

Tote that barge, lift that bale: How employers view fire service volunteers

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During the 2006/2007 fire season in south eastern Australia there were several media reports of employers' reluctance to release employees who were fire service volunteers to fight bushfires. There have also been isolated reports of volunteers being threatened with dismissal by their employers because of their firefighting activities.

In this paper we describe findings from a survey of NSW employers of their views on employing people who were NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers. A total of 384 employers responded to the survey, which was conducted during mid 2006. A four-page survey questionnaire was posted to all non-residential postal addresses in a selection of postal areas throughout the state. Respondents remained anonymous and returned the questionnaires by reply paid envelopes to the Bushfire CRC researchers at La Trobe University in Melbourne.

Respondents were asked for their views about many aspects on employing staff who volunteers with the RFS, any advantages or disadvantages they might see, any negative experiences they had encountered, and how much time they could reasonably spare their employees.

Asking Job Applicants if they volunteer

About 8% of employers reported asking applicants at job interviews whether they were "members of an emergency service". Private sector employers were about twice as likely to ask as public or not-for-profit employers.

Policy about employing staff who are RFS volunteers

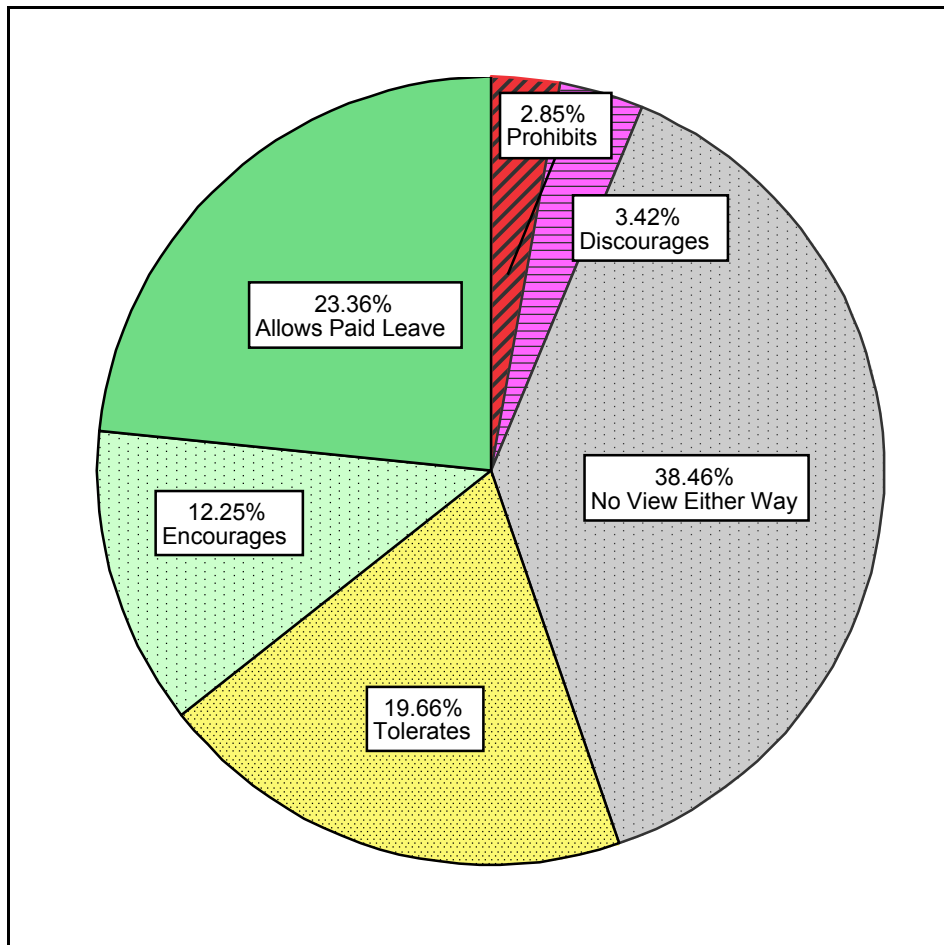
Only about 3% of employers have any kind of policy about employing people who are RFS volunteers, and only about 1% of these have a formal written policy.

Negative Experiences

Few employers (5%) reported negative experiences with employees who were RFS volunteers. The most common complaint identified amongst this small minority was the disruption to work when an employee left the workplace with little or no warning, or was absent for too long or too often.

Attitude to Employees Volunteering with RFS *during* Work Hours

We asked respondents about their organisation's *attitude* to employees volunteering with the RFS both during and after work hours. They were able to select from a range of attitudes ranging from "Prohibits" to "Allows Paid Leave". Only 6% of employers said that they "discouraged" or "prohibited" their employees from volunteering with RFS *during* working hours, and virtually none "discouraged" or "prohibited" volunteering *after* working hours.

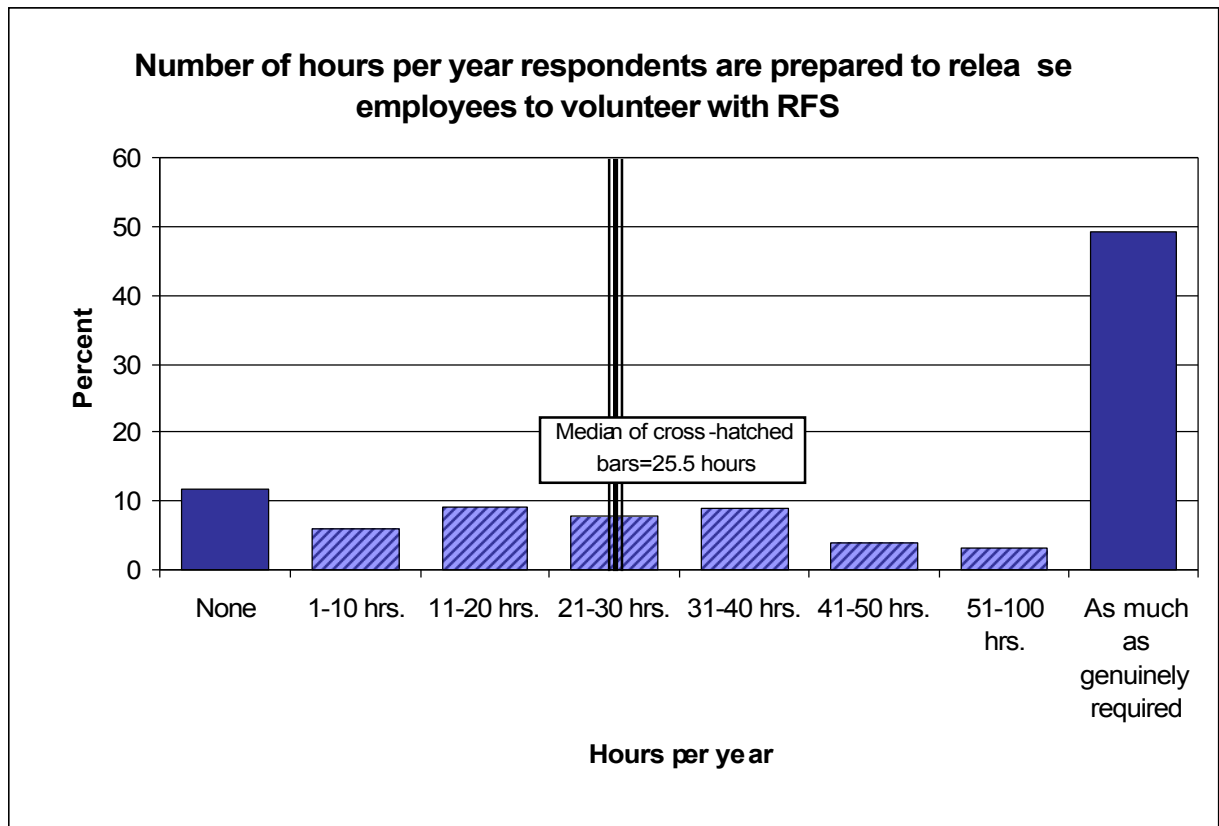


Time off for RFS volunteering

A key question for fire agencies is: how much time are employers prepared to release employees to volunteer? We asked: "For a full time employee working approximately 1,800 hours per year; how many hours per year would your organisation be prepared to release that employee to respond to fires or other incidents with RFS?" Respondents were able to select from a list of times ranging from "None" to "101-200 hours", or "As much as genuinely required".

About 11% of employers were not prepared to release their employees *at all* to volunteer with RFS. About 35% of employers were prepared to release their employees for limited times ranging up to about 100 hours per year, with a median of 25.5 hours per year. No employers selected the option "101-200 hours per year". However, the largest category of employers (45%) reported that they were prepared to release employees for "as much time as genuinely needed".

The median of 25.5 hours is consistent with the findings of the ABS Business Generosity Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002, p.2) which reported that, for businesses who donated cash, goods or services to the community sector, the amount given represented about 1% of their wages and salaries budget, which is equivalent to about 3 working days, or about 24 hours, per year.



Leave Provisions

Given the potential for disruption caused by employees leaving work to volunteer with RFS we anticipated that employers might have in place formal leave provisions for this eventuality. We found that only 12% of employers reported having such provisions. Further analysis showed that Public Sector organisations were much more likely to have implemented formal leave provisions (38%) than were Private Sector organisations (8%).

Concerns

When asked to describe any concerns they had about employing RFS volunteers, 75% of the employers responded “None”. Respondents who did have concerns were invited to describe them and 78 (20%) outlined one or more concerns. These were analysed for content, and four themes were identified:

1. The *amount* of workplace disruption that was tolerable due to employees responding to fires:
 - About 46% of respondents were prepared to accept *some* disruption but were concerned that disruption should not be *too long* or *too often*;
 - About 14% of respondents were not prepared to accept disruption *at certain times* (e.g. teachers when they had classes to take, or farmers during harvest);
 - About 24% of respondents indicated that volunteering must not be allowed to interfere with work *at all*. These were from occupations where fatigue at work could be a critical safety concern such as mining and transport.
2. The negative impact on the employer:
 - The negative impact of most concern was financial (17%), with some respondents concerned about the double burden of continuing to pay the absent volunteer whilst also paying replacement staff during the absence;
 - Of similar concern was the difficulty of finding replacement staff at short notice (15%);
 - The added burden on management of accommodating the absence by reorganising work and staffing or filling in for the absent volunteer (14%);

- Compromised customer service (13%); and
 - The additional workload imposed on the remaining staff (12%).
3. Characteristics of the business that made absences difficult:
 - The employer is small and lacks the spare capacity to make up for absent employees (46%);
 - The employer has strict or demanding clients, strict deadlines or schedules to meet or sees clients by appointment (24%);
 - The employer employs teams of specialised staff members who are highly interdependent and can't function properly in the absence of a team member (19%); and
 - The employer has an overriding duty of care to clients who are children, sick, disabled or elderly (11%);
 4. Miscellaneous—safety and risk issues, verification issues.

Potential Benefits

Skills Derived from Volunteering

Employers were most impressed by the possibility that employees who volunteer with RFS might bring to the workplace skills learned through their volunteering. In particular, 85% of respondents rated as important, the suggestion that RFS volunteers might have enhanced teamwork, initiative, decision-making and leadership skills and familiarity with working according to procedures. Skills more directly related to firefighting such as heavy vehicle and firefighting skills were less highly rated with about 60% of respondents scoring them as “important”.

Employee well-being & morale

Approximately 65% of employers endorsed the proposition put to them in the questionnaire, that employees who volunteer have higher job satisfaction, retention rates, health and fitness. However, fewer employers (47%) thought it important that employees might be attracted to an organisation that supported its employees' emergency service volunteering activities.

Recognition

Employers placed considerable importance on recognition for their support of employees who volunteer with RFS. Recognition from the general public was rated important by 73% of respondents whilst recognition from customers or potential customers was rated important by 65% of respondents.

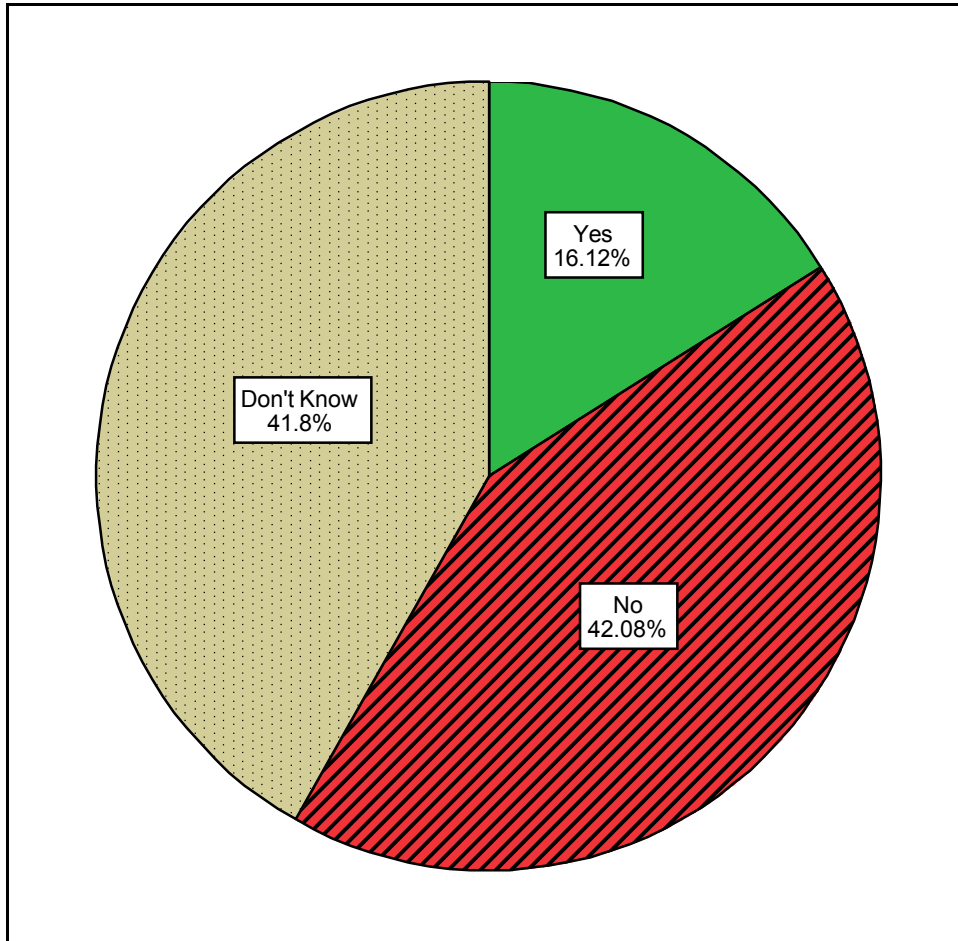
About 60% of employers rated recognition within their organisation amongst its employees as important.

About 50% of respondents regarded formal recognition from RFS as important.

Recognition from related organisations such as industry partners, trade unions and professional associations was regarded as important by only about 40% of respondents. This is interesting in the context of the current debate about social capital and reciprocity. We had anticipated that organisations would place more importance on being seen to be community-minded amongst their peers.

Help in Drafting Leave Provisions

Respondents were asked whether their organisation would benefit from assistance in drafting leave provisions for employees who are RFS volunteers. Given the relatively low incidence of such provisions it might be anticipated that this suggestion would be welcomed; however, our data showed that only 16% of employers thought it would be helpful.



Summary

For most employers, issues relating to employing RFS volunteers are not pressing concerns. Many profess a fairly supportive attitude towards employees volunteering with RFS. Very few reported negative experiences from having done so.

The reservations employers have about releasing employees to respond to fires and incidents with RFS seem largely based on pragmatic concerns and vary considerably with the nature and circumstances of the employing organisation. For some employers, some form of financial “compensation” may be helpful but for others, who need to replace specialised staff at short notice, compensation would make little difference.

The amount of time-off that employers are prepared to allow volunteers varies considerably but the median is 25.5 hours per year and very few employers are likely to support more than 40 hours per year.

The main benefits employers see from employing RFS volunteers are based on the perception that volunteers may have enhanced work skills such as teamwork and initiative, and may have higher morale and well-being. Employers also feel they can benefit from recognition amongst the general public, their customers and their workforce for supporting RFS volunteers.

Implications

Major implications: agencies should make available to their volunteers (a) an information pack for employers; and (b) a model agreement about time off for volunteering.

Key Words

Volunteers, employers