Law Enforcement Communication Center Turnover

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Abstract

Law enforcement agencies across the United States are experiencing a problem retaining employees in their communications centers. This problem appears to be shared by Florida law enforcement agencies as well. Information will be sought in an effort to identify any common factors in the attrition problem from the perspective of the employee. A review of exit interview data and surveys of operators and managers may result in information that could be beneficial to agency managers. It is the goal of this research to attempt to identify areas that management can focus on in the future to enhance longevity of communications employees.

Introduction

For some time across the United States, the problem of attrition has been an issue in law enforcement and emergency communication centers. A study has shown that the national average attrition rate for communication centers is 17% (APCO Project Retains, 2005). Estimates indicate that across the United States there are 16,612 local police and sheriff's departments, 49 state police agencies and scores of special districts. There are also an estimated 13,000 fire agencies. Using the above estimates, Dispatch Monthly estimates a total of approximately 195,791 public safety dispatchers nation wide. (Dispatch Monthly 2006)

This attrition problem appears to be a common issue as well in Florida law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement managers are tasked with providing the best services possible with many fiscal limitations. With budget constraints and increased work loads, it is important that managers continually assess their processes to ensure efficiency.

Attrition is costly to any organization. Employees are recruited, hired, and trained to perform tasks. Law enforcement agencies invest in each new employee that is hired. When that employee leaves after a short period, that investment is lost. A review of the Hernando County Sheriff's Office 2006-2007 Annual budget indicates that 87.2% of budgeted dollars are for salaries and benefits for employees. (HCSO 2006-2007 Budget).

This research will attempt to find any common factors that may exist with communications employees from a sampling of agencies that may give managers an avenue to pursue in order to improve the attrition issue.

Methods

The methods used in this research project were designed to focus on the communications employees and what they as a group indicate as important to longevity. Surveys were used to identify what factors are critical to retention in the eyes of the communication employees themselves. These surveys were completed by those who are currently employed in Central Florida sheriff's office communications centers. The choice of using sheriff's offices in the Central Florida area was because the author is employed by a sheriff's office and the responsibilities of the communication center employees are very similar within the agencies chosen.

A review of exit interview survey data was also conducted within the author's home agency which listed reasons for communications employee's departure. A review of the APCO International study, Project Retains was conducted as well as information available on the subject of retention in the private sector in print media. This data was considered in the communications employee's surveys.

A questionnaire for communications managers was also developed using the same resource material. This questionnaire resulted in a list of ten questions that were presented to managers in an interview format. This questionnaire was important to this research to validate the similarities between agencies surveyed and also what the agencies may be doing differently. The manager's questionnaire covered the following issues:

- Number of budgeted positions
- 12 or 8 hour shifts
- Attrition rate over the last three years (Managers were only asked if their respective agency was above or below the national average of 17%)
- Pay scale
- Length of training program
- Type of training, i.e. "On the job," "classroom," or a combination
- Do communications employees rotate duties
- Are any part-time personnel used
- Are exit interviews/surveys used
- Common reasons for separation
  (See appendix A)

When determining the targeted agencies to participate, the author felt that a geographic sampling would be more effective that choosing agencies specifically by size. The geographic area will also reflect employees that agencies are in competition to hire and retain. After the initial literature review, it appears that similar concerns are present nation wide; however local data should better serve law enforcement agencies in Central Florida.

Contact was established with the communications managers and human resources representatives of the following agencies:

- Hernando County Sheriff's Office (250 certified)
- Citrus County Sheriff's Office (243 certified)
- Pasco County Sheriff's Office (736 certified)
- Sumter County Sheriff's Office (139 certified)
- Lake County Sheriff's Office (453 certified)
  (Note) Citrus and Hernando Counties contract corrections to a private company, resulting in lower numbers of certified officers. (FDLE, 2006)

The purpose of this research was explained to the respective managers and each was requested to answer the questions listed in the manager's questionnaire. Four agencies agreed to participate in this research and one declined. To maintain anonymity the results will be reported using only Agency A, B, C, etc.

The survey developed for communications employees was designed in a fashion to determine areas that were important to the individual. Again, information obtained from APCO International's Project Retains, print media, and exit interviews/surveys were used for this purpose. The areas that were found to be consistent were included in the survey. The survey was distributed by e-mail to the agencies listed above and distributed by the respective managers to their personnel. The survey covered the following issues:

- Length of service
- Adequacy of training
- Adequacy of technology
- Level of stress
- Shifts worked during training
- Adequate time allowed during training to learn the technology
- Adequate time allowed during training to learn departmental procedures
- Perception of position as a job or career
- What is most important when considering long term goals
- Each participant was asked to list what they feel is the most important issue that would result in job satisfaction and a long career.
  (See Appendix B)

Results

The communications managers were initially contacted and requested to participate in the research project. Those that agreed were asked the series of questions that were listed earlier. The results are listed below:

Agency A

- 50 budgeted positions.
- 12 Hour shifts.
- Attrition rate above national average for the past three years.
- Starting salary $25,300.00.
- Initial training broken into several segments lasting approximately 1 year.
- First week of training in the classroom.
- Recently began rotating duties between dispatching and call taking.
- Uses three part-time employees answering phones and miscellaneous duties.
- Exit interviews are conducted by human resources.
- Main reason for recent departure has been a move of communications center from one side of the county to the other resulting in a long commute for many.

Agency B

- 40 budgeted positions.
- Twelve hour shifts.
- Attrition rate above the national average for past three years.
- Starting salary $23,072.00.
- Initial training program lasts approximately six months.
- Training is on the job.
- Dispatchers rotate call taking duties.
- Exit interviews and surveys are requested, but not required.
- Training issues and stress are listed as main reason for departure.

Agency C

- 20 budgeted positions.
- Dispatchers work twelve hour shifts. Call takers work eight hour shifts.
- Attrition rate above the national average for last three years.
- Starting pay for call takers $23,150.00 and $26,817.00 for dispatchers.
- Call takers are trained one to two months. Dispatchers six months.
- Training is all "on the job."
- Dispatchers and call takers do not share duties.
- Part-time personnel are used. Two current positions. (Difficult to fill)
- Exit interviews are conducted.
- Reason for departure is shift work and stress.

Agency D

- 46 budgeted positions.
- Twelve hour shifts.
- Attrition over last three years reported as "about average."
- Starting salary $22,776.00. (Note) a program has been instituted by Agency D that contributes to a deferred compensation plan for communications employees. This plan allows the employees to become vested after four years.
- 352 total hours in phases
- Dispatchers and call takers do not rotate duties.
- Agency does not conduct exit interviews.
- Most leave their position for sworn service, moving out of area, and few leave for dissatisfaction.

Discussion

The response by the communications/human resource managers was important to this study as a whole. During the interviews, it was determined that the participating agencies all are facing similar challenges to recruit and retain employees. The agencies all have similar responsibilities and are constantly assessing their processes to improve retention. During the author's review of exit interviews/surveys, a common theme appeared to be consistent throughout with employees departing within their first year of employment. The departing employees seemed to make reference to initial training being difficult and stressful. Suggestions were listed in the exit interviews/surveys that a portion of the initial training be changed to a classroom setting and possibly to eight hour shifts to lighten the stress level.

Upon completing the interviews with communications managers, it appears that a variety of approaches has been taken by the participating agencies for initial training and little improvement has resulted.

An interesting fact discovered by the manager's interviews was that Agency D reports that their attrition rate is at the national average. The other participating agencies report being above the national average. When comparing procedures and processes, it appears the only significant difference is that Agency D has implemented a benefit enhancement for their employees.

Employee Surveys

On making contact with the participating agency's communications managers, each manager was asked to distribute a survey to their employees. The survey was then e-mailed to each manager and after review, they were distributed for completion. (See Appendix B) Ninety three surveys were returned for this research and are listed below: (Note) the percentages were rounded to the nearest percent and some questions were left unanswered resulting in a minor variance in accuracy.

Results

- Length of service-
  Agency A
  38% less than 2 years
  27% 2 to 5 years
  8% 6 to 10 years
  27% 11 years or more

  Agency B
  46% less than 2 years
  42% 2 to 5 years
  8% 6 to 10 years
  4% 11 or more years

  Agency C
  27% 2 years or less
  33% 2 to 5 years
  27% 6 to 10 years
  13% 11 years or more

  Agency D
  56% less than 2 years
  13% 2 to 5 years
  19% 6 to 10 years
  19% 11 years or more

- Was initial training adequate?
  Agency A
  51% yes
  46% no

  Agency B
  96% yes
  0% no
  4% n/a

  Agency C
  93% yes
  7% no

  Agency D
  88% yes
  6% no

- Is the technology used for your position adequate for the job?
  Agency A
  78% yes
  19% no

  Agency B
  88% yes
  12% no

  Agency C
  80% yes
  13% no

  Agency D
  88% yes
  12% no

- How would you rate job related stress for your position?

Agency A	**Agency B**
8% low	0% low
27% moderate	50% moderate
43% high	38% high
19% very high	8% very high

Agency C	**Agency D**
0% low	12% low
20% moderate	44% moderate
33% high	31% high
47% very high	12% very high

- What shift did you work during your training period?

Agency A	**Agency B**
30% 8 hour	8% 8 hour
0% 10 hour	0% 10 hour
62% 12 hour	79% 12 hour
5% combination	8% combination

Agency C	**Agency D**
33% 8 hour	19% 8 hour
0% 10 hour	0% 10 hour
67% 12 hour	31% 12 hour
0% combination	50% combination

- During your initial training period, did you have adequate opportunity to learn the technology used by your agency?

Agency A	**Agency B**
68% yes	96% yes
30% no	0% no (4% n/a)

Agency C	**Agency D**
87% yes	88% yes
13% no	12% no

- During your initial training period, did you have adequate opportunity to learn your agency's operating procedures?

Agency A	**Agency B**
57% yes	88% yes
43% no	4% no (4% n/a)

Agency C	**Agency D**
80% yes	75% yes
20% no	19% no

- Do you see your position as a job or career?

  Agency A   **Agency B**
  30% job   12% job
  70% career   88% career

  Agency C   **Agency D**
  33% job   6% job
  67% career   94% career

- When considering your long term goals, which of the following would you rank as most important to you personally? (Note) Agency A failed to complete page two of the survey leaving the last two issues with responses from only three participating agencies. The total number of responses to this question was used to determine overall percentages. Some comments were included by Agency A and will be included in the reporting of the final question.

  Agency A   **Agency B**
                                        25% salary/benefits
                                        41% opportunity for advancement
                                        0% training opportunity
                                        38% recognition/job satisfaction

  Agency C   **Agency D**
  60% salary/benefits   31% salary benefits
  7% opportunity for advancement   38% opportunity for advancement
  0% training opportunity   0% training opportunity
  33% recognition/job satisfaction   31% recognition/job satisfaction
                        .

- Please list what you personally feel is the most important issue that will result in job satisfaction and a long career with your respective agency.
  Agency A
    o Better equipment
    o Improved work environment
  Agency B
    o Advancement opportunity
    o Better communication ("a voice within the agency")
    o Recognition
    o A growing pay plan
    o Personal satisfaction
    o More positive re-enforcement
    o Improved staffing levels
    o Improved technology
    o Internet access
    o 25 year retirement
    o More training

Agency C
- o More training
- o Recognition
- o Better pay
- o Respect from road supervisors
- o Adequate staffing to allow leave time
- o Better equipment and technology

Agency D
- o Better treatment by supervisors
- o Continued training
- o Better benefits
- o 25 year retirement
- o Recognition
- o Opportunity for advancement

Discussion

While preparing the surveys for this research, consideration was given to the information that had been taken from exit interviews for over a year at the author's home agency. Project Retains also contained a "best practices" list that was also considered. Project Retains reported several factors that predicted retention. Agencies that staffed at authorized levels, recruited constantly and carefully screened to minimize turnover, managed job complexity and trained for success, and compensated competitively to limit overtime dependency and keep qualified staff. (APCO Project Retains, 2005)

When looking at the results of the survey in this project, it is important to clarify that the responses indicate that over all, forty percent (40%) of responding communications employees have two years or less service with their respective agency. Twenty-nine percent (29%) have two to five years, Fourteen percent (14%) have six to ten years, and seventeen percent (17%) have over ten years. This shows that sixty nine percent (69%) of communications employees have five years or less service. It is critical that law enforcement managers make efforts to enhance longevity of their employees. This research does appear to validate that the attrition problem has been significant within the responding agencies for some time.

The author hoped to identify those issues that the communications employees candidly provided as important to them as individuals. It appears that these issues can been seen by reviewing the results of the survey. As initially indicated in exit interviews, initial training was reviewed to determine if the agencies possibly needed to consider revising initial training. Overwhelming responses indicate that eighty-two percent (82%) of current employees feel that their initial training was adequate and not a concern relating to longevity. The format of training varied from agency to agency as did shifts worked during training. These issues do not appear to have a great bearing on the retention of

employees. Another issue addressed was the technology in place in each agency for the functions of communications. Eighty-four percent (84%) responded that the technology is sufficient for their job function. This too does not appear to be a great concern of the part of the employee. Other areas of concern were covered by the survey that addressed departmental policies and procedures and the opportunity to adequately learn them. Again, seventy-one percent (71%) were satisfied.

The next area of the survey was to determine how the employee perceived their position. Seventy-seven percent (77%) indicated that their position was their chosen career and only twenty-two percent (22%) felt it was only a job. The employees were then asked to rank by importance the following:

- Salary/benefits 32%
- Opportunity for advancement 37%
- Training 0%
- Recognition/job satisfaction 31%

Conclusion

This research has given the author a new appreciation for the position of a sheriff's office communications employee. It has shown that the employees have a position that requires constant commitment to the public we serve. An overview of the facts indicates that the agencies responding to this research have all used the accepted practices to recruit and screen potential employees. We must remain diligent with recruiting those candidates that are of the mindset of wanting a career rather than just a job. We must also become creative in the areas listed by the employees as important to them. Managers need to be mindful that every member of the team plays an important role in the process as a whole. Most agencies currently have awards systems in place to recognize employees for outstanding performance. These systems can be vital to a "healthy" work environment. The employees responding in this research indicate that recognition is important to longevity and job satisfaction.

It appears from the data that salaries and benefits are always a concern to our employees. Agencies must remain diligent to provide adequate salaries and benefits to attract and retain employees. Law enforcement agencies are in competition with private industry for qualified employees and have to work with limited budgets to fund salaries and benefits. As mentioned earlier, 87.2% of the Hernando County Sheriff's Office 2006-2007 proposed budget is allocated to salaries and benefits. Managers must take a hard look at what is best for those in their agency.

The survey results show that several employees suggest a twenty five year retirement benefit as a factor that would be a positive impact on longevity. This is a matter that will take legislation to address. Managers however can offer benefit packages to offset these concerns. One agency that participated in this

research has implemented a program in which the agency pays 1.4 percent of communications employee's salary into a retirement account separate from the Florida Retirement System. This contribution is vested after four years of service. This contribution brings the total contribution to 3 percent, matching the rate of sworn members. This agency also reported the lowest attrition rate of those surveyed and that the main reason for communications employees leaving the communications center had little to do with dissatisfaction. It is unknown if this added benefit is responsible for the lower attrition rate, but all other factors surveyed appear to be similar to other agencies.

APCO Project Retains pointed out in their suggested "best practices" that several considerations be given in the area of compensation. It appears that the agencies surveyed in this effort, differ very little from the information obtained in the national study. APCO suggested that those employees that have volunteered to work on their days off, train others, have obtained certain certifications, and those that have learned or possess additional language proficiencies, be considered for additional compensation.

Each agency surveyed have pay plans to compensate their employees that attain levels of competencies within their job descriptions. Again, managers must be creative to hear the needs of their employees and work within limited budgets to attain a level of efficiency and employee satisfaction.

Those polled by this research also indicate that their position has moderate to high stress levels. Stress is a matter that must be monitored constantly and methods must be in place to address stress related issues. Agencies have Employee Assistance Programs in place to assist as well as break rooms and quiet rooms for employees to de-stress after critical incidents. The author's agency has implemented an early intervention program to assist with the early identification of stress related issues and deal with them before they manifest into larger personal and departmental problems. This system seems to be effective by holding supervisors accountable to monitor the status of their employees.

When preparing the surveys for this research, several issues had been brought out as possible reasons for attrition in the author's home agency as well as other agencies in the Central Florida area. These concerns have been addressed by this research and have resulted in some surprising responses. The lack of continued training or insufficient initial training is often listed as a problem. The results of this survey show that an overwhelming majority indicate their initial training was adequate and opportunity for future training was not nearly as important as the other areas discussed. This indicates that the participating agencies must be on target with their training programs and are meeting the needs of their current staff.

As a result of this research, it is apparent that regardless of geographical location, law enforcement communication centers have difficulty in retaining a high percentage of communications employees. It is however possible to improve retention by hearing the concerns of employees and making efforts to meet their needs. It is also critical that the employees be educated on the limitations that each agency faces in the area of funding.

In summation, there are three major areas of concern in the perspective of the employee relating to longevity:

- Salaries and benefits
- Opportunity for advancement
- Recognition and job satisfaction.

This effort has resulted in validation of the findings of APCO International's Project Retains. There appears to be no magic answer to the attrition problem. Managers must be in tune with the needs of their employees and make efforts to meet those needs when possible. Employees must also understand that managers are limited by strict budgets and growing need for services. Communication between the employees and managers can also enhance the employee / management relationship and foster a team effort to fulfill our obligations to the public we serve.

Captain Marc Rivenbark has been a member of the Hernando County Sheriff's Office since 1982. Marc has served in several areas within the Hernando County S.O. to include patrol, investigations, vice and narcotics, internal affairs, and community personnel services. Marc is currently the Judicial Services Commander.

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(Appendix A)

Question List for Communications Managers

1) Number of budgeted positions?

2) 12 or 8 hour shifts?

3) Attrition rate over last three years? (Above or below national average)

4) Pay scale/ benefits

5) Length of training program?

6) Is training on the job or classroom or combination?

7) Do call takers and dispatchers rotate duties?

8) Do you use any part-time personnel?

9) Does your agency conduct exit surveys / interviews?

10) If yes to question #9, what is the common reason for separation?

(Appendix B)

<u>Telecommunicator Survey</u>
<u>Please circle your response</u>

1) How long have you been employed in the communications center?

   a) Less than 2 years b) 2 to 5 years c) 6 to 10 years d) 11 years or more

2) Do you feel your initial training was adequate to prepare you for your assignment?

   a) Yes   b) No

3) Is the technology used for your position adequate for the job requirements?

   a) Yes   b) No

4) How would you rate the job related stress for your position?

   a) Low b) Moderate c) High d) Very high

5) What shift did you work during your training period?

   a) 8 hour b) 10 hour c) 12 hour d) Combination

6) During your initial training period, did you have adequate opportunity to learn the technology used by your agency?

   a) Yes b) No

7) During your initial training period, did you have adequate opportunity to learn your agency's operating procedures?

   a) Yes b) No

8) Do you see your position as a job or career?

   a) Job   b) Career

9) When considering your long term goals, which of the following would you rank as most important to you personally?

   a) Salary/Benefits   b) Opportunity for advancement   c) Training opportunity   d) Recognition/Job satisfaction

10) Please list what you personally feel is the most important issue that will result in job satisfaction and a long career with your respective agency.

_____
_____
_____
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Attached is a short survey designed to obtain input from law enforcement communications employees. The focus of the survey is to identify issues that you feel are personally important to you. This information will be reported in a research document and shared with law enforcement managers. The goal of this project is to identify areas that managers can address to improve job satisfaction and longevity.

Please take a moment and complete the survey. The last question will allow personal comments or suggestions to be included on subjects that may not be covered by the survey. Please note that your responses are important and are anonymous.

Thank you very much for your assistance in this project.

Captain Marc Rivenbark
Hernando County Sheriff's Office