

Where should we be going, and are we on our way yet? Stakeholder perspectives on making the future of emergency volunteering

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Emergency volunteering is any and all volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency, regardless of its duration or its particular organisational affiliation, or lack thereof.

Mud Army and SES volunteers working together during the 2011 floods in Queensland. Photo: Queensland Fire and Emergency Services.



Modern landscape of (emergency) volunteering is transforming

- Formal EM volunteering is becoming more demanding
- Fewer people have time for formal, high commitment volunteering & there is more competition for volunteers
- People are choosing more flexible, self-organised, less formal ways to volunteer
- Government expectations on Volunteer-Involving Organisations are increasing
- People still want to contribute to their communities



Challenge for emergency volunteer sustainability

“[Our change in thinking has] come from an understanding of where the national and international trends are going around sustainable volunteerism models and the emergence of new volunteerism groups and what makes them attractive. You look at that and go, ‘okay, here’s what we’re up against’. **Our traditional models will not survive in this area. So where do we need to go?**”

MANAGER IN EMERGENCY SERVICE VOLUNTEERISM



Change is not new, response is slow

“The greatest challenge now facing volunteer-based emergency services is a need to embrace prevailing change and establish priorities for action.”

REINHOLT / 2000

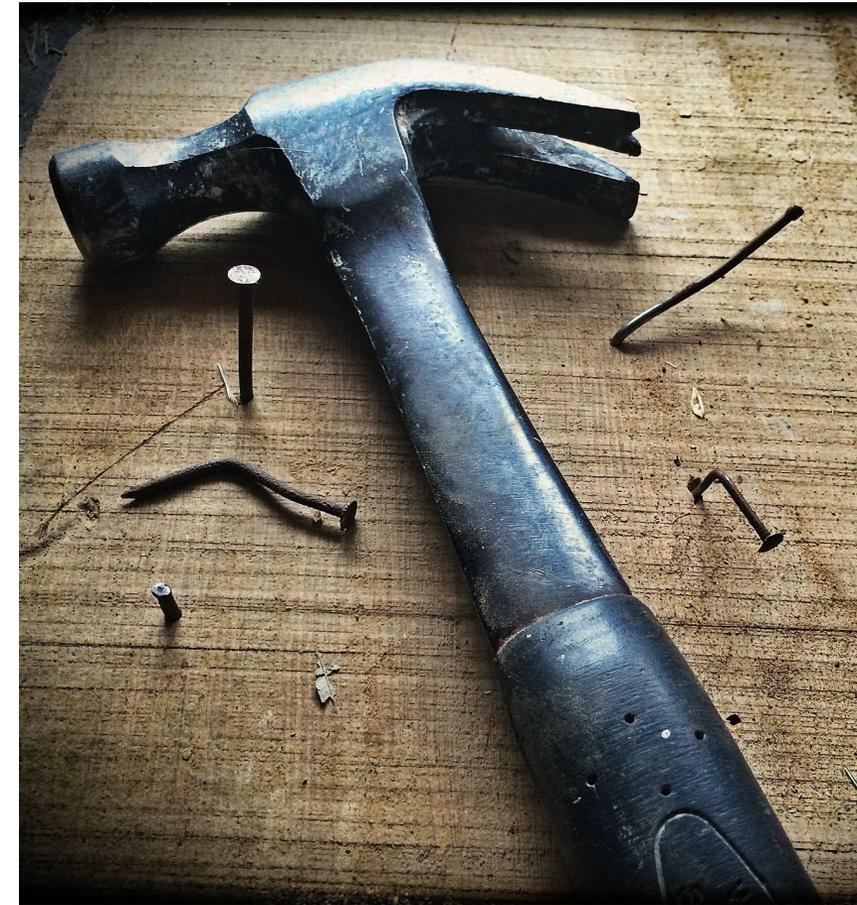
“This is the most exciting, challenging, vital, vibrant time to be alive and active in the Volunteer World. It is in transit. We are moving from the no longer to the not yet. Indeed, our arena might be characterized by these five Cs: Change, Challenge, Creativity, Choice, and Collaboration.”

SCHINDLER-RAINMAN / 1984

Framing the emergency volunteering 'problem'

- Frames are stories we tell about what is wrong and what needs fixing (e.g. Rein and Schön 1996)
- Complex problems tend to be framed overly narrowly ("if you have hammer everything looks like a nail.")
- The way complex problems are framed determines which solutions are deemed most effective and necessary.
- Frames can enable policy action or stall it

What different stories do stakeholders tell about what is wrong and what needs fixing with emergency volunteering?



Stakeholder perspectives

Participant categories	In-depth interviews	Qualitative Survey	Total
Managers in emergency service volunteerism	18	-	18
Managers in disaster welfare & recovery volunteerism	16	-	16
Local government managers	17	-	17
Community sector representatives	2	46	48
Volunteering peak body representatives	6 (group interview)	-	6
Emergency service volunteer group representatives	1	75	76
Total	60	121	181

Table 1: Emergency volunteering 2030 Environmental Scan participants

NB: Additional 8 community engagement managers, 7 volunteering peak body reps, 6 volunteer group reps to be added

1. Volunteer Sustainability



Problem

- Recruitment and retention of formal volunteers under current models is increasingly difficult in the face of the changing nature of volunteering.

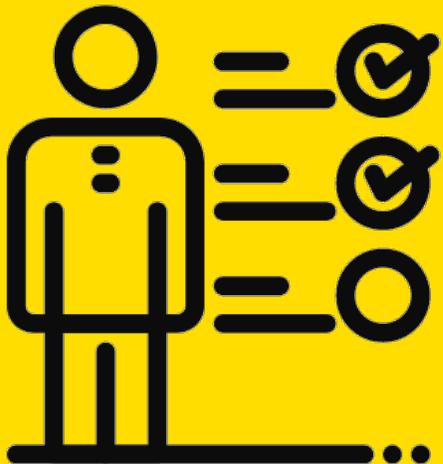
Solution

- Redesign volunteer models & management practices to make formal volunteering more attractive, flexible and accessible to a wider, more diverse range of people.

“Our issues are the standard ones about how do we maintain and sustain our volunteer workforce, given we can’t pay them? ... How do we match the expectations of people wanting to volunteer with the kind of roles we have available? How do we maintain motivation and commitment over time?”

MANAGER IN EMERGENCY SERVICE VOLUNTEERISM

2. Professionalisation



Problem

- Formal volunteering is becoming more professional in line with corporatisation, bureaucratization & government regulation; improves safety and service quality but creates barriers & disincentives, and disconnect between organisations & communities.

Solution

- Make formal volunteering as easy as possible; Review implementation to reduce burden on volunteers

“increased corporatisation, substantially more direction and orders from career bureaucrats, ...as a result it is no longer as relevant or connected to community. [The organisation's] key strength as a community-based and driven organisation is being replaced by the notion that it's a professional emergency response service. It is both, but the pendulum and momentum is all focused on the latter and not the former.”

ES VOLUNTEER GROUP REPRESENTATIVE

3. Expectation-capacity gap



Problem

- Rising political & social expectations of volunteers and Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs) in EM, but decreasing or inadequate resourcing and support available to (non-response) VIOs build capacity to meet these expectations.

Solution

- Involve a wider range of stakeholders in planning; redesign formal EM arrangements and funding provisions to be more equitable and inclusive; build greater community-wide capacity for EM

“There is no recognition in the formal arrangements as they currently stand for spontaneous volunteers, local community groups, local community sector organisations and so on. [...] there is no recognition or resources to 'support the supporters' - and this inevitably takes a toll on the individuals and organisations involved.”

COMMUNITY SECTOR REPRESENTATIVE

4. Culture Clash



Problem

- Command-and-control culture / structures and traditionalistic attitudes are barriers to the innovation, collaboration needed for a positive future for volunteering.

Solution

- Carefully and actively manage culture change to bring people along with shifts needed to adapt to the changing external environment; build stronger leadership for change and stronger adaptive learning capacity.

“I think entrenched attitudes, vested interests and an 'old guard' unwilling to innovate are the greatest challenges to this [EM] sector at present.”

COMMUNITY SECTOR REPRESENTATIVE

Four Frames

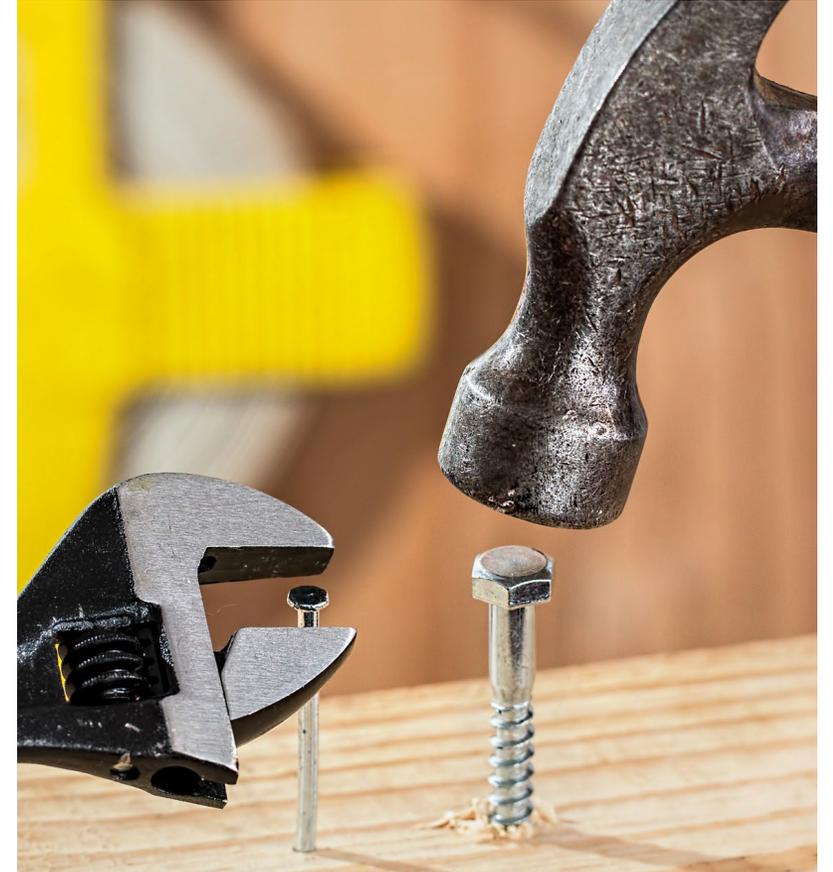
	Volunteer Sustainability	Expectation-Capacity Gap	Professionalisation	Culture Clash
Managers in emergency service volunteerism	Red Circle	Yellow Circle	Red Circle	Yellow Circle
Managers in disaster welfare & recovery volunteerism	Red Circle	Red Circle	Yellow Circle	Yellow Circle
Local government managers	Yellow Circle	Red Circle	Yellow Circle	Yellow Circle
Community sector	Yellow Circle	Red Circle	Yellow Circle	Red Circle
Volunteering peak bodies	Yellow Circle	Red Circle	Yellow Circle	Yellow Circle
Emergency service volunteer group representatives	Red Circle	Red Circle	Red Circle	Yellow Circle

Table 3: Presence of frames amongst Environmental scan participant categories (red=strong; yellow = moderate presence).



Implications

- EM sector **relies too heavily** on one – Volunteer Sustainability
- Not attending sufficiently to other key issues:
 - **Exacerbates** Volunteer Sustainability problem also
 - **Stalls progress** on making a preferred future
- Currently **tracking towards a far-less-than-preferable 'baseline' future**
- Is current action across all four areas, but curtailed by organisational boundaries, capacity (\$\$) and an **absence of sector-level leadership & responsibility**.
- In some respects, **the wrong people are talking about volunteering**.



More information

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