5.1 (1.1)	4.8 (1.0)	3.29	.071
	Understanding	5.9 (0.7)	5.4 (1.0)	21.61	.000**
	Career	4.5 (1.4)	3.4 (1.3)	40.96	.000**
	Social	4.2 (1.3)	4.0 (1.3)	2.12	.146
<b>Personal Values (PVQ)</b>	Universalism	4.6 (0.9)	4.6 (0.9)	.41	.520
	Benevolence	4.8 (1.0)	4.6 (0.9)	3.01	.084
	Power	2.9 (1.1)	2.4 (0.9)	20.08	.000**
	Achievement	3.6 (1.4)	2.8 (1.1)	23.00	.000**
	Satisfaction with SES				
	Overall Satisfaction	5.9 (0.9)	5.6 (1.0)	6.60	.011*

\* Significant at  $p < .05$  level      \*\* Significant at  $p < .01$  level

and staying with the emergency service are the same for both age groups – and that those reasons revolve around serving the community.

The research also revealed certain differences between the age groups. In particular, younger volunteers are more highly oriented towards the *Career* function and self-enhancement values of *Power* and *Achievement*. Younger volunteers also report higher levels of satisfaction and their sources of satisfaction extend beyond *Values* and *Benevolence* to include the functional motives of *Career* and *Enhancement*. These findings do not necessarily reflect fundamental generational differences. Instead, the differences point to stage-in-life matters whereby young adult volunteers are understandably working to establish their livelihoods, independence, and place in society. Arguably too, younger volunteers have an extended range of reasons for joining and staying. This is potentially advantageous for the organisation and provides more bases on which to appeal to, and satisfy the needs of, young adult volunteers.

These findings have two key implications for emergency service managers.

1. The notion of Generation Y being fundamentally different to, and more self-oriented than, older generations does not apply in this context. Younger and older members are similarly and most highly concerned with serving the community. Subsequently, managers should focus their recruitment and retention practices on maximising opportunities for all volunteers to fulfil their community-oriented needs and to minimise

backstage or bureaucratic requirements that keep members from frontline activities.

2. Young adult volunteers have reasonably foreseeable stage-in-life matters with which to contend, as indicated by the importance of career, status and success factors. These matters are not necessarily a threat to the core purpose of the organisation. However, they may necessitate some management modifications, such as providing greater flexibility, empowerment and opportunities for younger members to satisfy these needs, in order to increase the likelihood of volunteer satisfaction and retention among this group.

Some of the limitations of the study and the emerging directions for research warrant consideration. The survey responses were limited to the relatively low proportion of members who use their SES email account. Subsequently, further research could expand the potential sample by encouraging and enabling increased use of SES email accounts or by conducting such surveys via traditional post. The present study was a single-stage survey that captured responses from current volunteers at a single point in time. As such, the project did not examine changes in volunteer motives, values and satisfaction over time or stages in service. Valuable insights could be gained by conducting multi-stage longitudinal studies that monitor new volunteers as they progress through their training and deployment or, alternatively, decide to leave the organisation.

**Table 2.** Relationships between Motivations, Values and Satisfaction.

Motivation	Values	New Generation			Traditional Generation		
		β	t-value	Sig.	β	t-value	Sig.
Functional Motivations (VFI)	Values	.220	2.67	.008**	.384	2.70	.008**
	Protective	-.042	-0.77	.440	.053	0.56	.578
	Enhancement	.203	2.86	.005**	.209	1.61	.110
	Understanding	.146	1.64	.103	.157	1.21	.226
	Career	.118	2.26	.026*	.135	1.48	.143
	Social	.090	1.92	.056	-.084	-0.90	.375
		R <sup>2</sup> = 0.39			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.32		
Personal Values (PVQ)	Universalism	-.056	-0.66	.512	-.059	-0.45	.656
	Benevolence	.181	2.32	.022*	.524	4.01	.000**
	Power	-.199	-2.40	.018*	-.111	-0.73	.469
	Achievement	.059	0.88	.381	.038	0.31	.756
		R <sup>2</sup> = 0.08			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.18		

\* Significant at p < .05 level      \*\* Significant at p < .01 level

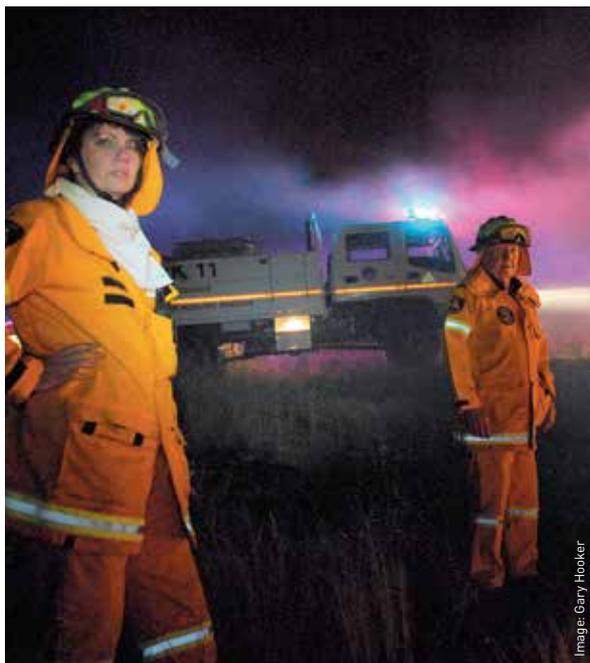


Image: Gary Hoeker

**Younger and older volunteers are most highly concerned with serving the community.**

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