

Retention Issues Facing Champion Township Fire Department

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that the following statements are true:

1. 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.

2. I have affirmed the use of proper spelling and grammar in this document by using the spell and grammar check functions of a word processing software program and correcting the errors as suggested by the program.

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ABSTRACT

The problem this study addressed was the continued amount of turnover among full and part time personnel in the Champion Township Fire Department. The failure of the department to retain qualified personnel was a problem as part-time firefighters leaving for jobs in other departments disrupted the stability of the workforce.

The purpose of this study is to understand the causes of turnover in the department with the end goal of recommending strategies to help keep quality personnel on the staff.

This study used the Descriptive Research Method to answer the following Research Questions:

1. What effect does the retention issue at Champion Township Fire have on performance within the department? 2. What are the benefits vs. cost of having personnel in the Deferred Retirement Option Plan? 3. How might retention of personnel be strengthened with the current resources available in the Champion Township Fire Department? 4. What factors and circumstances affect the employee's decision to stay or leave the Champion Township Fire Department?

The original data for this study were collected using a survey of 20 former members of the department. The results from the survey indicated that the primary reason given by part-time personnel leaving the department was due to "other personnel commitments." The majority reason given by full time personnel for leaving was the "lack of promotional opportunities within the current rank structure." Pay and benefits were indicated as a minor factor among the reasons for personnel leaving. Recommendations included that the department should develop a plan to provide career growth and retention incentives for the full time personnel and job enrichment opportunities for part-time personnel.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study addressed was long term loss of experienced personnel in Champion Township Fire Department who left for positions in other departments. Retention had become an increasingly difficult problem as the department lost twelve members to other departments over the last five years. The departures had impacted the department's ability to maintain continuity of teams and plan for promotional and professional development opportunities for employees.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to develop strategies that could improve the retention of valued employee's in department. The study investigated a variety of reasons that personnel gave for leaving Champion for other departments. The end goal of the study was to provide the information needed to make informed decisions about strategies that could help the department retain quality personnel on the staff.

Research Questions

The descriptive research method was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What effect does the retention issue at Champion Township Fire have on performance within the department?
2. What are the benefits vs. cost of having personnel in the Deferred Retirement Option Plan?
3. How might retention of personnel be strengthened with the current resources available within the Champion Township Fire Department?
4. What factors and circumstances affect the employee's decision to stay or leave the Champion Township Fire Department?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Champion Township Fire Department (CTFD) is currently a combination department consisting of seven career staff, including the fire chief, and 22 part time staff for a total force of 29. The shift coverage is currently at four with two career members, which consists of a Captain, a firefighter and two part-time staff firefighters on 24/48 shifts seven day per week. The fire chief works Monday through Friday 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The CTFD provides Advanced Life Support Service and Fire Protection services to a resident population of 9,762 and to the surrounding communities in the form of automatic mutual aid. In 2009 the department responded to 1625 emergency responses which represented a 100% increase since 1995. In 2009 425 were fire related emergencies, and of the total of 1625 responses we assisted with automatic and mutual aid 247 times.

In over 40 years the Champion Township Fire Department has only retired four full time personnel. The department has seen over 12 full time personnel leave early in their careers since 1977, and three within the last seven years, and 2 in the last three years for various reasons.

Currently with our full time staffing we have over 143 years of service and our current average age is 42.4 years for full time staff and 41.8 for our part time staff. Of the three current officer positions in the department, one is held by an individual who is currently in the Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP). He is eligible to stay up to 5 more years in the program.

The two remaining shift officers have 22 years and 21 years respectively. The retirement year of service is 25 in the state of Ohio. When each individual was polled about their plans for retirement for research purposes, they both responded that they plan to only work out their remaining years in order for them to reach 25 years of total service.

Replacing the other current officers will be necessary within 3 to 5 years. The challenge to the department over the next several years will be to retain the current fire fighters in order for the department to have a smooth transition into the next generation of leadership with the Champion Township Fire Department personnel, and so they continue to develop and grow in their current roles. If the department cannot retain the junior members and groom some of those for promotion there will be a critical shortage of experience within the department once the future retirements start taking place.

The significance of this study was to identify the causes of personnel leaving the department and develop strategies to retain and develop current personnel into an experienced and promotable staff to serve the community in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of reasons were cited for turnover in personnel ranging from lack of leadership from superiors, lack of a competitive pay scale, and lack of promotional opportunities within the fire district. These issues go to the heart of what the up and coming employees are looking for in job opportunities. The fact that there were available jobs for personnel to move into after leaving the district also is a factor of whether personnel make the difficult decision to move on from their comfort zone (Wilson, 2006).

Beadle (1999) reviewed issues facing a combination department, one of which was the lack of consistency due to having to work with different people every shift. The lack of retention in combination departments is affected by the lack of training for the volunteers and the attitudes of the full time employees towards the volunteer or part-time employees as seen in the results of questionnaires presented to the members

Young (2001) studied the effect of culture and societal issues in the surrounding area on personnel within the department. It may not be only internal issues that contribute to turnover but it can be the lack of satisfaction with one's current environment and surroundings that cause an employee to seek out different opportunities away from the current population.

Retention in the fire service can also be related to the time factor for part time and volunteer members.

Carter (1996) cited many non fire related issues for why retention is a problem in the fire service. In reviewing the data provided by the article was that the main problem was the time factor, and the obligations associated with being a productive and active member of the fire department. The main cause of this issue was the part time employee's commitment to their full time job, and not having the proper time to commit to the department.

Villegas (1998) speaks to the fact that the employer needs to provide what the employees want out of a career. Providing training that is necessary for the skills that are used daily is important in showing employees that the employer cares about them and is willing to invest the time and money into their career development. Another area was the need to provide the employees with mentorship and coaching. The corporate sector also embraces the need to empower and mentor employees in order for them to feel connected and a needed part of the overall success of retention within their respective businesses.

Eby (2006) reported that the key benefit of mentoring in conjunction with an aggressive retention program is more satisfied employees. He stated that when you have an employee that feels that he or she has someone that is guiding their career progression, they are more likely to take an active stock in the outcome of what type of employee they will become. Eby spoke about the need to mentor and the important part of ownership in one's career path.

In looking at the content of all of the literature that was reviewed for this paper, the main theme regarding retention was to keep quality employees is to provide the employees a sense of involvement and ownership in their careers. They need to see that self-involvement and guidance from a mentor will play an important part in one's career path and retention. The focus of the data collection for this study was around this foundation and attempt to get an accurate account of why retention may or may not be an issue within the Champion Township Fire Department.

PROCEDURES

In completing this research study a survey was used along with archived information on the subject of retention. One survey (Appendix 1) covered a broad spectrum of departments in order to get a true understanding of what retention problems have been caused mainly due to the implementation of the DROP program in the State of Ohio. A second survey was used in order to solicit the reasons that previous employees indicated for leaving the department (Appendix 2). The surveys were sent out to 3 former full time and 17 part time employees of the department. The results of the survey were intended to provide insightfulness into the ways that the CTFD might increase its ability to retain qualified personnel.

To determine the ability of answering the other research questions in this research project I was able to research past records that dealt with the cost involved with payroll and benefits of personnel, after they reached their retirement of 25 years, and once they entered the D.R.O.P. I also completed a short term evaluation of how we could strengthen our current resources with what we have available currently in the Champion Township Fire Department.

Definition of Terms

Former Personnel. Personnel who worked for Champion Township Fire Department

EMT. Emergency Medical Technician

Township Administration. Board of Trustees

Deferred Retirement Option Plan- A plan within the Ohio Fire and Police Pension Fund that allows personnel to retire on paper, but to continue working up to 8 more years while collecting interest on money that is invested for them based on their retirement pension entitlement.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited due to the lack of up to date information concerning the history of retention within the Champion Township Fire Department. The survey responses were obtained from a small sample of individuals that had work in the department and had left for other employment. The study was limited by the relatively to a limited number of reasons for departures and no follow up was conducted to discuss details with past employees.

Results

The results of the survey and literature review provided some answers to the research questions that were posed at the beginning of the study. Each question is presented and findings are discussed.

1. What effect does the retention issue at Champion Township Fire have on performance within the department?

In reviewing the effects the retention in the department has on performance, former and current personnel indicated in the survey (Appendix 2) that turnover has not affected the performance of the department as a whole. The personnel indicated that turnover had no bearing on how they performed on a daily basis. There was no data available to show that there was any type of performance issues with the personnel due to loss of personnel. The Champion Township Fire Department does not have any type of performance evaluation; therefore I was not able to collect the data on what personnel performance had on retention issues on the department as a whole.

2. What are the benefits vs. cost of having personnel in the Deferred Retirement Option Plan?

An examination of the benefit vs. cost of having personnel in the DROP showed that the production level of personnel enrolled in the DROP program was reduced greatly. The cost of

the current employee in the program, a senior employee working past the normal age of retirement, continues to grow due to longevity pay that is included in the hourly wage based on years of service in the department. During the next 8 years, 3 employees are eligible to continue working. They will receive yearly increases in their base pay and longevity pay. The inability to bring in a new employee at a lower rate will become a huge problem for the department's budget. Right now, the department could save over \$ 23,000 in pay and benefits by eliminating personnel that are currently in the DROP and bringing in new personnel with a lower stepped scale of salary.

3. How might retention of personnel be strengthened with the current resources available in the Champion Township Fire Department?

A review of the current resources available within the CTFD was conducted to assess what retention efforts could be supported. Providing some type of monetary buy out of the senior personnel in order to provide the younger part time staff with the opportunity to secure full time employment in the department was considered. A review of the current labor agreement between the CTFD and the firefighters union determined that there was no language in the contract concerning employee buy outs. In addition a review of the budget indicated that current funding sources would not support the added expense of buying out personnel for the remainder of their employment. Another option that was considered was the possibilities of promoting current full time personnel to the rank of Captain in order to give them a degree of ownership in the department. The ability to promote would be considered a management right within the department, but such a move would be limited by the ability to fund the promoted positions. The estimated cost of making these promotions would be around \$ 5,600.00 per year and it would also solidify our rank structure within the department.

4. What factors and circumstances affect the employee's decision to stay or leave the Champion Township Fire Department?

Eighteen of the 20 former employees completed and returned the retention survey. The survey options included 11 reasons for ending their employment with Champion Township and a space to list any other reason for leaving. Fifteen of the 18 respondents (83%) indicated that “Personal commitments outside of the department” such as time availability, other jobs, financial considerations or family issues was the primary reason for leaving the department. The second most selected reason was “Lack of promotional opportunities” with 12 of 18 (66%) respondents indicating so.

Table 1
Responses to Retention Questionnaire

Reasons Given	Responses
Unqualified to continue service	0
Training Opportunities	0
Turn Over of Fire Chiefs	3
Personal Commitments	15
Relocated	0
Lack of Promotion	12
Lack of opportunity for Full time employment	2
Issues with Township Admin.	2
Personal Conflicts	0
Financial Issues	2

N = 18

Personnel that filled out the questionnaire had the ability to mark multiple reasons on the survey for their reasons for leaving. As seen in the results, personal commitment and lack of opportunity for full time employment were the leading reasons that personnel decided to move on in their careers and leave the Champion Township Fire Department. The monetary issue facing personnel in their decision to leave a career was not indicated as a major factor. The

average years of experience of the personnel that responded was 6 years of service when leaving Champion Township Fire Department. All of the respondents were Firefighter/EMT's with the exception of (1) Captain, and did not have the ability to progress any further within the department due to our current promotional and rank structure.

Discussion

In reviewing the literature and the survey data, it is evident that there are a number of reasons why people leave jobs, not only within the fire service but also in the private sector. The findings of this study showed that turnover among fulltime personal in CTFD is related primarily to a lack of promotional opportunity and to personal commitments such as time, family, other work and financial obligations. These findings are consistent with (Wilson, 2006).

The results from the survey indicate that the department has to do a better job of providing incentives to retain employees and to create opportunities for promotion within the department. A number of literature sources noted that job satisfaction was a key factor in personnel leaving for other opportunities. In many of the cases reported, employee satisfaction was achieved through mentoring programs and aggressive retention programs as documented in Carter (1996). Neither of these options is currently available in CTFD. The need for coaching was evident in both the private and public sectors literature. The literature reported that investment in the employee, both personally and financially will increase the chances of keeping the employee, and getting more production out of that employee (Villegas, 1998).

Recommendations

The main points that were obtained from this research were that there is a need to provide the junior membership with promotional opportunities and give them a sense of ownership within the department. The department needs to be able to strike a balance between the need to grow and excel with the new younger employees and the need to keep the knowledge and skills of our seasoned employees. To do so the following recommendations are presented.

1. It is recommended that the department should continue to track eligibility of senior members to enter the DROP program in order to determine when and how retirements will impact

department operations. Knowing when and how departures will affect both mission critical job experience and leadership positions will be critical to planning and managing effective personal promotional opportunities and encouraging retention by making future opening known to the members.

2. The department should identify key leadership personnel who are essential to mission continuity and encourage them to remain in the department via the DROP program. Such a strategy should be based on the individual's willingness to mentor younger members of the department as preparation for future advancement. By doing so, senior member could play a big part in accomplishing the goal of keeping younger employees in the department while they learn and prepare to advance into the new position when the older person does retire.

3. Alternatively, it is recommended that the department encourage senior member of the department, who do not possess mission critical skills or leadership experience, to take their retirement when eligible. This tactic could provide younger members with promotional opportunities sooner and help to avoid becoming top heavy with officers in the department.

Departures would also contribute to balancing the budget as salaries increase when employees are promoted.

4. It is recommended that during the transition period till other senior members retire or leave the department, the administration needs to be creative in seeking ways to provide the employees with opportunities to develop their leadership skills and sense of ownership without making them an officer. The department should provide employees with specialized skills training and educational incentives that would enable them to enhance the department and their careers. The department needs to demonstrate a sense of faith in the employees and their commitment to the

department by providing job experiences for employees to tryout different roles and assignments. Communication is the key with our part time employees. The department must be more attentive to their needs, aspirations and other commitments. Part time employees need to sense that they important to future operations and mission of the department. The department must continue to evaluate our member's needs and make every attempt possible to create an environment that they want to return to, and one that rewards them for their loyalty and time of service.

Appendix 1

Former Champion Township Personnel Survey

1. Current rank of former personnel? _____
2. Total years in the Fire Service? _____
3. Years of service with the Champion Township Fire Dept.? _____
4. Rank when you separated from Champion Township Fire? _____
5. Please check all of the reasons that apply to you ending your employment with the Champion Township Fire Department.

Unqualified to continue service

Quality or Quantity of Training Opportunities

Turnover of Fire Chief's

Personal Commitments: Time, Family, Work, Financial

Relocated outside of response jurisdiction

Lack of opportunity for full time employment

Lack of promotional opportunities within the department

Retirement

Issues with township administration

Personnel conflicts within the department

Financial and benefit issues

Please list any other reason not listed above _____

6. Are you currently active in the Fire/EMS Service? Yes _____ No _____
7. If you answered yes to the previous question, What status are you currently serving in:
Paid/Career _____ Part Time _____ Volunteer _____

8. Would you consider returning to the Champion Township Fire Department in the future, under the current administration? Yes _____ No

Appendix 2

1. Current rank of former personnel? (1) Captain (12) FF (5) out of service
2. Total years in the Fire Service? Minimum 2 years ; Maximum 27 years
3. Years of service with the Champion Township Fire Dept.? Minimum 2 years ; Maximum 27 years.
4. Rank when you separated from Champion Township Fire? (2) Fire Chief's that resigned , (2) Captains that retired. (14) Fire Fighters that resigned.
5. Please check all of the reasons that apply to you ending your employment with the Champion Township Fire Department.

0 Unqualified to continue service

0 Quality or Quantity of Training Opportunities

3 Turnover of Fire Chief's

15 Personal Commitments: Time, Family, Work, Financial 15/17 = 88%

0 Relocated outside of response jurisdiction

5 Lack of opportunity for full time employment 5/17= 29%

12 Lack of promotional opportunities within the department 12/17 = 70%

2 Retirements of Captains

2 Issues with township administration

0 Personnel conflicts within the department

2 Financial and benefit issues

Please list any other reason not listed above _____

6. Are you currently active in the Fire/EMS Service? Yes 70% No 41%.

7. If you answered yes to the previous question, What status are you currently serving in: Paid/Career 2 12% Part Time 8 47% Volunteer 2 12%

8. Would you consider returning to the Champion Township Fire Department in the future, under the current administration? Yes 16 No 2

Appendix 3

- 1) How many were interested in only being a firefighter? **2/18**
- 2) How many positions are now open and cannot be filled due to lack of applicants? **0**
- 3) What is the average turnover rate among neighbor departments? **Undetermined**
- 4) How competitive is the pay scale in your department? **In line with surrounding departments.**
- 5) What is the general employment rate in the community? **We currently sit at about 11% unemployment for our area.**
- 6) Who is the largest employer in the community? **Kent State Trumbull Campus**
- 7) Where else do part time employees work? **70% work at other surrounding fire departments. 40% work other full time jobs outside of the fire service.**
- 8) When personnel leave, what other departments do they go to? **Outside of our county due to pay scale and promotional opportunities.**
- 9) How many full time positions are in the CTFD for firefighters? **3**
- 10) Are only officer positions that of the Chief and Captains? **Yes**

