

**Recruitment And Retainment Challenges Affecting
Volunteer Fire Services in Ontario, Canada**

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Interview with SME Prof. Nathan P. Broman: <https://youtu.be/7u7eVxiZgJo>

(See video description for SME Bio)

Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: D. Jake Lawrence

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Abstract

Across Ontario, volunteer fire departments face formidable challenges in recruiting and retaining their desired number of personnel. My research investigated the multifaceted causes of these recruitment and retention issues, examining both the tangible and cultural factors influencing potential recruits' decisions. Through descriptive research methods, data from various sources was collated, highlighting the impact of lifestyle, financial commitments, and deep-rooted cultural barriers on volunteer firefighters. The study revealed that the on-call nature of firefighting, combined with the relatively modest compensation, emerges as a primary deterrent for potential recruits. Additionally, cultural impediments, such as the prevailing "macho culture" and instances of sexism and racism in some departments, further hinder retention, especially among women and minorities. Modern societal shifts, like the need to commute for employment due to limited job opportunities and surging real estate prices, compound these challenges, making the traditional model of a volunteer firefighter less tenable in contemporary Ontario. While fire departments have innovated their advertising strategies and harnessed online platforms to attract recruits, these measures offer partial remedies. The research highlighted the need for broader systemic interventions, suggesting that transformative solutions may require collaborative initiatives from higher governmental levels.

1.0 Recruitment and Retainment Challenges Affecting Volunteer Fire Services in Ontario, Canada

In the vast expanse of Ontario, volunteer firefighters stand as the backbone of many communities, providing essential emergency services often with limited resources and recognition. While they constitute most firefighters in the province, these volunteers grapple with a myriad of challenges, from the tangible demands of the role to deep-rooted cultural barriers. The evolving landscape of firefighting, marked by an expanded role in community engagement, emergency response, and education, further intensifies these challenges. This research delves into the intricate dynamics of recruitment and retention, shedding light on the economic, geographical, and cultural factors that influence potential recruits' decisions. Additionally, it explores innovative strategies employed by fire departments, such as leveraging digital platforms and "double-hatting," while emphasizing the need for systemic interventions and collaboration. By offering a comprehensive analysis, this study aims to provide insights into the complexities faced by volunteer fire departments in Ontario and chart a path forward with actionable recommendations. The central questions guiding this research are:

1. What factors deter potential recruits from joining volunteer fire departments in Ontario, and how do these factors contribute to retention challenges?
2. Are the demands—time, lifestyle, and financial—of training and emergency response acting as deterrents?
3. What modern approaches are being employed to make volunteer opportunities more attractive?

2.0 Literature Review

"The efficacy and efficiency of fire departments hinge significantly on their staffing levels. A report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) in the U.S. underscores this, noting that a four-person firefighting crew can complete essential tasks 30% faster than a two-person crew and 25% faster than a three-person crew (Glanz, 2020). The implications are clear: more hands-on deck can lead to more lives and property saved. However, the challenges of maintaining these staffing levels, especially in volunteer fire departments, are multifaceted. While they are expected to undergo rigorous and frequent training, volunteer firefighters often receive minimal compensation for their efforts (Pritchard, 2017). This disparity between effort and reward can deter potential recruits.

The Northwest Territories Firefighter Retention and Retainment Toolkit, though crafted for a different geographical context, offers insights applicable to Ontario. It emphasizes the importance of targeted outreach, suggesting that understanding and addressing the unique needs of potential recruits can lead to more effective recruitment strategies (Dewar, 2021). Diversifying recruitment efforts can not only enhance the skill set within the department but also foster a more inclusive environment. The International Association of Fire Chiefs has also highlighted the importance of breaking traditional recruitment habits to address the challenges of volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention (Cagle, 2022). Similarly, the Fire Service Women of Ontario emphasizes the significance of including women in the fire service, which can play a pivotal role in addressing retention issues (Government of Canada, 2022).

Modern recruitment strategies, especially those targeting younger demographics, are evolving. The use of social media, online videos, and interactive content can appeal to potential recruits, emphasizing the challenging and rewarding nature of firefighting (Dewar, 2021).

Furthermore, terminology matters. Referring to positions as "paid on-call" rather than "volunteer" can provide a more accurate representation of the role, potentially attracting more candidates (Pritchard, 2017). The Ontario Association of Fire Chiefs has also acknowledged the challenges of attracting and retaining volunteer firefighters, emphasizing the need for innovative solutions (Frangione, 2021).

Yet, the challenges don't end with recruitment. The time and financial commitments associated with training can be daunting. With training sessions spanning months and often scheduled during evenings and weekends, achieving a work-life balance becomes a herculean task (Pritchard, 2017). The expanded roles of firefighters, which now include EMS response and hazardous materials handling, further compound these challenges (McKearney & Boyle, 2020). The financial implications for fire departments are also significant. Training a recruit can cost between \$2800 and \$4400 in wages alone, with equipment costs adding another \$3800 (McKearney & Boyle, 2020).

The broader challenges of recruitment and retention are not unique to Canada. Agencies worldwide, as noted by FireRescue1, are grappling with doing more with fewer resources, further emphasizing the global nature of this issue (Klink, 2021). Climate change, with its increasing frequency of extreme weather events, especially wildfires, intensifies the demand for well-trained firefighters. Regions prone to wildfires, exacerbated by changing climate patterns, underscore the urgency of addressing firefighter shortages (Aziz, 2023).

The practice of "double-hatting," where firefighters serve both as full-time firefighters in one municipality and volunteers in another, has been introduced in Ontario as a potential solution to address staffing challenges. This approach allows firefighters to serve in multiple capacities, maximizing their expertise and availability. However, while it offers a potential solution to staffing

shortages, it also brings its own set of complexities, including potential conflicts of interest and workload management (Walker, 2018). Insights from experts like Nathan P. Broman suggest that while overarching themes exist, solutions must be tailored to specific community needs and dynamics (Lawrence, 2023).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The methodology for this study was anchored in a mixed-method approach, integrating descriptive research with qualitative insights. This design was chosen to offer a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by volunteer fire departments in Ontario. The descriptive research method provided a comprehensive snapshot of the current landscape, capturing the nuances of the evolving firefighting environment, especially in the context of recruitment and retention. This method was particularly beneficial in understanding the broader trends and patterns, offering a foundational base upon which the subsequent qualitative analysis was built. The qualitative component, on the other hand, aimed to delve deeper, offering a more granular exploration of specific issues, potential solutions, and the lived experiences of those in the field. This approach was instrumental in capturing the intricate details that often remain obscured in purely descriptive studies. Through in-depth interviews and discussions, the qualitative method illuminated the personal stories, challenges, and aspirations of firefighters, shedding light on the human element behind the statistics.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data was sourced through a detailed interview with Nathan P. Broman, a recognized expert in the field of firefighting (Lawrence, 2023). This interview was conducted via a digital platform, lasting approximately 30 minutes. While it was structured with predefined

questions, it was intentionally designed to be open-ended, allowing Mr. Broman the freedom to share his extensive insights and experiences. Specific themes explored during the interview included recruitment challenges, retention strategies, and the evolving role of firefighters in modern times. The richness of the dialogue facilitated by this approach was invaluable, shedding light on the intricate nuances and complexities of part-time firefighter recruitment and retention broadly. Complementing the primary data, an exhaustive review of existing literature was undertaken. This involved a thorough examination of a diverse range of sources, from academic journals that provided scholarly insights to online articles and reports that offered practical perspectives. The selection of sources was driven by their relevance and authority on the subject. A significant emphasis was placed on literature that delved into modern recruitment strategies, which were invaluable in understanding the nuanced shifts in recruitment terminology and its potential impact on perception and appeal.

3.3 Data Analysis

Upon gathering the primary and secondary data, the first step involved organizing the information into coherent categories. This categorization was based on themes such as recruitment challenges, retention strategies, technological advancements in recruitment, and the evolving role of firefighters. For the qualitative data obtained from the interview, key insights, anecdotes, and perspectives shared by Mr. Broman were highlighted and cross-referenced with the secondary data to identify overlaps and discrepancies. The secondary data, primarily sourced from academic journals, reports, and other publications, underwent a content analysis. This process entailed a systematic review of the literature to extract relevant statistics, findings, and trends. Quantitative data, such as statistics were analyzed to understand the broader patterns and implications. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted to juxtapose the modern recruitment strategies

against traditional methods. This helped in discerning the effectiveness and relevance of various strategies in the current recruitment landscape. Throughout the analysis, a conscious effort was made to maintain objectivity, ensuring that personal biases did not influence the interpretation of data. The findings from both the primary and secondary data were then synthesized to draw meaningful conclusions and recommendations, ensuring that the research objectives were comprehensively addressed.

3.4 Limitations

It is essential for readers and stakeholders to bear these limitations in mind when interpreting the findings and recommendations of this research, ensuring that they are applied judiciously and contextually. One of the primary constraints was the limited timeframe within which the research was conducted. This temporal restriction inevitably curtailed the scope of primary data collection, particularly in terms of the number and diversity of interviews that could be conducted. While the insights from the interview with Nathan P. Broman were invaluable, the study would have undoubtedly benefited from a broader spectrum of perspectives, especially from volunteer firefighters stationed across various parts of Ontario. Such a diverse range of voices would have provided a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges and intricacies of recruitment and retention. Furthermore, the geographical focus of this research was exclusively on Ontario. While this allowed for a deep dive into the specific challenges faced by volunteer fire departments in this province, it also means that the findings and conclusions drawn may not be directly applicable or generalizable to other regions, provinces, or countries. Different regions may have unique socio-economic, cultural, and logistical factors that influence the dynamics of volunteer firefighting, and these were not explored in the current study.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Recruitment Challenges

Economic and geographical factors have emerged as significant barriers to recruitment. Although rising real estate prices in major cities of Ontario have led many individuals to migrate to rural surrounding municipalities, potentially providing a larger recruitment pool, most of the employment opportunities are still concentrated in urban areas. This geographical shift often results in these individuals being located far from their employment, which in turn affects their ability to respond promptly to emergency calls as volunteer firefighters. Additionally, the increasing emphasis on rigorous training and professionalism in firefighting has raised the bar for potential recruits, making the recruitment process more challenging than before.

4.2 Retention Difficulties

Retention of volunteer firefighters remains a significant concern. Many of these firefighters, especially those with other full-time professions, find it challenging to maintain a balance between their professional commitments, firefighting duties, and personal lives. Furthermore, the fire service culture in some departments, particularly in smaller rural areas, has been historically dominated by a "macho culture", and tend to be less professionally developed than departments in larger urban areas. This culture, combined with instances of sexism and racism, has posed significant challenges to retention, leading to difficulties in maintaining a diverse and inclusive environment.

4.3 Modern Recruitment Strategies

In response to the evolving challenges, fire departments have been proactive in adopting modern recruitment strategies. A significant trend observed is the increasing reliance on digital platforms, especially social media, to reach out to potential recruits. These platforms offer an

interactive and dynamic medium to showcase the life of a firefighter, resonating particularly with the younger generation. Efforts to diversify recruitment, targeting more women and minorities, have also been observed. Furthermore, the practice of "double-hatting" has been introduced as a novel recruitment strategy, where full-time firefighters who work out of town also serve as volunteers in their home municipalities.

4.4 Evolving Role of Firefighters

The role of firefighters in today's world has seen significant evolution. Beyond just combating fires, they are often the first responders to a myriad of emergencies, ranging from medical crises to natural disasters. Their responsibilities have grown to encompass not only emergency response but also proactive community engagement and education. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, especially wildfires, has further highlighted the critical role firefighters play in community safety.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Recruitment Challenges in Broader Context

The migration of individuals to rural municipalities, driven by economic factors such as rising real estate prices in urban centers, is reflective of a larger socio-economic trend observed not just in Ontario, but globally. For volunteer firefighting, it means potential recruits might be geographically distant from their primary places of employment, which could hinder their ability to respond promptly to emergency calls. This geographical challenge is further exacerbated by the modern work culture, where individuals often have long working hours, making it even more difficult to commit to additional responsibilities like firefighting. Furthermore, the world of firefighting has seen a paradigm shift in its expectations. The increasing emphasis on rigorous training and professionalism indicates a move towards standardizing and elevating the role of

firefighters, even if they are volunteers. This professionalization, while crucial for ensuring safety and efficacy, raises the bar for entry. Potential recruits now face a steeper learning curve, which could be daunting for many, especially when considering the voluntary nature of the role. The economic aspect of volunteer firefighting also plays a pivotal role in recruitment challenges. The disparity between the effort and reward is not just a matter of financial compensation but also pertains to the recognition and value associated with the role. In a society where professions are often valued based on monetary compensation, the minimal or sometimes non-existent financial rewards for volunteer firefighters can lead to a perception that the role is of lesser importance or value. This perception can deter potential recruits, who might feel that the sacrifices they make - in terms of time, effort, and sometimes even personal safety - are not adequately recognized or compensated.

5.2 Retention and Cultural Impediments

At its core, retention is influenced by the overall experience and sense of fulfillment derived from the role. While firefighting is inherently demanding, the added pressures of juggling it with other professional and personal responsibilities can make the role particularly taxing for volunteers. This is further accentuated by the unpredictable nature of emergencies, which can disrupt the daily routines of volunteers, leading to increased stress and potential burnout. The financial aspect cannot be overlooked. While volunteer firefighters are driven primarily by a sense of duty and community service, the minimal compensation can sometimes be a demotivating factor, especially when they see their counterparts in other emergency services receiving better compensation for similar risks and responsibilities. This disparity can lead to feelings of being undervalued, which can, over time, erode commitment and dedication. However, one of the most significant impediments to retention is the prevailing culture within some fire departments. The

historical dominance of a "macho culture" in certain departments, particularly in smaller rural areas, creates an environment that can be unwelcoming or even hostile to individuals who do not fit the traditional mold. Instances of sexism and racism are not just isolated incidents but are indicative of deeper systemic issues that need to be addressed. Such a culture not only alienates members from diverse backgrounds but also deprives the department of diverse perspectives and skills that are crucial for effective community engagement and service. It's essential to understand that fostering an inclusive environment is not just a matter of principle but also of practicality. A diverse and inclusive fire department is better equipped to understand and address the unique needs of a diverse community. Moreover, in an era where community engagement and public trust are paramount, having a fire department that reflects the community's diversity can enhance public confidence and cooperation.

5.3 Modern Recruitment Strategies and Their Implications

The shift towards digital platforms for recruitment is not just a tactical move but a strategic response to the changing dynamics of communication and information consumption. As society becomes increasingly interconnected through digital means, traditional methods of outreach may no longer resonate with potential recruits, especially the younger generation. By leveraging platforms like social media, fire departments can tap into networks and communities that were previously inaccessible. This not only widens the pool of potential recruits but also allows for more targeted and personalized outreach. Diversifying recruitment efforts is a testament to the evolving understanding of the benefits of diversity in emergency services. Historically, firefighting has been a male-dominated profession, with certain stereotypes associated with it. However, as societal perceptions change and the value of diverse perspectives becomes more recognized, there's a growing impetus to challenge these stereotypes and create a more inclusive firefighting

community. Targeting women and minorities is not just about filling quotas; it's about harnessing the unique skills, experiences, and perspectives they bring, which can enhance problem-solving, community engagement, and overall effectiveness. The change in terminology, such as the shift from "volunteer" to "paid on-call," is more than just semantics. It's an acknowledgment of the value and contribution of these firefighters. By providing a more accurate representation of the role, it challenges preconceived notions and can shift public perception. This, in turn, can make the profession more appealing to potential recruits who might have been deterred by the perceived lack of compensation or recognition. The strategy of "double-hatting" is indeed innovative, but it's essential to consider its broader implications. On the one hand, it maximizes the expertise and availability of firefighters, ensuring that communities have access to experienced professionals. On the other hand, it raises questions about workload management, potential conflicts of interest, and the long-term sustainability of such an approach. While it offers a solution to immediate staffing challenges, it's crucial to consider the potential strain on firefighters who serve in multiple capacities and the possible impact on their well-being and job satisfaction.

5.4 Evolving Role of Firefighters and Community Expectations

The role of firefighters has undergone a significant transformation over the years, reflecting the changing needs and expectations of the communities they serve. Historically, the primary responsibility of firefighters was to combat fires. However, in today's multifaceted world, they are often the first line of defense against a myriad of emergencies, from medical crises to natural disasters. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, especially wildfires, has further elevated the role of firefighters. With climate change exacerbating risks, communities are looking to firefighters not just for response but for guidance on mitigation and preparedness. This places an added responsibility on firefighters to stay updated with the latest knowledge, techniques, and

technologies to effectively address these evolving challenges. This expanded role signifies a broader shift in societal expectations, where firefighters are no longer seen as mere emergency responders but as pillars of community safety and resilience. As communities become more diverse and interconnected, there's a growing expectation for firefighters to be more than just emergency responders. They are now seen as community ambassadors, educators, and role models. Their involvement in community events, school programs, and local initiatives is not just about emergency preparedness but about building trust, fostering community cohesion, and promoting a culture of safety. They are now seen as multi-skilled professionals capable of handling a range of situations. This shift in perception, while positive, also brings with it heightened expectations. The community expects firefighters to be well-trained, adaptable, and responsive to a broader range of emergencies. This has implications for recruitment and training, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach that equips firefighters with a diverse skill set.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on my research, I have the following recommendations:

1. **Enhanced Compensation and Incentives:** The role of a volunteer firefighter is demanding, both physically and mentally. To acknowledge their dedication and sacrifices, municipalities should consider enhancing compensation packages. This could encompass stipends, tax breaks, educational scholarships, or health benefits. For instance, offering tuition assistance for firefighters pursuing higher education can be a significant draw. By providing these incentives, municipalities can make the role more attractive, potentially increasing recruitment and retention rates.
2. **Targeted Recruitment Campaigns:** In today's digital age, the younger generation is increasingly reliant on digital platforms for information and communication.

Municipalities can tap into this trend by investing in targeted recruitment campaigns on platforms like social media, online videos, and interactive websites. By showcasing real-life experiences, testimonials, and the benefits of being a firefighter, these campaigns can resonate with potential recruits and dispel any misconceptions.

3. **Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives:** A diverse fire department is a strong one. By actively seeking to recruit women, minorities, and other underrepresented groups, fire departments can benefit from a range of perspectives and skills. Municipalities should host community outreach events, partner with organizations promoting diversity, and ensure that their recruitment materials are inclusive and representative of the community they serve.
4. **Cultural Sensitivity Training:** The fire service's historical "macho culture" can be a deterrent for many potential recruits. To combat this, municipalities should mandate cultural sensitivity and inclusivity training for all members. This training can address unconscious biases, promote understanding, and foster a culture of respect and acceptance. Over time, such initiatives can transform the internal culture of fire departments, making them more welcoming for all.
5. **Flexible Training Schedules:** Many volunteer firefighters juggle multiple commitments. Recognizing this challenge, municipalities should offer flexible training schedules. This could mean providing online training modules that firefighters can complete at their own pace, hosting weekend workshops, or offering condensed training programs during evenings. Such flexibility can reduce the barriers to entry and make it easier for individuals to commit.
6. **Community Engagement:** Firefighters are community heroes. Beyond their emergency response duties, they play a crucial role in educating the public about fire safety.

Municipalities should facilitate and promote community engagement events, such as open houses, school visits, and fire safety workshops. These events not only enhance the image of the fire department but also serve as indirect recruitment tools by sparking interest in the profession.

7. **Review of "Double-Hatting" Strategy:** The "double-hatting" strategy, where full-time firefighters serve as volunteers in their home municipalities, is innovative. However, its implications need thorough review. Municipalities should assess the effectiveness of this strategy, considering factors like potential burnout, response times, and overall job satisfaction. Regular reviews can ensure that the strategy remains beneficial in the long run.
8. **Infrastructure and Equipment Investment:** Safety and efficiency are paramount in firefighting. To ensure that volunteer firefighters can perform their duties effectively, municipalities should invest in modern equipment and facilities. This includes the latest firefighting equipment, safety gear, and state-of-the-art training facilities. Such investments not only enhance the safety of firefighters but also make the role more appealing to potential recruits.
9. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Open communication is key to understanding and addressing the concerns of firefighters. Municipalities should establish regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys, focus groups, or town hall meetings. These platforms allow firefighters to voice their concerns, provide suggestions, and feel heard, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging.
10. **Collaboration with Other Municipalities:** Collaboration can be a powerful tool. Given that many challenges faced by fire departments are not unique to any single municipality,

there's immense value in collaborating with neighboring municipalities. This could involve sharing best practices, pooling resources for joint training sessions, or even conducting joint recruitment drives. Such collaborations can lead to cost savings, shared expertise, and a more unified approach to addressing challenges.

7.0 Conclusion

The role of volunteer firefighters in Ontario is both vital and evolving. As our research has highlighted, fire departments face multifaceted challenges in recruiting and retaining these essential personnel. Economic shifts, changing societal norms, and the increasing demands of the profession have all contributed to these challenges. However, with adversity comes innovation. Fire departments have begun to adopt modern recruitment strategies, emphasize diversity and inclusion, and seek ways to better support their members.

My findings demonstrate the importance of understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by volunteer firefighters. Enhanced compensation, targeted recruitment campaigns, cultural sensitivity training, and community engagement are just a few of the strategies that can make a significant difference. The introduction of practices like "double-hatting" and the increasing reliance on digital platforms for recruitment further highlight the dynamic nature of the profession and the need for adaptability.

While this research provides valuable insights, it also points to potential areas for further study. The long-term implications of strategies like "double-hatting" remain to be fully understood. Similarly, the effectiveness of digital recruitment campaigns, especially in reaching diverse demographics, warrants deeper exploration. Additionally, understanding the specific challenges faced by women and minorities in the fire service can provide a foundation for more targeted and effective inclusion initiatives.

The role of volunteer firefighters is more critical than ever, especially in the face of increasing extreme weather events and the broader challenges posed by climate change. As municipalities in Ontario and beyond grapple with recruitment and retention challenges, it is my hope that this research serves as a foundation for informed decision-making and future studies. The safety and well-being of our communities depend on the dedication and expertise of these brave individuals, and it is incumbent upon us to support and empower them in every way possible.

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