Drowning in Turnover
How to fill your talent pool for future EMS demands

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In a recent survey by JEMS, more than 5,000 EMS providers weighed in on various elements of their profession and the agencies they serve. The results send a clear message to those in leadership positions trying to recruit and foster talent for their organizations—you’re either hiring the wrong person for the job or aren’t set up to keep the right one.

Although it’s unlikely the results will surprise these leaders, who themselves admitted to facing the same challenges identified by their workforce, creating sustainable solutions to the workforce crisis can be challenging without a clear picture of the problems most agencies face. With increasing call volumes and turnover challenges, poor hiring decisions aren’t a mistake agency leaders can afford to make.

“The combination of increased demand and constrained resources will force EMS agencies to get smarter about how they operate, and that starts with hiring the right people,” says Kurt Steward, Ph.D., vice president of public sector for Infor.
The Survey

This survey, conducted by JEMS in 2016, tapped into 5,203 respondents from a blended makeup of volunteer, private, and fire-based EMS systems. (Please note more respondents answered some questions on the survey, but only 5,203 completed the entire survey, so some questions will have a higher response rate.)

All levels of these organizations participated, from EMTs new to the industry to paramedics, supervisors as well as seasoned management and agency administrators. Having the unique perspective from both the EMS provider and their boss confirmed challenges these organizations face across the industry, despite the type of EMS agency.

Participants were asked a wide range of questions covering overall job satisfaction, length of service with the agency, turnover, age, level of experience, reasons for seeking new opportunities, and more. Of the total respondents, 45.6% were private EMS agencies, and 72% deliver ALS care. The responses also covered a majority of the U.S., being split into three main demographics: Northeast, Southeast, and Central.
Workforce Challenges for EMS

From these respondents, three themes emerged that consistently pose challenges for EMS organizations: retention, succession planning, and an increased demand on EMS.

**Retention:** There’s an expensive and frustrating experience many managers will face in their career: watching talented individuals leave their organization. After investing time, energy, and precious resources training a new employee, losing that individual has an obvious negative impact to the agency. But with 57.1% of respondents reporting their agency as understaffed, losing talent poses a greater threat. More staggering is that 64.1% of agencies, both private and fire-based, report retention as “always a problem” out of the options always a problem, sometimes a problem, or not a problem. Worse yet, 68.3% of respondents have annual turnover in their agency at 10% or higher. Of the total respondents, 23.1% reported an annual turnover greater than 20%.

With concerning percentages of the workforce leaving agencies, it’s natural to wonder why. More survey results pointed to some potential reasons EMS providers look to take their talent elsewhere. The survey asked EMTs and paramedics separately why they look to leave their organization. Both sets of respondents pointed to lack of advancement opportunities being the top reason, with 57.4% of EMTs and 67.9% of paramedics responding this way. “Retaining and attracting highly qualified EMTs and paramedics will be critical for EMS agencies as we continue into the next decade,” says Steward.

**Succession planning:** If employees fear they have no career opportunities within their organization, it could indicate a larger problem with succession planning and staff development. When asked about succession planning specifically, both EMS leaders and EMS providers agreed it’s a problem. Only 9.2% of participants selected that they have a “formal, clear succession plan in place that works as designed,” while 63.2% selected “we do not have a process for succession planning.” In looking at the respondent subsets separately, 51.5% of EMS leaders themselves admitted to having no process for succession planning, and 37.2% selected an unsatisfactory response of “we have a succession plan in place, but we still scramble to fill senior positions when someone leaves the agency or retires.”
Increased demand: A third trend that emerged from the survey results is the shifting nature of the EMS industry and its overall role in the healthcare system. JEMS asked participants whether they anticipated increasing community demands on their agency in the next 5 years, which would require larger EMT and paramedic staffing levels. Of the 5,784 respondents for this question, 54.3% expect a “significant” increase, 38.8% expect a “moderate” increase, and only 6.9% expect “no change” at all. With the evolution of EMS’ role and such initiatives as community paramedicine, it’s understandable for a majority of the participants to expect their job demands to increase.

“As EMS’ role in the healthcare system is evolving, it’s crucial for us to recruit and retain quality front line practitioners delivering medical care and navigation services that improve the experience of care for the patient and reduces cost to the system,” says MedStar Mobile Healthcare CEO Doug Hooten, MBA.

Looking at these data points combined paints a bleak picture for management: EMS leaders run understaffed organizations that have unsuccessful systems in place for developing and retaining the necessary work force to meet ever-increasing demands.

The good news is these problems are not unique to the EMS industry. Developing talent and nurturing your talent pool to eventually become the future leaders in your organization is a task faced by any business, and there are proven methods to set your agency up for success.
Building a Better Team

Currently, 57.6% of organizations have a blend of part-time and full-time employees. If there’s a shift in recruitment and use of staffing agencies, which is reportedly low, or an increase in part-time employees, retention will be even more important.

As it stands now, EMS agencies are competing to find and keep the best and brightest in the field, and 44.5% of EMS providers who leave are going to another agency. This presents an opportunity for organizations to improve their retention and career development to keep these individuals who want to stay in the field of EMS. How will they do that? Hooten suggests, “Practitioners need continual support from a pool of well-educated, competent and consistent leadership. Recruitment, retention and leadership succession planning needs to be a focus for our profession.”

The first step to implementing a strong recruitment and retention program is hiring the right person for the job up front. It sounds deceivingly simple, but there’s a science to it.

One place to start is getting to know the employees you’re recruiting. According to the survey, 38.8% of the workforce is under 35. Data suggests that statistic will only increase. Already as of 2015, one in three American workers fall under the millennial age bracket (born 1977-1995). So to stay competitive, agency leaders have to learn how to manage across generations. Forbes predicts that by 2017, 36% of millennials will have manager titles or above, but only 7% of companies have implemented programs to develop these leaders. To set your organization apart, the message is clear: Don’t be one of these companies. “Effective leaders are able to work across multiple generations. The key to long term success is finding the common ground among all elements of the diverse EMS provider workforce that ensures both quality healthcare service delivery while creating a value filled work environment,” says City of Tulsa Fire Department Director of EMS Chief Michael Baker.

Start by analyzing your top performers in the organization. Identify the consistent behavioral traits you see in your best employees. Once you’ve identified these traits, you’ll have a clearer picture of what makes a leader in your organization. That can guide your hiring process. Recruit candidates who display these characteristics, and target these employees early on as being ripe for future leadership positions within the organization. This process can sound daunting but isn’t something you have to do manually. EMS leaders can use technological solutions to analyze these traits, track employee progress, and build out a program.
Long-term planning is key for an agency’s continued success, and it doesn’t have to be shrouded in mystery—or worse, nonexistent, as some EMS leaders reported in the survey. When asking participants how long they typically stay with an organization, JEMS found that 57.4% of EMTs stay 0-3 years, and 41.5% of paramedics stay 0-3 years. The smallest percentage of responses for both EMTs and paramedics was the long-term tenure option of more than 10 years at an agency. Regardless of age, the national average length of service for all workers is 4.6 years.\(^3\) With time of the essence, organizations need to hire the right individual and immediately begin fostering their talent for future success.

If both employees and managers are aware of the leadership traits they’re looking to cultivate, there’s a win-win scenario in place. Employees will feel valued and appreciated. They’ll have a well-defined vision for their path and how to achieve their goals, making them feel more loyal and committed to their future within the agency. Likewise, managers will feel more comfortable having a coaching and development strategy in place. They will know what to look for and how to mature their employees.

But professional development isn’t something managers and employees should think about once a year in their annual performance review. One of the biggest shifts HR departments are seeing is a move away from the annual review and instead scheduling more regular “check-ins” or “touch points.”\(^3\) If you’re waiting to talk to your employee at their review, especially if your employee is a millennial, you’re waiting too long, and you’re missing key opportunities.
One management challenge across generations and especially with millennials is the idea of coaching and feedback. Growing up with the Internet and advanced technology in a society promoting instant gratification means millennials expect this in the workplace too. This generation isn’t looking for daily praise, but they are looking for continued guidance about their performance to know where they stand.

This style of coaching and planning doesn’t just benefit one generation; it benefits your entire organization. And coaching isn’t just for new employees entering the organization. Many individual participants of the JEMS survey cited bad management as an additional reason they’re looking to leave an agency. Bad management could point to another weakness with succession planning. Succession planning doesn’t mean promoting based solely on tenure or seniority. Your organization should be able to identify the traits that will make your business the most successful and look for those individuals who embody your culture and support your mission. With proper workforce development, you can promote positive behavioral traits at all levels of the organization, so you’re not only developing your future leaders but also allowing your current leaders to prosper.

References
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