

Volunteers: the ageing and the millennials

Jake Moir, NSW Rural Fire Service

The New South Wales Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS) has over 70,000 members and is rapidly approaching a demographic dilemma. As 'baby boomers' begin to retire, it's time to shift the focus of the NSW RFS to 'millennials' and get ready for the challenges that come with that generation.

Widely, millennials, or Generation Y, are the people defined as those born between 1980 and 2000, who are currently transforming the way workplaces manage and lead their employees. Millennials have developed a workplace reputation as 'high maintenance' and 'needy' and tend to 'job hop' between multiple different careers and jobs across their working life. This is in contrast to earlier generations (mainly baby boomers) who settle in and see a career through until the end. The implications? The NSW RFS now has a growing membership that want to have purposeful work, constant feedback, come with a lot of ambition and want work-life balance.

High maintenance and needy

The needy and high-maintenance reputation of millennials stems from a range of generational differences. Primarily, it's the desire for constant

feedback. Young workers want to know how they're doing, what they can do better, where their shortfalls are and most importantly how they can affect the organisation. These employees seek purpose, expect their organisations to continually engage them and place high value on their relationship with their managers.

For NSW RFS, this maintenance and sense of need is inherently a challenge. From the top down, leaders in the organisation are going to have to cater for millennial volunteers. This means engaging them constantly to maintain their interests, but not so much so that the organisation impedes on their work-life balance. The service must utilise the sense of reward millennials can gain from responding to incident calls and regularly upskill millennials to provide them a sense of progression. The service also needs to keep them informed and set a clear vision and mission for this generation to aspire to.



Image: NSW Rural Fire Service

Job hoppers

It appears this rising generation don't like to stay in the one place. Rather than nesting in a career, job hopping involves moving around workplaces regularly, with many spending only two to three years in a career before moving onto something else. This presents a challenge. The NSW RFS needs to keep the millennial generation engaged and interested or risk losing them. This presents an interesting opportunity, where we may see more interstate and intrastate transfers by members.

Diversity research has indicated that there is benefit in a mixed variety of perspectives and experiences, and the NSW RFS may gain from millennials moving around all the time. A volunteer from the Victorian Country Fire Authority may transfer into the NSW RFS bringing a range of skills and experiences the service isn't always used to. This opportunity requires the NSW RFS to work with volunteer fire services across the country and bring accreditation to allow members to do this at their pleasure, or again, risk losing them.

Moving forward

To deal with the changing demographic in workplaces and volunteering, NSW RFS needs to shift its focus from the current membership and proactively chase after the future of the service: the millennials. A good initiative

was started with the NSW RFS Young Members Group in December 2010. This group should continue to provide a young perspective on the service and help guide the service into the next generation of captains, group captains and staff.

There is plenty of argument for more incentives such as enhanced employer engagement programs, financial incentives and tax concessions; but largely the service needs to develop its personnel policy to deal with the rising trends of this generation. The nature of what the NSW RFS does isn't likely to change, but the people will most definitely change as time goes on.

The service needs to prepare for this. Leadership at all levels needs to know how to work with these young volunteers and understand what motivates them. From junior captains through to the Commissioner, everyone needs to understand that young members are likely to have different attitudes, but are here to stay.

Millennials want to be engaged in work that has purpose, desire constant feedback and are highly educated. Millennials generally had a youth of high expectations and have developed a high level of ambition. They are described as needy and high maintenance and the NSW RFS must be ready for this generation to begin taking over the reins when older generations hang up their boots. Largely, personnel policy is going to make the difference and positive action must continue to engage, motivate and retain firefighters in the world's largest volunteer fire service.



Image: NSW Rural Fire Service



Image: NSW Rural Fire Service