

Evaluating the Hiring Process for the Baltimore County Fire Department:

Determining the Most Effective Recruitment and Selection Methods

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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: _____

Abstract

The fire service is deeply rooted in tradition, and the value of that tradition should never be under-estimated. It is a part of what makes the occupation so desirable. However, employees are the fire service and community's most valuable resource. The economic downturn has caused the applicant pool to be much deeper. It is imperative that the fire service take full advantage of this applicant pool to increase the organizations diversity and talent. The Baltimore County Fire Department is not exempt from this need to act. The problem was that the Baltimore County Fire Department lacked a progressive method of determining the most qualified candidates to fill entry level vacancies. The purpose of the research was to determine methods to validate the Baltimore County Fire Department's process of filling entry level vacancies with the best qualified candidates. The descriptive research method was used to complete the project. The research questions for this project included legal issues, methods to validate the best qualified candidates, determined the correlation between personality characteristics and quality employees, identified traits or characteristics Baltimore County Fire Department personnel considered important, and determined specific methods other organizations use to identify the best candidates. An extensive literature review, a series of personal interviews, and a survey instrument were designed and conducted to answer each of the research questions. The results included the definition of 7 characteristics that members of the Baltimore County Fire Department felt were necessary to be successful employees, correlated to the confirmation of a link between personality and the ability to handle stress, and an array of methods which could be used by the fire department to access the best qualified candidates. Key recommendations are: creating a citizen and youth academy, administering personality tests, and streamlining the application process for successful recruitment.

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Determining the Most Effective Recruitment and Selection Methods

Many fire departments in the United States reiterate the importance of history and tradition to their new employees in some form, either formally or informally. There is little doubt that the traditions of the fire service play an integral role in the development and continuance of one of the most important cultures within the agencies, and that is the camaraderie referred to as the brotherhood and sisterhood. Likewise, fire departments continue to use past methods to determine and develop organizational strategies, tactics, and personnel procedures. Regardless of the naming convention of those policies, Methods of Operations (MOP) or Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), each is invariably rooted in past practices or experience. The importance of evaluating prior experiences is a critical component of determining the need for the department to remain the same through traditional methods, or to create and impose changes that will propel the organization into the future with new advancements within the fire service. While few articles have been published in fire service trade magazines regarding such changes in management and leadership, numerous articles and books have been published in other arenas. One example is a book written by Captain Michael Abrashoff, *It's your ship*, which offers great insight on the necessity of changing management and leadership techniques in an effort to become more progressive. These new techniques will increase an organization's productivity and allow an organization to flourish. In his book, Abrashoff writes about the Navy's predisposition to following SOP's since they are "safe, proven, and effective" and personnel rarely get in trouble when they don't deviate from those procedures. Although SOP's are made to be followed, some variance is required if an organization is ever to move forward. Abrashoff states, "you have to look for new ways to handle old tasks and fresh approaches to new problems" (2002, pp. 118-119). Although recruitment and retention isn't necessarily governed by an SOP in

every organization, the past practices in the fire service are getting stale and new innovative techniques are critical to remain competitive in the current employment market. The Baltimore County Fire Department is not exempt from the need to develop new and innovative recruitment and retention techniques. This applied research paper examines the current state of the department's efforts and practices and looks for new ways to engage future applicants.

The problem is that the Baltimore County Fire Department lacks a progressive method of determining the most qualified candidates to fill entry level vacancies in the organization. The purpose of this research is to determine what methods currently exist that will validate the Baltimore County Fire Department's methods of filling entry level vacancies with the best qualified candidates. The descriptive research method will be used to complete the project. The research questions for this project include a.) What legal issues exist that must be considered and addressed in the hiring process? b.) What methods can be used to determine or validate the quality of a candidate? c.) What evidence exists to confirm or deny the correlation between personality characteristics and quality employees? d.) What types of traits or characteristics do Baltimore County Fire Department personnel consider important? e.) What current testing and selection criteria do other fire departments use to determine the best qualified candidates? f.) What screening and selection methods do private sector employers use to identify quality candidates? The project will be completed in three primary phases. The first phase is to conduct a comprehensive literature review of the current hiring practices with the information made available by public safety and private organizations. The second phase is to develop and distribute a random survey to current sworn members of the Baltimore County Fire Department to solicit input on the membership's perception of the best characteristics and traits of quality employees. The final phase will be to conduct interviews of successful private organizations and

other combination fire departments in the Baltimore Metropolitan region to determine what hiring processes and methods they incorporate in order to identify quality candidates. The information gathered will be evaluated to determine if the Baltimore County Fire Department could benefit from any changes in its current recruitment and hiring practices to identify the best qualified candidates.

Background and Significance

The Baltimore County Fire Department was established in 1882 after a long and contentious battle between the residents of the two neighboring jurisdictions of Baltimore City and Baltimore County, Maryland (Weaver & Frederick, as qtd. in Utz, 2012). Once known as Baltimore Town, the City of Baltimore controlled many of the public services for both the city and the county. Additionally, the city collected a certain portion of the county resident's tax base fees to cover the cost of those resources. This expenditure of the county resident's tax money angered many constituents, and was further punctuated by an 1835 fire which destroyed a mutually operated courthouse in Baltimore County. The poor response time of the Baltimore City Fire Department to the blaze broadened the anger of the county residents, who were ultimately responsible for a large portion of the reconstruction fees. In response to this incident, county citizens became more insistent on a full separation from the city's public services. Over time, the city expanded its boundaries outward and consumed additional county territory to the extent of where the perimeter lines are drawn today (Weaver and Frederick, 1982). Since the settlement of the issues and the drawing of the jurisdictional lines, the Baltimore County Government and the County Fire Department have grown exponentially over time.

According to the Baltimore County Government website (2011), the fire department currently provides fire, rescue, and EMS services to over 800,000 citizens. The department also

provides an array of services including hazmat response, technical rescue response, fire prevention and public safety awareness education. The fire department is responsible for covering an area of 610 square miles within which 25 career stations and 33 volunteer stations are strategically located. The career force is approximately 1,000 members strong and the volunteer force provides an additional 2,000 members to the overall structure of the organization. Growth in the community prompted many changes in the fire department, and additional challenges emerged in the late 1960's in response to the Civil Rights movement.

Civil Rights for minorities, specifically blacks and females, began to change the face of the organization between the periods of the late 1960s to the late 1970s. Those changes and many of the challenges associated with diversity in recruitment and retention still exist today. The first black male firefighter hired in Baltimore County occurred in 1966. By 1969 the department roster included two black men and in 1978, the first female was added to the roster. The low rates of minority hiring prompted the development of a recruitment program in 1974 (Weaver and Frederick, 1982). Confidential internal interviews with senior department members provided further insight on the history of that unit, formerly known as the applicant investigation unit. The original unit consisted of three to four full-time personnel and only a limited number of applicants were processed past the written portion of the examination. In the late 1980s, the unit was reduced to two full-time members. In 1994, the unit was again restructured and one full time sworn member and one full time civilian member ran the program. In 1998, changes were implemented in the testing process to allow all applicants who passed the written test to move on to the physical ability testing (PAT). That same year, all uniformed personnel were put through the test to validate a standard time for completion of the PAT. In 2007, the PAT was once again validated by department members in order to re-establish an up-dated standard passing time.

Currently the hiring process remains a series of testing, beginning with a written examination with a passing score of 70% or higher, a physical ability test (cut off time undetermined at this point), followed by an oral board interview. The interview results are arranged by score or a standard rating system and sent to the Fire Chief to select a recruit class. Once selected, each new hire signs a conditional offer of employment, completes a personal history and background booklet, and submits to a medical physical with a stress test prior to the start of the academy recruit class. The recruitment section is currently undergoing another transition with new leadership. This creates an excellent opportunity for instituting new and innovative ways and recommendations for advancing the future of recruitment in the Baltimore County Fire Department. For the success of the fire department, it is imperative that the recommendations include a proactive measure to consider and eliminate past practices of alleged discrimination in hiring.

The U.S. Department of Justice has investigated the fire department on multiple occasions, and several articles have appeared in the local *Baltimore Sun* newspaper reporting on complaints filed by black firefighters of alleged discrimination. Most recently, in 2012 a series of articles appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper regarding another federal investigation by the U.S. Justice Department. One of the articles states that this “marks the third time since the late 1970s that the agency [U.S. Dept. of Justice] has investigated discrimination in county hiring” (Hirsch, 2012). Although no official report of findings has been published or disclosed by the U.S. Department of Justice on the most recent complaint filed, it punctuates the need to continue to refine the current recruitment and retention process in the County Fire Department to reduce alleged discrimination complaints.

The significance of this research project is to determine what recruitment methods to employ that will help to identify the best qualified applicants to fill the entry level vacancies in the fire department. Most importantly, consideration must be given to equal opportunity for all applicants. This research project aligns with the Executive Development course unit 5, Change Management. Specifically, it incorporates the enabling objective that the student will “recognize diversity and the role of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), as significant factors in change” (USFA, 2011, SM 5-11). This research also incorporates the enabling objective from unit 7, Organizational Change and Culture, to “identify the characteristics of a culture, specifically, organizational culture” (USFA, 2011, SM 7-21). The research is also in-line with the USFA’s fourth strategic goal to “improve the fire and emergency services professional status” (USFA, 2011). It is anticipated that through a comprehensive literature review, internal department survey instruments, and personal interviews, that constructive advances in non-traditional methods of recruitment can be determined and adopted to effect positive change in the organization, while keeping in concert with the importance of diversity awareness.

Literature Review

There are many factors which contribute to the strength and validity of an organization’s recruitment and hiring process. The basis of such a program must be rooted in fairness and equality as outlined by various federal, state, and local laws. In addition, past customs of applicant screening methods utilized by public safety agencies should be evaluated in comparison to those utilized by private sector employers, in an attempt to determine the best recruitment practices. Finally, some of the alternative methods identified should be researched further to determine if they may be applicable to the screening and hiring fire service candidates.

Laws

Perhaps one of the most important steps in the applicant division of any fire service organization is to have a basic understanding of the laws and policies that govern the unit. If the unit supervisor is not well versed in the applicable laws, then the human resources personnel for the jurisdiction should be consulted on a regular basis for guidance and approval of all testing and hiring practices employed by the organization. For the purpose of this report the major human resource laws for both the Federal Government and the State of Maryland, warrant a brief review.

It can be argued, in any organization, as to the ranking sequence of the personnel, the citizen, and the agency, by matter of importance. However, the most basic element in each of those categories is the human resource; the individual. Each person as an individual contributes to the organizational team to provide the services to the community (citizen), which serves to enhance the positive reputation of the department, builds trust, and satisfies the mission of the organization. It is a series of components originating in each individual, whose background and individuality contribute to the whole. Since the individual is the building block for the organization, he/she is also the foundation for many of the legal mandates established over time through the progression of government and civility.

The basis of American law is defined through the U.S. Constitution. From that founding document comes years of federal and state laws, amended laws, legislated protections, and presidential orders. According to Ledvinka and Scarpello (as cited in Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2008), “five main areas of the legal environment have influenced human resource management over the past 25 years” (p. 37). Those areas, which continue to draw attention in the present human resource arena, include equal opportunity, safety and health, pay and benefits,

privacy, and security legislation. The specific laws include, but are not limited to the following: the fourth amendment which provides equal protection for all citizens including due process for all, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, mandating equal pay for equal performance of men and women; Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1963, forbidding discrimination based on color, sex, race, religion, or nationality; the Age Discrimination Act of 1967, prohibiting discriminatory employment actions against those over age 40; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, prohibiting discrimination against disabled individuals; and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, barring discrimination against the circumstances of pregnancy and childbirth for employers with more than 15 personnel. (Noe, et al.,2008). These same protective laws must be given significant reflection and consideration during the testing, selection, and continued employment of all fire service personnel.

From an all-white male composition, America's fire service has experienced significant struggles in the past when adapting to equal opportunity, specifically in relation to diversity. A virtual scan of national news reveals that many fire departments, regardless of size and geographic location, still experience allegations of racial disparity. Regardless of whether or not those allegations are founded, the premise sometimes creates unwarranted turmoil among the membership and can also create a financial burden on the defending organization. An evaluation of articles pertaining specifically to East coast fire departments reiterates the need to clearly define and hire the best qualified applicants, without discriminating against gender or race.

In one article, published by the *New York Times*, federal judge Nicholas Garaufis placed a ban on all hiring for the City of New York Fire Department based on prior complaints from a group of black firefighters alleging discrimination. In his findings, the judge "ruled that two entrance exams were discriminatory and ordered the city to give 300 minority applicants hiring

status and retroactive seniority, and to financially compensate thousands more who had taken the test” (Fahim, 2010). The financial damage to the City of New York is apparent in the resolution. However, additional compensation was substantial to the taxpayers of the city to pay for overtime while the ban was in effect. In addition to the financial impact, the ban also likely caused morale issues and damaged race relations among the membership, which will burden that department for many years to come. The important message of reducing discriminatory accusations is in the initial phase of recruitment, followed by employee retention and how the positive non-discriminatory process is accomplished. By designing testing procedures that eliminate any implication of discrimination, and having human resource specialists confirm the testing procedures, the likelihood of experiencing legal ramifications in the future can be reduced.

In a related situation, the NAACP filed a suit against the Reading, Pennsylvania Fire Department claiming that its recruitment methods lacked inclusion of blacks and other minorities. According to the complaint, the City of Reading did not have a recruitment plan and in essence relied on “word of mouth” to recruit firefighters. The complaint further claimed that the agency did not reflect, in numbers, the equivalent of the community’s demographics. The article also mentioned a separate claim, made prior to this one by the Latino Coalition, for the same disparate amount of demographic representation. Although the article did not confirm the outcome of the fire department’s claim, it did state that the Reading City Council agreed to develop a recruitment plan for the city’s police department (Lindsey, 2006). Once again, agency discrimination claims begin at the recruitment phase of the hiring process, and may be greatly reduced or eliminated by sound policy and practice.

Although many articles focus on discrimination against blacks and other minorities, a growing component of allegations in the modern fire service is the claim of reverse discrimination. This is an added source of contention, but a necessary dimension for agencies to acknowledge and legally prepare for. An article in the *USA Today* newspaper cites such an example. According to the article, the U.S. Supreme Court justices ruled “that New Haven, Conn. improperly crossed that line [equal opportunity] when it denied promotions to white firefighters who had scored highest on a test” (“USA Today”, 2009). This ruling punctuates the difficulty of balancing the equal rights issues for fire departments across the United States. Although this article focuses on ways to make promotional tests increasingly valid and fair, the resolutions offered are comparative to recruitment measures. It is suggested in the column that a less rigid system of functional tests, like assessment centers, be used to validate candidate’s readiness for the position; it also includes a discussion of residency requirements to address balancing racial demographics. These same methods, if designed appropriately, may be used in the evaluation of new hires. However, organizations must not allow past practices to become barriers against innovative and forward thinking. An example of this can be applied to the previous scenario of racial disparity by comparison of jurisdictional demographics.

When organizations seek to hire personnel who are comparable to the demographic composition of the community, it must factor in the eligibility of the potential workforce. Many fire departments have basic requirements for entry-level positions, including but not limited to, a minimum age requirement, generally 18-21 years, a high school diploma or an equivalent, and a background free from criminal conviction or drug charges. In a 2003 report produced by the Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, the reintegration of Maryland prisoners can be tracked by the number of releases per county (LaVigne & Kachnowski, p. 1). This information is critical to

human resource managers or applicant units to be able to identify how many of the jurisdictions candidates meet the basic qualifications for hiring. Some of the key points of the report include that “between 1980 and 2001, the Maryland prison population more than tripled....to 23,752 people” (p. 9). In addition, “during 2001, 97 percent of all men and women released from Maryland prisons returned to communities in Maryland” (p. 39). Finally, in 2001 755 of prisoners released went to Baltimore County, 91% of which were male, 56% black, 43% white, and 1% unknown race; all of which were similar to the racial distribution for Baltimore County, Maryland at that time (p. 40). By these statistics, organizations must consider the amount of eligible workers within the district or state, and may even need to expand their search away from local residents to meet the desired proportions of demographic equality. This is just one example of non-traditional factors that should be considered when constructing a recruitment plan. Again, the value of the process must be measured against the consequence of failing to recognize and comply with federal standards. Additionally, other requirements such as state laws and labor agreements must be evaluated and applied to the recruitment and hiring process.

State and local government agencies are careful to follow federal laws and guidelines, but often take the liberty to structure their own supplementary laws specific to the needs of the communities for which they serve. The State of Maryland is an “at will” work state. That means that either an employer or an employee has the right to terminate employment with or without just cause, unless they are entered into a contract agreement (“Maryland Business Basics”, 2009, p.9). Most combination (career and volunteer) fire departments in the State of Maryland are members of organized local labor groups, which operate under the International Association of Firefighters. The right to organize and belong to a union is covered under the National Labor Relations Act. This local union protection assists those members in securing employment

contracts, including rights and protection, however each agency's contract must be read to address any specific incidents relating to actions or inactions of its membership.

Additionally, the State of Maryland has also adopted statutes to protect the employee. One particular statute is the Labor and Employment (2011) article, 3-701, which states:

An employer may not require an applicant for employment to answer an oral or written question that relates to a physical, psychiatric, or psychological disability, illness, handicap, or treatment, unless the disability, illness, handicap, or treatment has a direct, material, and timely relationship to the capacity or fitness of the applicant to perform the job properly (p. 1).

While this statute offers protection to the employee, it also offers a component of protection to the employer if the vocation, such as the fire service, is subject to extenuating circumstances involving high risk incidents such as providing public safety services.

An additional employee right in the State of Maryland is the prohibition of an employer requiring an employee to submit to a polygraph test. This is covered under the Labor and Employment (2011) article, 3-702(c) and states "an employer may not require or demand, as a condition of employment, prospective employment, or continued employment, that an individual submit to or take a polygraph examination or similar test" (p. 2). This is significant to the applicant unit to understand because it could result in monetary fines and legal implications if such a test were to be administered.

Most recently, as published in the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper, the State of Maryland became the first state in the nation to enact a bill to prevent an employer from requiring the employee or applicant to provide access to social media accounts (Dresser, 2012); known as Senate Bill 433. These types of statutes, as well as other state and local laws, must be researched

and understood so that the employing organization does not engage in any pre-screening testing that will result in the need for legal defense. The recruitment unit must gain knowledge and an understanding of the laws governing employment at all levels of government. Insight should be gathered on how organizations within the public safety arena are currently conducting recruitment and hiring practices in comparison to private sector organizations.

Public & Private Methods

Fire departments often mirror one another in techniques of recruitment and testing procedures. Additionally, there tends to be a consistent alignment within the public safety field in regards to hiring practices. This section of the literature review will examine parallels between public safety hiring methods, pursue distinctive approaches from the private sector, and compile varying recommendations from both arenas for potential best recruitment and hiring practices.

Research reveals that recruitment and hiring within the fire service may be market based; it has been shown that the number of applicants is driven by the economy. The global economy has been at a low for the past several years. This decrease not only causes less job opportunities, but it also decreases the operating budget for recruitment divisions. This trend is true in the U.S. as well as other countries, but the outcomes are the same. Less money is available to recruit personnel, but more people, and people of various backgrounds, are applying for fire service careers. In an article published by a British fire service magazine, the author refers to this trend of reduced spending and an increased applicant pool. An emphasis is placed on the organizations ability to be more selective in order to gain the highest quality workforce as possible; and to use this current economic crunch in a positive aspect to lessen the negative impact of fiscal restraints. It also proposes increasing the emphasis on job knowledge, skills, and abilities which could result in the creation of an apprenticeship program to foster an applicant pool with that requisite

knowledge to trim down the amount of qualified applicants (Thelwell, 2011). In essence, the author is proposing that the fire service hire only experienced individuals who are already trained to perform the associated tasks of emergency services. This approach could be embraced if the fire service favored a more professional based competency profile for its applicants. The danger in that practice for U.S. public safety organizations lies in the previous section on federal and state laws governing employment. Likewise, if an organization offers the position of firefighter as an entry-level position, such prerequisite knowledge could not factor in. However, all available methods and suggestions should be given consideration to expand on this topic of recruitment and hiring.

An American response to punctuating the required knowledge, skills, and abilities focuses on the physical requirements of firefighting. In an article published in the *Fire-Rescue* magazine, the author encourages a pre-hiring review of all KSA's for current firefighters and updating the job description prior to hiring new employees. This practice would enforce standards that the current personnel are performing in a manner that the new applicant is requested to function in. The article also emphasizes the need to create a written test, physical ability test, concrete interview questions, conducting reference checks, and planning to interview three applicants for every one position that is vacant (Murphy, 2000). This method closely mirrors the practices of Mid-Atlantic regional fire departments.

In a related article, by Douglas Bogard, the emphasis is again on screening applicants to match the departments requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities, but takes it a step in a different direction by focusing more on identifying individual behaviors, motivations, and goals. The article further defines those dimensions as traits and personalities needed for success and encourages agencies to look for candidates that possess those traits and personalities that align

with the job and department, not the likes and wishes of the top brass. The author also specifically identifies the characteristics of teamwork, honesty, work ethic, community, and attitude as important dimensions of the fire service (1998, P. 14). To reiterate the importance of defining an applicant's character, other research points to public safety communications divisions as a leader in this area of hiring practices.

Often overlooked, the communications division of any fire department is an integral portion of the overall operations for that organization. The call takers and dispatchers must be proven to be of the same strength in terms of personality and character as the folks on the streets carrying out the organization's mission. In a series of articles published in the Association of Public-Safety Communication Officials (APCO) bulletin for telecommunications, the author points out the need for slowing down the applicant process and searching references to gain a first-hand interpretation of an individual's traits and characteristics. The article discusses the importance of identifying specifically what an organization is looking for in an employee prior to conducting that search. It also punctuates the need to affirm an applicant's information through the use of personal references, such as schools, jobs, and past employers. The author warns that the biggest clues may come from unspoken words as opposed to the spoken words, and applicant investigators should pay close attention to that fact (Bobka, 1998, pp. 20-22). In the second part of a three part series, Bobka (1998) advises that personnel selection should be concentrated on the results of multiple personal interviews and not just one opportunity to question and observe the applicant. She also focuses on the need to schedule interviews for a time convenient for the applicant to reduce the likelihood of eliminating high quality applicants due to other commitments (1998, pp. 38-39). These methods may be combined with or substituted for current

practices in the fire service and warrant comparison with private sector methods of recruitment and hiring.

The variables of measuring success are subjective and dependent upon the goals of the organization or agency. However, one of the most successful private companies in modern era America is Wal-Mart. In an article published by *Human Resource Management*, founder of Wal-Mart, Sam Walton, believed in making his customers number one and to do that it required hiring good people. It was his belief that the quality and effectiveness of the applicant division was the basic building block in creating a successful company. It was also Wal-Mart's policy to track employee exit surveys to determine the reasons for departing employees in order to potentially seek to resolve any hidden negative issues. The author of the article also pointed to a college course he had taken during graduate school which surprisingly told him that interviews were potentially the least valid selection tool that exists. Instead, the professor, the author, and ultimately Walton, came to rely on "behavioral instruments and validation processes" to search for quality applicants and to further the training of its applicant division members to use these tools. They also punctuated the need for extensive background checks, character references, and exit interviews (Peterson, 2005, pp.85-88). Although background checks and personality traits have been mentioned in public safety reports, the use of exit interviews to gain insight on poor practices affecting employee turnover could be a useful tool. In addition to specific case studies, such as Wal-Mart, general information for recruiting in the private sector also appears in many publications.

In 2009, The *Harvard Business Review* published a recruitment guide. This guide was based on an assessment of how well several organizations' had the ability to locate talented executives to replace those being lost through the attrition of the baby boomers. The anticipated

openings were in senior level management positions. The study concluded that it was “mystified” how clients had reported a low degree of preference on personnel who could learn new things, as opposed to those with a higher degree of experience. In addition to the inverted thought process of best attributes, it also found that most company’s selection processes relied on the manager’s feelings about an applicant as opposed to any other methods or the use of reference checks. The authors focused on the idea that companies should aim towards a “gold standard” when applied to the hiring goals for the organization. Out of this study came a seven step guide for hiring top level executives. In brief, that guide specifies the need to identify an organization’s needs, specify the job, develop the candidate pool, assess the candidates, close the deal, mentor the newcomer, and conduct periodic audits and reviews of the process. Some of the key points from this list of requirements include: the importance of the folks hired today will lead tomorrow, hiring is improved if job, team, and organization-based competencies are addressed, reaching out to the references who know the candidate best are more beneficial, the quality of assessment tools are more beneficial than having a larger pool of applicants, developing a mentoring process for new hires is encouraged, and lastly the significance of reviewing the process. The last key point of the process focuses on the assessors themselves. The article states that the assessors should have a high level of emotional intelligence, be educated and trained in the process, develop the right techniques, have organizational support and commitment, and be a solid cast of characters for consistency purposes (Fernandez-araoz, Groysberg, & Nohria, 2009, pp. 74-84). As revealed in this article, the benefits of conducting background and reference checks, having a small, trained, and consistent interview board, and periodically reviewing the process in its entirety may assist applicant units in the fire service. In addition to the stated ideas and preferred methods of screening applicants by both public safety

and private sector employers, additional insight on alternative assessment tools or methods should be considered.

Alternative Screening Methods

Literature suggests that many employers seek applicants who possess the characteristics and traits that best match that of the organization's ideals of quality personal attributes; and in cases of high stress jobs, those with exceptional coping skills. Several articles were reviewed and one common theme which consistently appeared was the use of the Big Five Factors or Five Factor Model to determine a candidates personality traits.

The first article was a study conducted to determine if intensive care unit (ICU) nurses were affected by the high stress levels of working in that type of environment. The initial factor defined in the article suggests that staff members who do not exhibit effective stress coping skills are more likely to commit errors in work assignments, are less likely to participate in team work, have an increase in sickness and absentee rates, and are either dissatisfied with their work or contribute to the cause of customer dissatisfaction. The negative effects of the inability to cope with stress is then evident and a cause for organizational concern. In addition, the article points to aging as a factor in how personnel perceive and react to stress, but elude to certain personality traits as remaining stable throughout the change in maturation and should not affect the individual's reaction to stressors. The study used the Big Five trait factor method to determine characteristics of nurses who exhibited stability in coping with stress, likewise it indicates that contradictory to earlier studies, personality traits may be a significant factor in handling stress. The Big Five trait scale includes an assessment of an individual's reaction or scoring on neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The conclusion of the study revealed that a significant relationship between personality, coping, and stress does exist

and recommends a personality trait screening as part of the employment process (Burgess, Irvine, & Wallymahmed, 2010). The results of a personality test may strengthen retention within an organization and also be a key component to determining employee-organizational compatibility.

Wright, Domagalski, & Collins (2011) argue that interviewers or interview teams may not be able to accurately determine a candidate's personality traits through interviews alone. It also suggests using the Big Five personality test, however in this case it is used to enhance the applicants resume. The idea behind the article is to have applicants take the Big Five test and include the results on a bio-data formatted resume to assist applicant units and interviewers in making the appropriate determination of character to gauge against that of the agency or organization's desired traits. Again, the article suggests matching the applicant's personality traits to that of the hiring agency.

In a separate article, published by the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, the authors lean more towards networking and socialization than trying to determine the person-job fit. The study covered three areas of recruitment and selection including the Big Five factor personality model, recruitment sources (selection methods), and interview with selectors (the applicant division teams). The findings of this report include that for the first portion relating to the Big Five model of personality, the most desired attributes for qualified personnel include honesty/integrity, conscientiousness, general abilities, potential for development, and range of previous work experience. It also states that specific knowledge, skills, and abilities were rated low on the scale of importance. Additionally, the article points to smaller companies placing more emphasis on informal social networks to learn about an individual's character than any other method, which may align with background interviews for larger organizations. Certainly

when proposing the use of any new tool or method, applicant units need to revert back to the basic laws and regulations and be certain that the method employed is fair and equitable.

The last article reviewed, by Risavy & Hausdorf (2011), was on the use of personality testing as a selection tool. The article discusses the potential for adverse impact on white females and other minorities when using the Big Five personality trait as a tool. The primary focus however was not on administering the test, but rather on how the results were used as a basis for selection. The study used the four-fifths rule to examine and determine each of the five methods of selection and determined that three of the five would not impose adverse effects for minorities. As cited in a uniform guidelines manual published by the Biddle Consulting Group (2011), the four-fifths rule is a method delineated by the EEOC which states that if any race, gender or ethnic group's selection or promotional rate is less than four-fifths, or 80%, of any other group competing for the position, than evidence of adverse impact is sustainable. The three methods of determining results which do not violate the four-fifths rule included using a "compensatory top down with fixed/sliding bands or the compensatory cut score selection decision methods" (Risavy & Hausdorf, 2011, p. 26). Therefore, careful attention must be paid to the application of this and any other method for screening candidates to reduce the likelihood of engaging in discriminatory hiring practices.

Procedures

Methods

Following an extensive literature review, a need to develop an internal survey instrument for the Baltimore County Fire Department was identified. The purpose of the survey is to determine a member's individual perceptions of the most important characteristics or traits of successful employees. The survey (see Appendix A) contains six questions; two each from the

categories of demographic information, a personality or characteristic ranking system, and a section of open-ended questions allowing for personal and honest feedback. The following questions were posed to the survey respondents. Question # 1 asks the respondent to identify him/herself by rank through one of three choices: line staff, supervisor, or manager. Question # 2 asks the respondent to identify his/her length of service with the department according to intervals of five years; including 0-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, or over 30 years respectively. Question # 3 provides a list of fifteen traits or characteristics (#15 being other, to allow for the respondents own entry of traits) and asks the respondent to check all of those which he/she deems an important characteristic of a successful employee, based upon their own experience(s). Question # 4 takes that same list of fifteen possible responses, and tasks the respondent with affixing a degree of importance to the top five characteristics in order of importance to them. Questions # 5 and # 6 are open-ended questions allowing the respondent to offer any insight or thoughts regarding the best practices the applicant unit could employ to seek the best qualified candidates for hire.

Fire department membership totals are fluid; changing almost monthly due to attrition, retirements, command staff reductions, and new hires. During the research process, the number of sworn employees in the Baltimore County Fire Department continues to fluctuate in the general range of approximately 975 members. A 2006 website, research-advisors.com, was used as a tool to determine the appropriate sample size for this survey. According to the website's sample size table for a population size of 1,000 personnel, a confidence rate of 95%, and a margin of error of 5%, the total number of surveys needed totaled 278. Due to the size of the Baltimore County Fire Department and the allocation of employees ranging by work station or unit location, both field operations and support services, a total of 300 surveys were distributed

to allow for consistency in the distribution to each work location. The survey was made available to the fire department members from March 19, 2012 through April 20, 2012. Random amounts of surveys were packaged into sealed envelopes and sent via the department's inter-office mail system and addressed to the attention of the on-duty officer receiving that particular day's mail. In addition, an email was sent to all chief officers and captains within the fire department explaining the purpose and availability of the survey, the survey process, a statement of voluntary participation for completing the survey, and a confidentiality statement for all members to review (see Appendix B). Finally, a post was uploaded on the fire department's blog as an additional means to reach the entire membership. A total of 87 survey responses were received by the stated deadline and were processed for the purposes of this research.

In addition to the survey instrument, a series of confidential personal interviews were conducted. Representatives from three primary groups participated in the personal interviews. The interviews included a questionnaire of employee representation groups (Interviewees 1-A and 1-B), regional combination fire departments (Interviewees 2-A, and 2-B), and private sector organizations (Interviewees 3-A, and 3-B). The respondents were randomly selected from the Mid-Atlantic area resources that were available. Each of the three questionnaires was designed specifically for employee representation groups, regional combination fire departments, and private sector organization groups (see Appendices C, D, and E). The interview questions were varied slightly according to which group was being interviewed. However, there were no variances within each group's questionnaire. Each questionnaire was preceded by a voluntary agreement and confidentiality statement prior to soliciting any responses (see Appendix F). All respondents from each group consented to their individual participation on behalf of their respective organizations.

Limitations

The author acknowledges several limitations regarding both the process and outcomes of the research. The largest obstacle and limitation for both the survey and the personal interviews was member participation.

The survey distribution depended primarily on individual station officers to relay the availability of the surveys to their members. The successful means of reaching members for this research through the fire department's blog cannot be determined. It is unknown to the extent in which the blog may or may not have affected the outreach attempt. In addition, not all members of the fire department have a county issued email address; therefore an electronic survey was not pursued. The limited access to member email addresses, time required, and the financial burden to distribute a survey to such a large number of personnel would have been astronomical and futile. Finally, although the survey instrument allowed for an "other" category, it may have limited the respondents thinking to just the characteristics listed on the form.

The personal interview process was also limited by member response. Respondents from other regional combination departments seemed limited by the number of available staff members to assist with the research questionnaire. The largest prohibiting factor for interviews from the private sector organizations, as indicated by their general lack of response, was unsuccessful communications. Additional time may have proven to be beneficial to this particular research project. However, the emphasis on minimal staffing seemed to be the greatest factor in the lack of all responses.

Results

The first three research questions are addressed in the literature review section. The first question sought to answer what legal issues existed that must be considered and addressed in the

fire department's hiring process. A review of federal and state laws revealed a plethora of information pertaining to the legal issues and the associated mandates that applicant units and human resource managers must be aware of during the recruitment and hiring of new personnel. The second question researched methods to use that could determine or validate the quality of a candidate. That too provided many avenues for tips and techniques in the recruitment and hiring process. These tips and techniques included: written and physical testing, multiple interviews, conducting background checks, and the use of personality testing to determine person-job-organizational fit. The third question sought to confirm or deny the correlation between personality characteristics and the quality of a candidate. Research articles provided a positive correlation between the use of personality testing and identifying the best quality candidates. However, one study pointed to using caution when determining the test results due to the potential of adverse impact on minorities. The fourth question sought to ascertain what types of characteristics and traits the current sworn members of the Baltimore County Fire Department considered important. This was achieved by distributing a random and anonymous survey instrument to the members.

A total of 87 out of the 300 randomly distributed surveys were completed and returned by the due date. The first two questions determined the demographics of the sample population by rank and length of service in the Baltimore County Fire Department. Out of the eighty-seven surveys received, 45 were completed by members of the line staff, 35 by supervisors, and 7 by managers (see Figure 1). This data is representative of the population of the department's ranks. Line staff positions do greatly exceed the number of supervisory positions within the department. Likewise, supervisory positions do exceed the number of managerial positions. Returned surveys indicating the length of service of overall respondents, regardless of rank, was calculated and

reported within the following ranges: 0-5 years (8), 6-10 years (10), 11-15 years (11), 16-20 years (10), 21-25 years (17), 26-30 years (24), and 30+ years (7). The largest response from the sample population is members with 26-30 years of service and the least amount from 30+ years of service (see Figure 2). The data is difficult to assess by the low return rate of the survey other than that the minimal response from members with over 30 years of service would parallel the low amounts of personnel with that long of tenure within the fire department. The next phase of the survey requested respondents to rank characteristics and/or traits of successful personnel.

The fire department currently utilizes a scoring system for entry-level written tests based on a scale of 70 out of 100, or 70%, to achieve a minimum passing grade. Using that same system, the characteristics or traits which respondents marked for question # 3 as important to them for successful employees from the list of 15 possible answers, including “other”, by all respondents were counted. The list produced seven key characteristics or traits which 70% or greater of the respondents felt were necessary for an employee to be successful. They include honesty (85%), professional (83%), integrity (80%), hard-working (80%), trustworthy (77%), dedicated (77%), and responsible (74%). Question # 4 then required respondents to list in order of importance only the top five characteristics or traits from that list. The top five most frequently ranked characteristics in order from #1 through #5 are: honesty, integrity, hard-work, responsibility, and a tie for dedicated and/or professional (see figures 3-7). The two lists mirror each other and suggest parallels in the use of this tool with other personality tests.

If the same list of fifteen characteristics or traits are given to applicants, and they are asked to rate only the top 5 characteristics or traits as one portion of the overall questions on the oral interview boards, the results could be tracked and compared to the success of the employee. Since the research has not yet been validated by any other means, the question should only be

used as a research benchmark to validate further studies and perhaps the institution of personality testing in the organization, and not as a factor for selecting the best qualified candidates. The final phase of the survey included an opinion section.

The last two questions were open-ended, allowing the respondents the latitude to give their individual input into the recruitment and hiring process. A list of comments was formulated for ease of review. The comments were also divided by position and length of service to determine if any variables existed among the various ranks or seniority.

Similarities among all ranks or positions included comments to include a desire to give preference or consideration to applicants who have a military background, preference for an applicant with a volunteer fire service background, applicants with some college education, applicants who want a career versus a job, applicants who are in average to good physical shape, and applicants who have a proven history of community service.

Several members from each division of length of service in the line staff and supervisory positions displayed a strong desire to hire the best or most qualified applicants regardless of race, gender, age, or other factor of diversity. However, only one comment was made by a member of the managerial staff regarding diversity, and that was to increase the diversity parameters.

The line staff and supervisor responses were the most closely aligned and several of their responses included a focus on the fire-rescue academy as part of the larger problem with recruitment. Respondents recommended that the two units, the applicant unit and the fire-rescue academy, should work more closely together to prepare and develop a new recruit into a successful firefighter.

Additional general comments of interest include: having one final review board (of the same personnel) who will make final recommendations to the Chief, including a resume portion

to the overall applicant process, raising the minimum age to 21 years old, conducting a thorough background investigation and personal reference check on all applicants, training evaluators and recruiters for consistency, to seek critical thinkers and/or college EMS or Suppression degree program students, the creation of shadow days/share days to expose prospective employees to the fire service, and the inclusion of psychological tests for all candidates. An executive summary of this data should be made available to the current recruitment manager for further consideration.

The results from the personal interview series, separated by the three types of groups, are evaluated next. This includes the employee representation groups, regional combination fire departments, and private sector organizations.

The first individuals interviewed consisted of representatives from various employee representation groups. Interviewees were asked to answer a series of nine questions to the best of their ability. The first interviewee, identified as 1-A, is a twenty-seven year member of the fire service; 25 years of which maintaining affiliation with the current employee representation group. This group has historically had very little to do with the recruitment or the hiring process, and reports that any past involvement has been sporadic and minimal. This particular group's involvement consists of conceptual ideas which never come to the forefront of the candidate selection process. However, this group is expected to and does guide or advise new members in regards to career decisions and/or potential discipline issues. Furthermore, the group representative believes that change within the department over the past ten years is mainly effected by generational issues. A negative impact is viewed by the group from "digging too deep" on applicant lists, whereas it perceives a positive impact by the department "exceeding the mark on minority hiring, especially African-Americans". Suggestions from the group to improve the hiring practices in the department include hiring the right people for the right reasons,

focusing on new and innovative ways to recruit quality candidates, and to focus more on employee retention. The group believes there is a retention issue within the department that needs to be addressed. Final comments made by the group representative included the need to educate applicants about the demands of the job, specifically relating to work schedules and the types of calls they will be exposed to.

The second interviewee, identified as 1-B, is a fifteen year veteran of the fire service; 12 years of being actively affiliated with the current employee representation group. This group reports having a history of assisting the applicant recruitment unit with developing a physical agility test, shortening the length of the hiring processing time in order to keep applicants interested, focusing on retention issues through the creation of a mentoring program, and although inconsistent, participate in phone dialogue with applicants through the human resources department in order to encourage applicants to remain active in the hiring process. This group makes initial contact with the academy classes; however, it does not have an obligation or the intent to interact with new hires until they graduate from the recruit academy. In general the group's representative feels that the quality of applicants is improving, however believes the department has "failed in all aspects of diversity". The representative also mentioned that the department does a better job of "washing out inept employees" than in past practice of the fire department. The suggestions from the group for improving the hiring practices in the department include the involvement in development of a written diversity plan, and encouraging the department to follow through on it. Therefore, group 1-B, who does not have any obligation to represent or guide new members, has historically had more input and participation with enacting changes to the department's hiring practices than 1-A which represents new members. The two groups are polar opposites in regards to their beliefs of the adequacy of the diversity of the

department; however both groups suggest that more can be done to generate a better qualified pool of applicants.

The next group of interviewee's includes representatives from combination career-volunteer fire departments in the Mid-Atlantic region. This interview series looked to produce helpful responses with answering the fifth research question identifying current testing and selection criteria that other fire departments in the Mid-Atlantic region use to determine the best qualified applicants. These interviewees were again asked a series of nine pre-determined questions, although they varied slightly from those asked of the employee representation groups because of their specific responsibilities.

The first interviewee, identified as 2-A, has worked for the department's recruitment office for five years. This interviewee has a marketing background which the department believes to be beneficial with recruitment and hiring new employees. This department is a combination career-volunteer department that has approximately 1,300 combined sworn and civilian members and approximately 1,300 volunteer members. The department generates eligibility lists approximately once per year, the lists are both budget and need driven. The average size of an academy class is 40-50 recruits. Interviewee 2-A would not comment on any changes, either positive or negative, concerning the quality of applicants over the past few years. However, interviewee 2-B did cite that the economy drives a change in the numbers of applicants upward. This department uses a series of steps to create an applicant eligibility list to include a written test, followed by an oral interview. The scores of the oral interview then determine which candidates move on to the background check and the medical physical examination phase of the process. Once that is complete, the candidate participates in the CPAT (Candidate Physical Ability Test) which is pass/fail based on a prescribed cut-off time. This department does not

require any type of mental health screening for new hires. Interviewee 2-A also believes that the fire service's degree of successful recruiting and hiring is based on the process their department utilizes to create an eligibility list. This department does not report any significant retention issues. The types of recruitment methods employed include job fairs, face-to-face relations, radio and newspaper advertisements, public transportation/ bus billboards, and movie preview advertisements.

Interviewee 2-B is an eleven year veteran of the department's recruitment team. The department is currently comprised of approximately 825 sworn-uniformed members and is supplemented with approximately 500 volunteer members. This department has not hired any new employees since December of 2008. However prior to 2008, the department would typically generate an eligibility list and hire academy recruits once or twice per year. This change in hiring is in response to the continued economic decline. Recruit classes consisted of 40-50 personnel on average. Interviewee 2-B has not seen any remarkable changes in the quality of applicants over the past few years. This department uses a series of steps to generate an eligibility list as well. The minimum qualifications must be met first before the candidate can proceed through the process. These minimum qualifications include a high school diploma or GED and proof of six months of continuous employment prior to submitting their application. Once the minimum requirements are met, the applicant takes a written test, an oral interview, the CPAT (Candidate Physical Ability Test), and a background check. Oral interviews are scored on a point system; the maximum amount of points achievable on the interview is 100. The candidate's background check is performed by an outside company contracted by the department. Studies of each phase of the testing process are conducted to assess and ensure against any negative impact to any specific group of candidates or individual applicants. Interviewee 2-B believes that the fire

service can do a better job of recruiting and hiring the best qualified candidates for the fire department. Interviewee 2-B believes that the best approach to successfully recruit the best qualified candidates is through a combined effort of the fire department and human resources personnel. Interviewee 2-B also believes the current practices being utilized for the department's recruitment methods, including a website, newspaper and radio ads, and a new video to be used by field personnel are extremely effective recruitment tools. This department representative reports some issues with employee retention and attributes that to economy based issues such as no raises and to the department's demand for personnel to be both fire and EMS qualified. EMS personnel are reporting a high rate of burn-out and that some employees do not wish to perform both fire and EMS functions, but are required to do so by the department.

Both of these combination fire departments are closely aligned with their testing and recruitment methods and processes. These two departments use an oral interview method prior to sending any applicants to the CPAT test, and both conduct candidate background checks. Department 2-A does not report any retention issues whereas 2-B has seen a trend in retention issues caused by the economic downturn and employee burn-out, primarily relating to Paramedics. Both agencies employ similar recruitment methods, of which closely mirror Baltimore County. However, department 2-A advertises on public transportation and at movie theater previews. These specific recruitment methods have the ability to reach a more diverse population of the community than either department 2-B or Baltimore County's recruitment methods.

The final groups of interviewees are participants from private sector organizations. The questions generated for this interview series consisted of nine questions, again slightly different from the other two groups, but pre-determined and asked of both organizations representatives.

This series of questions were developed to answer the sixth research question seeking information on how private sector organizations recruit, screen, and select new employees.

Interviewee 3-A has worked for the organization's human resources unit for seven years. The applicant and hiring process for this organization is on-going. Interviewee 3-A reports that the time it takes to process a new employee from application to employment varies. The entire hiring process typically takes this organization approximately three weeks to complete. The interviewee also commented that the trend in the current quality of applicants appears to be economy driven. The organization seeks applicants who are positive, driven, have a good attitude, and who are a good fit for the organization, usually determined by the candidate's personality qualities. The process this organization uses to screen and select candidates includes a completed application, an initial 45 minute interview with a manager, a personality test, and a final 3-hour interview. The organization recruits through the use of referrals, agency staffing, schools, and various web-based sites including career builder.com, indeed.com, and Craig's list. This organization does not report any significant retention issues.

Interviewee 3-B is a ten year veteran of the organization's human resource team. This organization hires approximately 450-600 external applicants per year and on the average, processes 40 new hires per month using a team of four human resource recruiters or generalists. The average time it takes to fill a job vacancy is approximately 35 days. The time it takes to process a new employee from time of offer and acceptance is generally three weeks. Interviewee 3-B reports that recent trends that are seen in the quality of applicants have been consistent with poor presentation and dress. The main characteristics or traits this organization looks for includes integrity, trust, energy, compassion, respect, accountability/responsibility, and a proven record of working as part of a larger team. The process this organization uses to evaluate a candidate for

hire is through an application, interview, job shadowing-time, background check, and a pre-employment health screen. The organization recruits primarily through the use of a web-site, professional journals, local community newspapers, and social networking sites. The organization's interviewee reports sporadic retention issues, but can point to individual leadership issues at the department level as a correlation to that loss. When asked for any other input that may be beneficial to the fire service, interviewee 3-B recommends processing applicants quickly, since the best talent is not in the job market very long. Interviewee 3-B also recommends a 24 hour response time to notify the applicant that they are successful candidates and qualify for the next phase of the hiring process.

Each of the private sector organizations interviewed provided good insight as to their respective recruitment and hiring processes. Both organizations process their applicants fairly rapidly at the rate of approximately three weeks from application to offer. Organization 3-A focuses a great deal of time on the interview process which includes the use of personality tests to confirm the applicant's personality traits will match the fit of the organization. Organization 3-A does not experience any retention issues, whereas 3-B does; and that is attributed to leadership issues. Organization 3-B does not use any type of personality testing, but the characteristics and traits it searches for is closely aligned with the results of the attributes produced by the internal survey of members of the Baltimore County Fire Department. Specifically, three of the seven most important characteristics of a successful employee appear in organization 3-B's list of important characteristics including integrity, trust, and responsibility.

Discussion

Determining the most effective recruitment and selection methods for fire service personnel is far more difficult than it appears on the surface. There are a variety of methods which could be employed to determine the best qualified candidates, but selecting the single best or even a combination of best methods is a very difficult task; and it appears to be based on each specific department's wants or needs. For an organization to identify the best qualified applicants, it must first know exactly what it is looking for in terms of type of employee. Part of that can be accomplished by verifying that the current job description matches the exact duties and responsibilities that the members are currently performing (Murphy, 2000, p.75). After an organization clearly identifies the job specification of the entry-level employee, the characteristics and traits of a successful employee in that role should be identified. According to the Harvard Business Review, "assessing people for complex positions is inherently difficult for several reasons, including the unique and changing characteristics of many jobs, the challenge of assessing intangible traits, and the time constraints of many candidates" (Fernandez-Araoz, Groyberg, & Nohria, 2009, p. 80). By conducting a periodic job analysis, specifically prior to advertising a hiring announcement, overcoming the challenge of determining what type of candidate would best fit the organization is greatly reduced. Likewise, by establishing a list of intangible traits, such as the characteristics and traits of a successful employee, that hurdle too becomes more manageable. However, managing time constraints are much more difficult when establishing an eligibility list. A time constraint for a candidate does not only refer to their availability to interview or test, but also a need to locate gainful employment within a reasonable amount of time. This poses an interesting correlation to the research project. The Baltimore County Fire Department may take six or more months to assemble an eligibility list of candidates

for hire. One of the interviewees, 3-B, clearly states in the interview that the best talent is not in the job market for a very long period of time. In concert with that statement, interviewee 1-B from the employee representation group believes that it takes the fire department too long to process candidates which potentially removes the best qualified people from the eligibility list, and may have far reaching negative effects on attempts to diversify the department. The implication of this portion of the study, specifically for the Baltimore County Fire Department, is that the overall process may need to be shortened in order to capture the best qualified applicants and improve diversity in the future.

Interviewees from both Mid-Atlantic combination fire departments and both private sector organizations included an oral interview as a part of the overall selection phase of prospective candidates. Interviewee 3-A indicated that their private sector organization requires two interviews, one lasting 45 minutes and the second on average of three hours. The Baltimore County Fire Department also utilizes an oral interview board as part of the applicant testing process. However, each interview is usually limited to 15-20 minutes based on a pre-determined time allotment to answer a series of specific questions. Interestingly, one of the reference documents points to the interview process as “probably the most invalid selection process that exists” (as qtd. in Peterson, 2005, p. 87). The article references the use of behavioral instruments and other means to determine the quality of a candidate, not the interview process. Organization 3-A also incorporates the use of personality testing as part of its evaluation process. However, more reference information, interview responses, and survey responses indicated a strong need or desire to conduct a minimum of one interview and in several cases encouraged the use of multiple interviews. This brings the author to the last point which is to examine the survey

instrument used to evaluate the characteristics and traits of successful employees as determined by the current sworn membership of the Baltimore County Fire Department.

The survey data revealed that 70% or more of the department's personnel who responded to the survey identified seven primary characteristics or traits of successful employees. Of those seven, 5 were listed as the most frequently ranked answers to the top five most important characteristics or traits. This trend in data suggests that a baseline of preferred characteristics and traits of successful employees can be defined for the Baltimore County Fire Department.

Therefore, as indicated by reference literature and private organization interview 3-A, the use of personality testing should be considered as a tool to help establish future eligibility lists. In an article already cited in the literature review, DeLongis and Holtzman (2005) say "it is well known that personality plays an important role in the stress-coping process" (as qtd. in Burgess, Irvine, & Wallymahmed, 2010, p. 131). The fire department is a high stress job and an individual's success rate and associated retention rates will depend largely on their ability to navigate that stress as determined by their personality traits. Likewise, and according to the ICU nurse study, if the personality of the employee does not fit the institute it will be the cause of significant negative ramifications for the organization. Specifically cited by the authors, the failure to adequately match the employee's personality with the agency will result in an increased commission of errors, a declination in teamwork, an increase in absenteeism, a dissatisfied employee, and a negative customer impact (Burgess, Irvine, & Wallymahmed, 2010). The resolution to such a negative impact can be accomplished through the use of personality testing. The implications of the combined results of the survey and personal interviews for the Baltimore County Fire Department suggest both the need and desire by the membership to effect

changes to the current system of establishing an eligibility list and the subsequent hiring from that list in order to attract the best qualified candidates.

Recommendations

The purpose of this research project was to determine what methods currently exist to validate the Baltimore County Fire Department's methods of filling entry level vacancies with the best qualified candidates. After considering the information contained in the literature review, gathering information through the use of a personal interview series, and creating a random internal survey, several key areas were identified that support the need for changes to the current recruitment and hiring processes of the Baltimore County Fire Department.

The first research question sought to determine what legal issues or concerns needed to be addressed during the hiring process. While no glaring disparity in the current methods of recruitment and hiring came to light, the need to remain focused on diversity as an issue did. As supported by existing literature and the responses from the employee representation groups, the need to reach all areas of diverse populations is necessary. However, a significant amount of survey respondents alluded to hiring the best qualified applicants regardless of diversity as an issue. In order to overcome this contrasting belief, the gap between the current memberships must first be closed. One way to accomplish this closure is to form collaborative relationships between the applicant unit, the employee representation groups, and the field operations personnel in order to engage in an unconventional method of recruitment. To do this, a core group of personnel should be selected to establish a recruitment advisory team. Then the first goal of this collaborative team should be the creation and establishment of a citizen's academy and a youth academy. The benefits of both academies are multi-dimensional. It would serve to build positive community relations by giving the general public a first-hand experience of what

firefighters and EMS personnel do on a daily basis. Next it would generate increased support for the volunteer companies through the attraction of new members, either active or auxiliary, who would like to assist their community volunteer station. Finally, and most important to this research project, it would give the fire department an avenue to reach out to all areas of diverse populations who would not normally be exposed to the fire service. Engaging adults, as well as the youth, in the communities may serve to expand the future recruitment of diverse members and should be included as part of a structured diversity plan. Likewise, the diversity plan should be all inclusive of, and representative of, the entire population of the membership to forge a stronger bond and working relationship among the current employees.

Next the research attempted to identify what methods can be used to determine the best qualified candidates, what evidence exists to confirm or deny the correlation between personality and quality, and the characteristics and traits the current membership feels is important to the success of an employee. Although no one method was proven to be the single best, several suggestions came through the literature as well as the internal survey instrument. The literature confirmed a correlation between personality and the ability to handle stress. The members of the Baltimore County Fire Department determined a base-line of 7 characteristics or traits which they feel contribute to the success of an employee. It is recommended to use that data as a basis to confirm or deny the benefits of utilizing a personality test, such as the Big 5 trait factor, to incorporate into future candidate testing; although it must be administered by a consultant or contractor who is certified to conduct such tests. In addition to personality testing, both the survey respondents and the interviewees strongly encouraged the use of thorough background and reference checks on all applicants. Several articles referenced for the literature review also

confirmed the need to check on perspective employees to determine the validity of their claims of past experience, character, and education.

Finally, several other significant recommendations came from the interview process of other agencies, both the fire service and the private sector organizations. It is recommended that the applicant unit begin to expand its recruitment tools and methods to reach a larger area of the population in order to make it inclusive of all populations of race, gender, ethnicity, age, and any other component of difference or diversity as described by the EEOC. These methods may include better marketing of the department and job announcements on public transportation billboards, community carnivals, schools, or during movie theater previews in order to reach a more diverse group of candidates. The applicant unit should advertise in areas most likely to be seen or heard by the largest possible diversified population. A core cadre of assessors should be trained to conduct the oral interview boards for the purpose of consistency in evaluating and grading. Although one source of literature points to the interview process as a bad indicator of person-organization fit, the survey results found that some current personnel would like to have a final review board established to bring highly recommended applicants back for a 2nd interview.

Both the current membership of the Baltimore County Fire Department and the interviewees provided significant and beneficial insight as to ways the department can improve its current recruitment and hiring methods. Although the research did not validate one single best method, the fire department should consider making and tracking changes to the recruitment and hiring process in order to determine which methods are the best fit for the individual organization. The recruitment and hiring process is dynamic and fluid and should be ever changing with the community shifting and the generation of candidates which are applying. The best talent will be in high demand, so the length of the process needs to match that demand. A

change as simple as shortening the overall testing process may lead to incredibly positive changes in the organization's degree of quality personnel, benefiting the fire department and community as a whole. In addition, exit interviews should be conducted of personnel leaving the department via resignation or retirements to determine if any issues exist which may require the attention of the administration and applicant unit to remain competitive in the job market. It is also advisable for the applicant unit or human resources to conduct a study and review of each phase of the applicant testing to verify that adverse impact is not occurring and that should be gaged against the EEOC four-fifths rule as a guideline. Finally, it is recommended that further research be conducted to continue to develop a better base of knowledge of the potential applications of personality testing and to determine an applicant-organization fit. Research on recruitment and retention methods must be continually evaluated and updated to remain current and should not be a document which is reviewed once and placed on a shelf. There is much to be learned about attracting and identifying the best qualified candidates and any fire department would benefit greatly by learning and adopting those methods, regardless if those practices are traditional or non-traditional.

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Appendix A

Fire Department Recruitment Survey

Demographic Information:

- 1.) What is your position in the department?
 - a. Line Staff (EMT, Paramedic, FF, FS, FADO)
 - b. Supervisor (Lt. or Capt.)
 - c. Manager (Chief Officer)
- 2.) How many years of service do you currently have?
 - a. 0-5 years
 - b. 6-10 years
 - c. 11-15 years
 - d. 16-20 years
 - e. 21-25 years
 - f. 26-30 years
 - g. Over 30 years

General Information:

- 3.) Given your experience, what do you believe are the most important characteristics or traits of successful employees? Check all that apply.
 - a. Honesty
 - b. Integrity
 - c. Trustworthy
 - d. Hard working
 - e. Dedicated
 - f. Knowledge
 - g. Skills
 - h. Accurate
 - i. Punctual
 - j. Prepared
 - k. Loyal
 - l. Responsible
 - m. Professional
 - n. Cooperative
 - o. Other:

List: _____

Appendix B

Fire Department Recruitment Survey-Confidentiality Statement

Jennifer L. Utz, Captain

Baltimore County Fire Department

Contact information intentionally deleted by author-Contained on original form

Date: March 16, 2012

Purpose of Study:

This survey is being conducted as part of an applied research project for the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. The intent is to collect responses from a random population within the fire department to determine each individual's perception of the most important characteristics or traits of successful employees, both past and present.

Procedures:

The survey will be available for members to complete between the dates of March 19, 2012 through April 20, 2012. The survey instrument shall take no longer than 10-15 minutes to complete and is strictly confidential. Upon completing the survey, the member shall place it in a sealed envelope (provided), and sent back to Capt. Utz at Station 16-A. *Note: 300 surveys are being distributed for the purpose of the study however additional copies are available upon request.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in the survey is totally voluntary and designed to give each individual member an opportunity to participate without any fear of disclosure of information or opinion. Member participation is both encouraged and appreciated, however not mandated by the researcher or the fire department.

Confidentiality:

This survey instrument is designed to provide complete confidentiality. The only demographic information requested is general position and length of service to determine what, if any, variables exist among the views of members in regards to their experience.

Appendix C

Personal Interview-Employee Representative Groups

- 1.) How long have you been with the Department?
- 2.) How long have you been involved with the employee representation group you are currently associated with?
- 3.) Do you have any involvement with the current hiring process?
- 4.) If so, what? If not, why?
- 5.) Have you ever been asked for input by the recruitment division from your group's perspective?
- 6.) Are you expected to represent or advise new members?
- 7.) Have you seen any changes in the quality of members over the past 10+ years and if so, are they positive or negative changes?
- 8.) If you have an opportunity to give input, what type of advice would you offer the recruitment division and what changes if any would you like to see?
- 9.) Any additional input?

Appendix D

Personal Interview-Regional Combination Fire Departments

- 1.) How long have you worked in the recruitment office?
- 2.) What is the size of your department? Career? Volunteer?
- 3.) In general, how often does your department generate eligibility lists?
- 4.) How often do you hire and what is the average size of your academy classes?
- 5.) Have you noticed any changes in the quality of applicants in the past few years? Positive or Negative?
- 6.) What processes or steps does your department take/use to screen applicants for hire? (i.e. written, practical, interview, background, etc.)
- 7.) Do you think the fire service in general does a good job of recruiting and hiring the best qualified individuals?
- 8.) What recruitment methods do you use and are they effective?
- 9.) Do you have issues with retention of employees?

Any other input or information that you think may be helpful or relevant to improving the applicant investigation unit:

Appendix E

Personal Interview: Private Companies

- 1.) How long have you worked in the applicant unit/HR?
- 2.) How often do you hire? How many applicants do you process at a time?
- 3.) How long does it typically take to process a new hire from the time of application?
- 4.) What trends, if any, have you noticed in the quality of applicants?
- 5.) What characteristics or traits do you look for?
- 6.) What is the process or sequence of steps that your company takes to evaluate a candidate for hire?
- 7.) How do you recruit or advertise for your open positions?
- 8.) Do you have retention issues?
- 9.) What other information or input do you have that may benefit the applicant unit in the fire service?

Appendix F

Fire Department Recruitment Interview-Confidentiality Statement

Jennifer L. Utz, Captain
Baltimore County Fire Department

Contact information intentionally deleted by author-Contained on original form

Date: March 27, 2012

Purpose of Study:

This interview is being conducted as part of an applied research project for the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in the interview is totally voluntary and designed to give each individual an opportunity to participate without any fear of disclosure of information or opinion. Individual participation is both encouraged and appreciated, however not mandated by the researcher or the fire department.

Confidentiality:

This interview is designed to provide complete confidentiality. The only information to be published in the final report will be alphabetic and/or numeric identifiers and the general heading of type of affiliation, i.e. regional combination department, private company or corporation, or employee representation group. No names or agencies other than the Baltimore County Fire Department will be referred to in the final report.

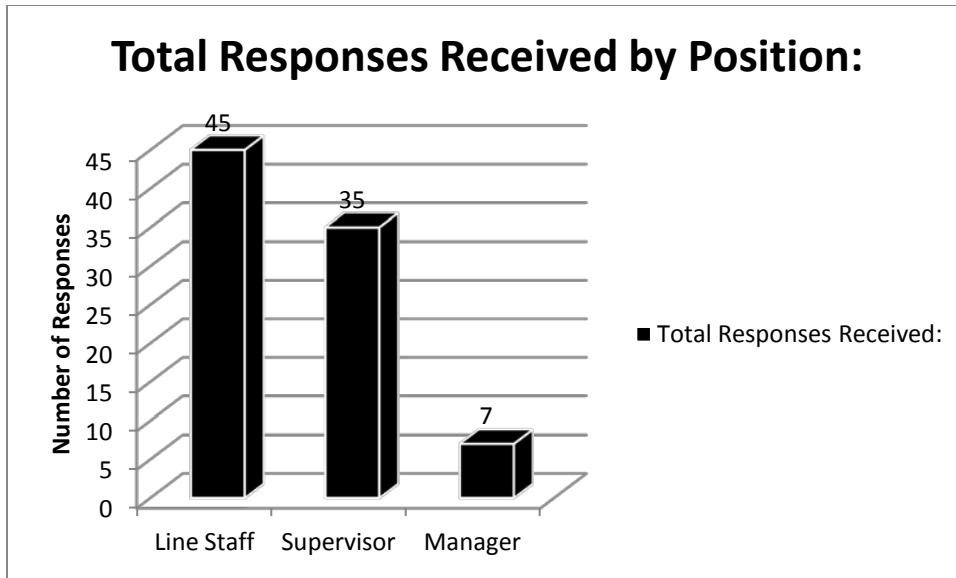


Figure 1: Total number of survey responses received by rank or position.

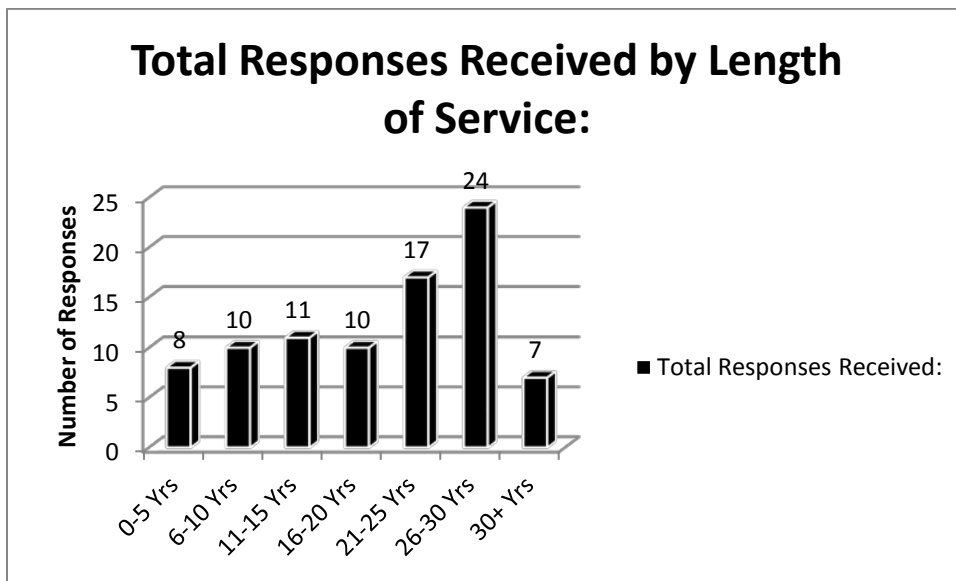


Figure 2: Total survey responses received by length of service.

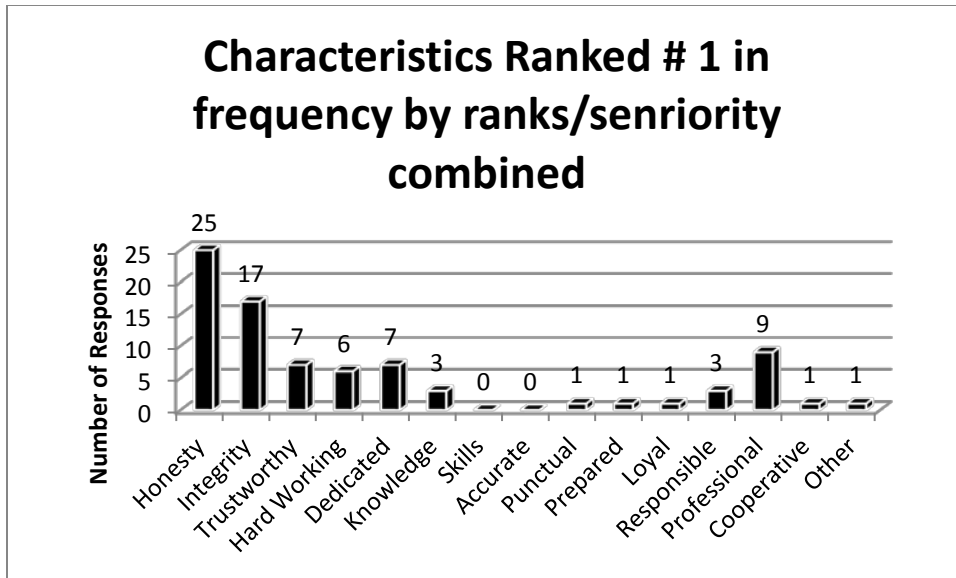


Figure 3: # 1 characteristic ranked by frequency: Honesty.

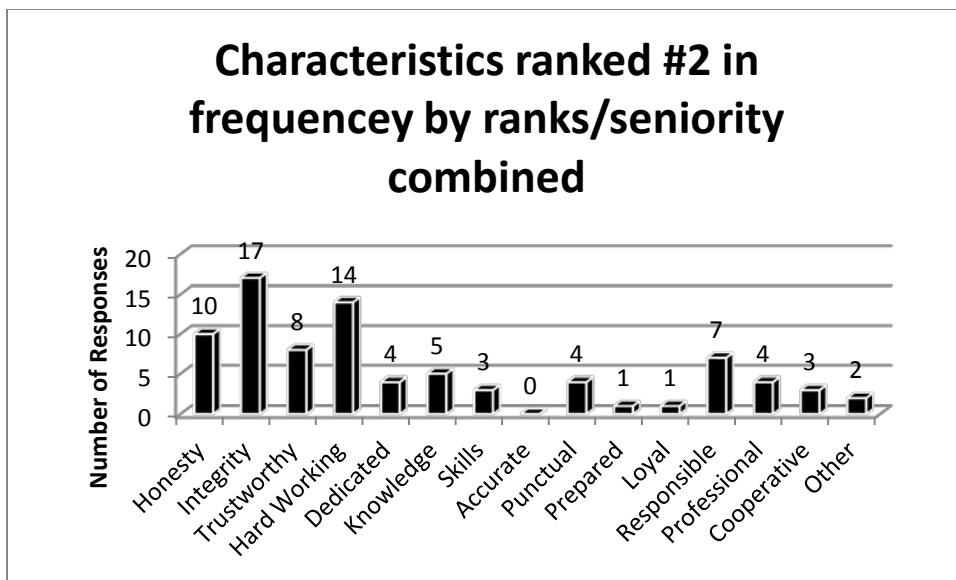


Figure 4: #2 characteristic ranked by frequency: Integrity.

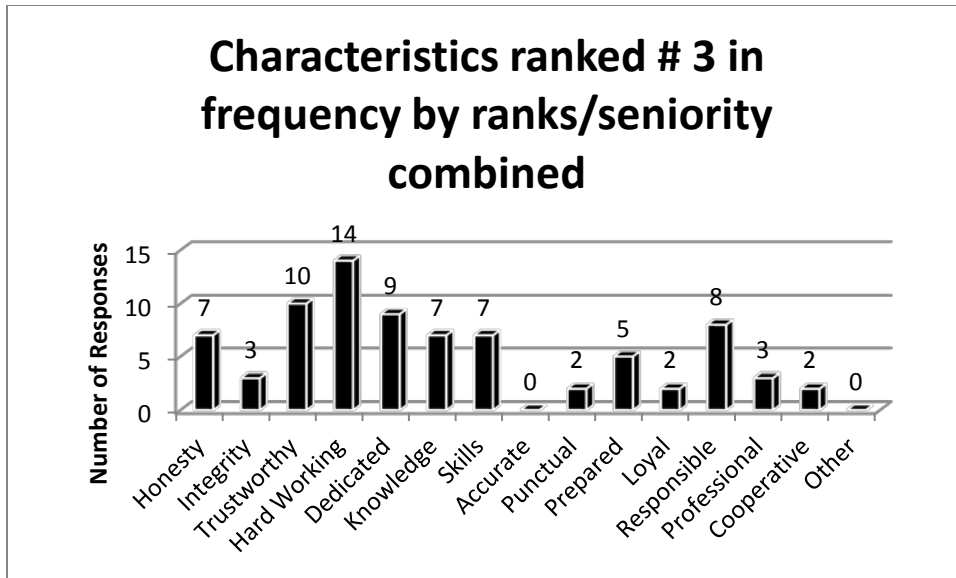


Figure 5: # 3 characteristic ranked by frequency: Hard-working.

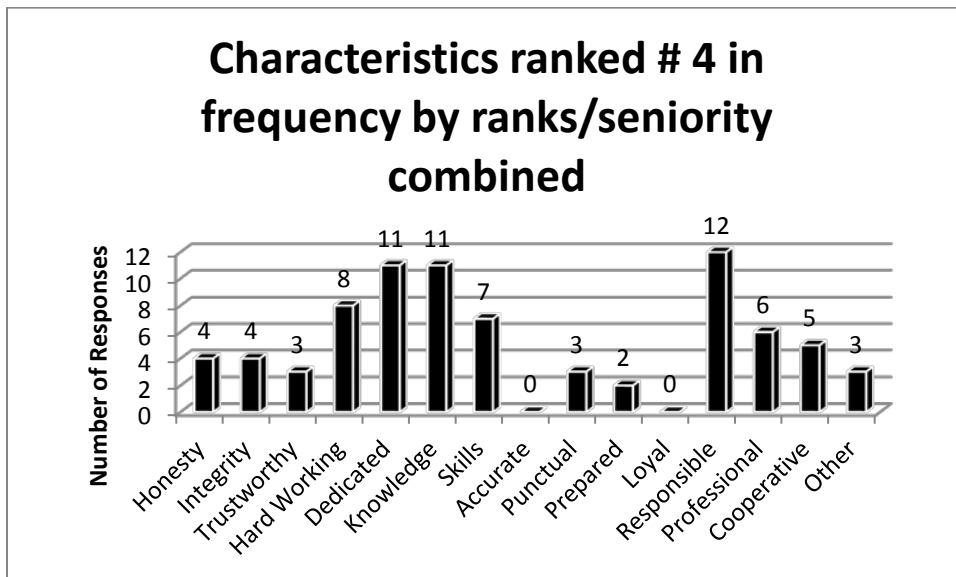


Figure 6: # 4 characteristics ranked by frequency: Responsible.

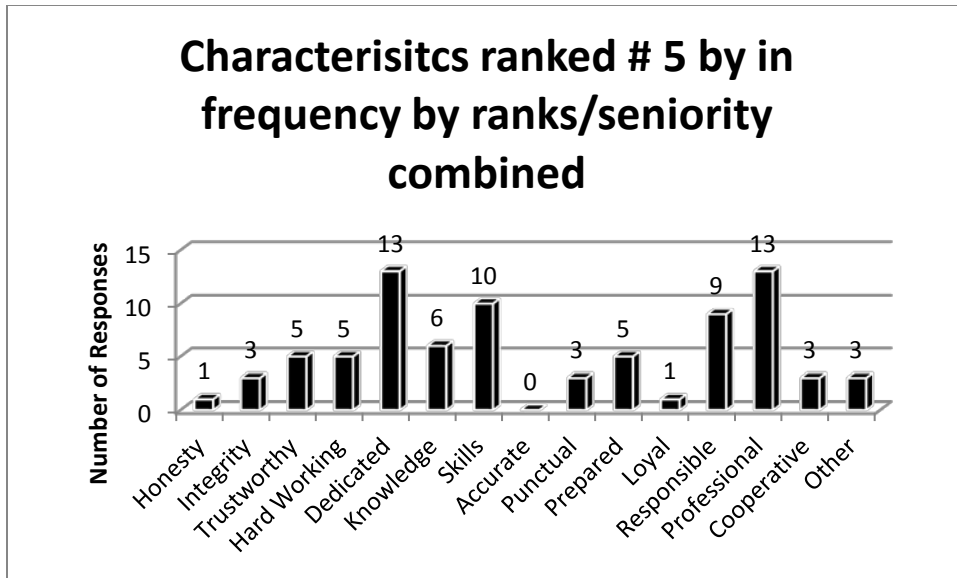


Figure 7: #5 characteristics ranked by frequency: Dedicated & Professional.