

The Ever-growing 9-1-1 Hiring Crisis

By Sue Pivetta

There is an elephant in the Com Center. We know the elephant is there. We walk around it—complaining about having an elephant in the Center. There isn't much room left. Being busy people, we squeeze past her, brushing up against a tail, a leg or a trunk. And for all we know, there is a leg or a tail or a trunk in the way. But it's really huge, with many parts connected to another part. The entire thing is what is getting in our way even though we can only see what we bump into. In order to get the thing out, we first must acknowledge her largeness—only then will we be able to figure out how to move her.

The “elephant” is the challenge of recruiting, hiring, training and retention. A great number of Com Centers are unable to attract quality people. Many attract applications that cannot pass the hiring process. A smaller number of Com Centers have applicants, only to hire but lose quantities in training. Like the elephant, many people have an idea of what new phenomenon this is based on what part of the elephant they bump into. Each will have a perception of the problem based on what part you're trying to squeeze past.

Is the elephant the pay, or is she an inadequate hiring test? Or how about the difficulty of the work, the type of people applying, Generation X, competition, shift work, something the industry is doing, or not doing? What you perceive is probably based on what part of the elephant you have bumped up against. Very few have the whole picture: the whole picture could be overwhelming—big.

Three Reasons the Hiring Crisis is Particularly Painful to Emergency Communications

- 1) Recruiting, testing and training cost real money—and funds are tight. Agencies cannot afford to continue to hire and lose people. Most likely the agency is hiring to fill a vacancy being covered by overtime. Significant amounts of overtime could create more vacancies—creating more hiring, and so the rat chases his tail, and here we go again.
- 2) This isn't fast food where you put on your apron, follow someone around for a week and then become useful. Training is lengthy—trainer time is precious and must not be wasted on someone you could lose. Trainers put emotional energy into this person. If the person doesn't make it or quits, it's nerve-racking. High trainee turnover takes a significant emotional toll on the trainer and the Com Center. Burn out and negativity set in, and this affects trainee retention.
- 3) Candidates must be high caliber and intelligent. The nature of this work requires autonomy, decisions made with no direct supervision. Decisions that could lead to injury, death, lawsuits. Com Centers must be very picky about who they hire—they owe that to the public—but there are many jobs the public can choose from.

Sounds very big, doesn't it? Still, those who have the power to make the needed changes stay

un-convinced! Solutions that require funding (pay increase, recruiting, marketing, agency review) are tabled for easier fixes such as new hiring tests. Agencies scurry to deal with a tail wagging in the face, or a foot on the console, or a drippy snout, while this enormous challenge stands firm.

What is needed is a whole systems approach by leadership. It is important to recognize that Com Centers are not alone in the hiring crisis: that the economy is good, that people are working, and therefore the work must be attractive to those looking for work. Recognition of this problem is multi-faceted. There is no one problem and there is no one solution.

The Public Perception of This Work

In an effort to view the problem from all angles we can isolate extremities. Consider this actual letter to Ann Landers:

Those on the other end of 9-1-1 call are real heroes

Dear Ann Landers:

I would like to bring your attention the hard working people at 911. ...a combination of workhorse and saint... the average person cannot envision the physical, emotional and mental anguish, missed meals, lost sleep and neglected social activities, in addition to all the tragedy we deal with—day in and day out. ...satisfaction when we save a life...we are the unseen heroes.

Is this a true representation of the work? And if it is, why are we wondering why good people don't apply? Take another look. Are they heroes? Who would sign up for physical, emotional, and mental anguish, and missed meals for average wages and crummy hours? So, do they hang in there for those times when they save a life, or do they save lives continually—and that's why they miss meals and have no social life?

We say *these* new hires (unlike the old new hires?) come into training not understanding the reality of the work. How could they not? The public perception of 9-1-1 is one word: stressful. Or is it that those who do understand the real work, don't apply. Others understand but expect to be a tragic hero—only to find out the only tragedy is not the work, but the pay, hours, dysfunctional atmosphere and lack of leadership.

Not represented are the real rewards: security, satisfaction, helping others, camaraderie, stimulation, great benefits, interesting work. People should come to work at 9-1-1 because it's a good job. But when we represent the work as it is in the media, they will still come, but who is coming and who is not? The solution involves a cultural change. If indeed the work is that difficult, what needs to change? If good people are not coming, what can be done to attract them? Consider this:

For Sale: High priced vehicle, no brakes, careens out of control,

difficult to drive, looks tragic, a must see.

Generation X meets Generation S (Stuck)

Generation X, those young people who don't want to work that hard, have different values and a choice of jobs. Generation X won't do crummy shifts and overtime, they want to play. They won't take the abuse we did (the nerve). Is the predicament Generation X (the elephant) or is it the ability to attract Generation X (enticing the elephant)? It is so impossible to create a workplace where Generation X (or any other generation) can say, "I have *the* most incredible hours!"

No matter what argument is offered (money, time), it's not a matter of *doing* change, it's a matter of being flexible enough to *consider* change. How many Com Centers have considered on-site daycare? Casinos are doing it for their shift workers. What about part timers? Volunteers?

Case study: "I just hired a great dispatcher away from a Com Center. She loved her work but had two little girls and wanted to work part time. She negotiated her schedule with me. The day she left, her Center asked her if she could work part-time. For a year she was told they wouldn't DO part time."

Think about this: Where there is rigidity, things *do* snap.

Competition With Business

People can make better money doing less demanding work than this. The simple solution is: offer more money or incentives and attract better candidates. An agency gets the people they deserve. Police agencies have full time recruiters, relocation incentives, hiring bonuses. No money for this? Let's say the Com Center toilet overflows and shorts out the entire Com Center—find the funds? Of course, is this no less a crisis?

Raise the pay and you will attract greater quantity and higher-level candidates. Increase the pay and you reflect value: high risk, intelligence, skill, stress, liability, demands, expertise, and aptitude. We need to come to our senses. We don't get it—they get it! That is why they don't apply or stay. If the industry does not value the work accordingly, why should we expect the people we hire to? Intelligent workers demand deliverables, not lip service. Higher pay equals one more reason to apply, and one less reason to quit. It's good business.

Conclusion

This article is intended to reveal a particular type of tunnel vision busy professionals have. Once this system-blindness is understood, Com Centers can begin to see their challenges in relationship to the entire Emergency Communications culture. As an industry, the negative perception of the work can only change when there is a conscious effort to re-package the profession. Things must be done. The media can be involved in creating a more realistic observation of the work, but we must be the impetus.

It is possible that you have invited the elephant into your Com Center with current practices, for example, a residency requirement in a town of 17,000 people? How can you expect to dig up many qualified people to test within the city limits? Do you insist on non-essential minimum job

requirements? For example, one agency required employees to have the same vision as police—why? Are job tests pass/fail when the skill could be taught, for example typing? Keyboarding and data entry, such as required for CAD, can be taught. An otherwise wonderful candidate could be lost when a few weeks of extra practice while in training could result in a good candidate. Of course you want to hire someone who already holds these skills, but what if your best candidate does not?

Creativity is needed. An agency in Florida is now offering a ‘relocation fee’ for laterals. What *about* daycare? Part-timers, volunteers for non-emergency lines or data entry could make a difference—ideas? 9-1-1 college training programs are popping up all over the world. Do you have one in your area? Allow the scared-but-interested folks a chance to prepare for the work. How about a vision retreat? The answers to your challenges are within your own people and a facilitated retreat may be needed to focus on solutions. Think different.

In the event a realistic observation of the work reveals a place no one would *want* to work, it may be necessary to begin the work of transforming the Com Center. Take a hard look at the hiring, training, evaluation processes, the practices and traditions. Purge history, target negativity and so forth. But again, not small fixes. In order to remove large obstacles, tremendous time, effort and costs may be needed. The alternative is to stumble around the thing and feed it until it grows so enormous there’s no room to breathe.

Question: So, what do you feed an elephant in your Com Center? Answer: Anything it wants!

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