



EVERY TELECOMMUNICATOR MAKES A DIFFERENCE

**RESPONSIVE EFFORTS TO
ADDRESS INTEGRAL NEEDS
IN STAFFING** BY LOREDANA ELSBERRY

The struggle to find and keep qualified employees is one universally acknowledged by comm center supervisors and managers. In a busy center, the number of telecommunicators available to handle the workload can make a substantial difference in response time. The addition of even one person can dramatically improve the average speed of answer and reduce mandated overtime. Every telecommunicator makes a difference, and understaffing is risky business. Understaffing can lead to mistakes caused by rushing, longer wait times on 9-1-1 calls, delays in dispatching needed resources, morale problems, overuse of sick days, burnout and much more.

Until recently, managers had no national data they could use to compare their center with others to determine whether they were dealing with an extreme situation. The comm center staffing problem has finally been quantified. APCO is the first entity to conduct a comprehensive and definitive study on staffing and retention issues, through Project RETAINS (Responsive Efforts to Address Integral Needs in Staffing). The research components of RETAINS included Study I, a random sample of communications centers; Study II, a study of large centers; six site visits and literature review regarding the industry and retention in similar fields.

RETAINS gives empirical evidence to support the argument that additional qualified people are needed to staff public safety communications centers. When the study was released in 2005, the average national turnover rate for comm center personnel was 17% (retention is 83%). Think that doesn't sound bad? Let's put that figure into perspective. In comparison, two other fields with well-known personnel shortages are nursing and teaching. The turnover rate for these fields is just 15%. The even higher turnover rate for comm centers means that not only are there not enough people to answer 9-1-1 calls, but those who are staffing the comm centers are doing their normal workload plus compensating for the vacancies. Although not the only factors that play into understaffing, recruitment and retention are probably the most prevalent causes for the crisis.

Understanding that turnover is a problem and more people are needed is not enough. In order to recruit, hire and retain good employees, other dynamics and vari-

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ables must be taken into consideration. Unfortunately, there's no magic formula when it comes to staffing a comm center. Centers vary from city to city, county to county and state to state. Most comm centers are governed at the local or county level. Services provided at a specific center vary depending on service population, service area, the number of client agencies and call volume, and whether the center is primary or secondary, consolidated or stand-alone, etc. An overwhelming number of variables make each center unique in its operations and dynamics. The good news is that there are tools to help you estimate the appropriate staffing levels for your communications center.

One component of Project RETAINS was the creation of an online toolkit developed to help you estimate appropriate staffing levels. The extensive, nationwide RETAINS study also resulted in the compilation of more than 150 effective practices (EPs) related to staffing. The EPs, in conjunction with the toolkit, are the tools to help you make positive change in your center and justify your argument for increased staffing levels.

THE COSTS OF INAPPROPRIATE STAFFING

Understandably, it takes an investment of time and effort to find qualified candidates. Although directors and managers face the temptation to hire "maybes" just to fill a position, the long-term implications and consequences need to be considered. By hiring someone who is not a good fit for the profession or the organization, precious resources—money *and* time—can be wasted. To better understand how this can affect an organization, let's consider the associated costs.

When there's a vacancy, money must be spent to advertise and recruit for the opening in available forums and media, and current employees must work mandated overtime to ensure minimum staffing for the center. Once applications are received, time is required to process candidates through the application process and interviews. Background checks must be performed. Meanwhile, current employees must continue to work mandated overtime.

Once the applicant pool has been narrowed and job offers issued to candidate(s), new hires need to go through training, often

consisting of several weeks of academy or classroom instruction. Still, current employees are working extra overtime to ensure that the comm center continues to operate.

Once the new hires complete initial training, a communications training officer (CTO) or mentor is assigned to the new hire for on-the-job training. Two people to one console. Current employees are still working overtime. Only when the new hire is fully trained does the number of overtime hours worked by other employees go down.

Preparing employees for success is an ongoing process. With a new hire, there is an initial learning curve as the person learns how to do the job. However, this is not the only learning curve. As new technologies are introduced and applied to public safety, telecommunicators will need ongoing training, especially tenured employees who have worked for the center for a considerable amount of time but never been exposed to the technologies that are commonplace for younger generations. We must prepare employees at every level to succeed. Learning cannot stop after new-hire training.

If a "maybe" is hired, the new hire may never make it past training or probation. This means the cycle must be repeated.

Understandably, this takes a toll on employees. Even the most dedicated and capable telecommunicator will begin to experience burnout and could potentially leave. This vicious cycle must be broken. To do so, we must understand how each step of the process can affect the employee and the organization overall. Much more must be considered than call volume and how many more bodies are needed.

DETERMINE THE APPROPRIATE STAFFING LEVEL

RETAINS showed that 81% of communications centers use some staffing formula(s). A combination of formulas or variables are used, including call volume, average calls per hour, Erlang C, shift relief factor, available employee time and work analysis. These formulas focus on certain critical factors, but in order to address the overall problem of inadequate staffing, more factors need to be taken into consideration.

The RETAINS toolkit looks at two different types of positions: coverage and volume-influenced. The terminology is research-based, but the concepts are based

in public safety. Both positions take into consideration how turnover and employee availability affect staffing levels.

The study recommends that centers that experience regular turnover use an adjustment for turnover when estimating the number of staff needed to handle the workload. An adjustment for turnover has more credibility because it is based on historical data for several years. Five years is the recommended standard if the data are available. It is useful to know whether you are losing employees in the early stages of employment or after they have been at the center for a while. If you are losing employees early on, it may indicate a problem with recruiting, screening and selection or training. If you are losing them after several years with the center, it may be an issue related to pay, benefits or another unrelated issue.

A *coverage* position is most closely related to minimum staffing. A coverage position takes into consideration much more than the minimum number of people needed per shift. It looks at the hours needing to be covered within a 24-hour period. Estimating appropriate staffing levels for coverage positions takes into account the number of full-time employees or full-time equivalents (FTEs). The following equation is used:

$$\text{FTE} = \frac{\text{Hours needing coverage}}{\text{Employee Availability} \times \text{Turnover Adjustment}}$$

A *volume-influenced* position is based upon the call volume for the position—not the total call volume in a center. These are the positions that are staffed above coverage (minimum staffing) positions. Volume-influenced positions are common in medium to large centers but are uncommon in small centers. The equation used to estimate the appropriate staffing levels for these types of positions is:

$$\text{FTE} = \frac{\text{Workload}}{\text{Employee Availability} \times \text{Turnover Adjustment}}$$

A volume-influence position will look at how quickly calls are processed (average processing time or APT) and how many calls can be processed within an hour (hour processing capability or HPC). In order to determine the workload for a volume-influenced position, the call volume for that position is divided by the HPC.

Why is it so important to know how quickly calls are processed and how many available employee hours there are and to adjust for turnover? Not understanding these numbers is what leads to under-

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staffing. The rate at which calls are processed can be an indicator of several things. If it takes too long to process calls, it could be an indication that the procedures in place need to be updated. Are employees in need of refresher training? Is technology a problem due to decreased functionality or obsolescence?

Employee availability usually begins with 2,080 hours per year—40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year. However, this is not the actual amount that is worked by an employee. Sick time, vacations, comp time (if applicable), FMLA, military duty, training, meals and breaks all decrease employee availability. Available time decreases with each year an employee is with your agency. Even if you pay employees to eat at their consoles, breaks will still be taken. All of these factors will determine how many available employee hours a center realistically has in order to staff positions accordingly. Should any of these factors be underestimated, staffing levels can be affected.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

The EPs described by RETAINS are based on extensive and detailed research. In light of the variation among communications centers, these strategies were termed “effective” rather than “best.” That which makes something a “best practice” depends on a fit between the practice and the situation. The goal is to provide ideas for practices that can be tailored to “best” meet the needs of a specific center.

The EPs cover a variety of topics, including staffing, overtime, recruitment/selection, shift management, job complexity, pay and benefits, working conditions, preparation/training, and recognition. RETAINS offers ideas on how to find qualified candidates and retain the qualified staff you have, current and future. It's not enough to hire good, qualified employees. The key is to retain them. RETAINS identified the top factors that predict employee satisfaction as:

- Center performance (management);
- Preparation and ongoing training;
- Appreciation by management;
- Shift selection process;
- Effective mentoring of new trainees;
- Appreciation by immediate supervisor;
- Screening and application process; and
- Appreciation by the media.

Predictors of retention are:

- Fully staffed (all authorized positions filled);
- Monthly overtime hours;
- Job complexity;
- Hourly base pay; and
- Working conditions.

What do these predictors mean? A center operates better when all authorized positions are filled. This sounds like common sense, but so many centers do not have all of their authorized positions filled. The implications of operating with less staff than optimum can include excessive overtime, bad call handling behavior, high call abandonment rates, hiring of candidates who are not suited to the center or the profession, etc. The list goes on.

Telecommunicators and managers need to understand the dynamics of their center. An effective strategy is to understand what the numbers mean in your center. You can pull the numbers, but do you understand how they translate into the dynamics of your center? For instance, if employees are expected to work a certain number of overtime hours each month, what is the reason behind it? Is there a staffing shortage? Are there employees abusing sick leave because they cannot take vacation? Understanding the numbers also means looking beyond the symptoms and addressing the root of the problem.

Any number of strategies may be effective in addressing and resolving issues in your center, but you can use the RETAINS EPs as a starting point. They are effective, not best. In exploring the recommendations, a best practice may emerge to better suit the needs of your center.

Of greatest importance is the need to understand the variables of your center and who your employees are. This can play a key role in whether or not you are able to staff your center to authorized level, retain your staff and have a measure of employee satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Although many decision makers may disagree, turnover does affect staffing levels, and centers should plan for predictable turnover. In order to make this argument substantive, it needs to be converted into a dollar figure. It's up to you to educate the decision makers that paying overtime rather than benefits for another employee is not a

good course of action. Associating cost and consequence helps to bolster this argument. Perform an analysis to determine how much it costs to hire someone. Then determine how much money is spent in overtime when there are staffing shortages, and add a narrative explaining that using mandated overtime as a staffing solution will adversely impact current employees and be a catalyst for higher turnover. The cost of hiring someone plus the dollar and morale costs of repeated overtime will quickly show that hiring a good candidate and paying benefits is the better option.

APCO Project RETAINS offers several tools and strategies to help resolve this nationwide problem. However, the effort must begin with you. Learn the dynamics of your center, and what it takes to succeed. This will help you understand how to make improvements, substantiate arguments for more staff and identify good candidates for hire. The reports offered through RETAINS are a good starting point to bring to decision makers, but these should not be your only tools. Job descriptions, summaries, narratives and supplemental documents are great additions. Use this information as your arsenal to support your request for additional staff.

There's no guarantee that requests for staff will be granted, but the knowledge you gain by going through the process and learning about the EPs is priceless. Good things can come from the invested time and effort. You'll get to know your co-workers better, identify areas that need to be changed or can be improved upon, set the foundation to fill all authorized positions and get the needed staff for your center.

If you would like to learn more about the effective practices or how to estimate appropriate staffing levels using the APCO Project RETAINS tools, contact 911services@apco911.org. APCO Project RETAINS is free to APCO members.

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RESOURCE

APCO Project RETAINS, Staffing and Retention in Public Safety Communication Center. August 2005.

1. **What is the national turnover rate for public safety communications centers?**
 - a. 15%
 - b. 83%
 - c. 17%
 - d. 81%

2. **APCO Project RETAINS provides a single formula for staffing public safety communications centers.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. **The top predictor for retention is**
 - a. Hourly base pay
 - b. Center performance
 - c. Job complexity
 - d. A fully staffed center

4. **Employees should continue to receive training throughout their careers in order to be better prepared to handle new technologies and serve the public.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. **The effective practices offered by APCO Project RETAINS address:**
 - a. Staffing and retention
 - b. Recruitment, screening and selection
 - c. Overtime and shift issues
 - d. All of the above

6. **A coverage position is most closely related to:**
 - a. Minimum staffing
 - b. Special events staffing
 - c. Staffing based on call volume
 - d. Staffing to authorized levels

7. **Some of the implications of operating a center that is not fully staffed to authorized levels are:**
 - a. Bad call handling behaviors
 - b. High call abandonment rates
 - c. Employee turnover
 - d. All of the above

8. **Employee availability per year is 2,080 hours (40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year).**
 - a. True
 - b. False

9. **The recommended number of years to use to determine a turnover pattern is:**
 - a. One year
 - b. Five years
 - c. Six months
 - d. Three years

10. **Turnover plays a role in the challenge to staff communications centers to fully authorized levels.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

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