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Diversity recruiting is about getting candidates on equal footing (Guest Commentary)

Ottawa Police Services says traditional recruiting methods outdated in a multicultural society

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The changing demographics of job candidates and the need for managers to tailor their management styles accordingly is an important concern in today's workforce. But how we recruit in a multicultural society has to change as well.

In policing, the traditional means of recruiting that have suited us well for more than 150 years are no longer appropriate. Newspaper advertisements, "shopping mall" recruitment booths and the twice-a-year university or college job fairs just don't meet our needs.

Applicant pools are changing — not only in terms of education, experience and age. Potential recruits now come from communities that simply don't view policing as a career option or as an honourable profession. This is one of the major reasons why outreach projects will fail if we don't let go of the old ways of recruiting. They will also fail if we do not address retention issues.

I would not suggest that we have to convince people to become police officers; candidates must already possess the desire to wear the badge, otherwise the spirit isn't there to enable them to do a good job.

What I would suggest is that the policing spirit is indeed in many of our new community members — we simply need to learn how to nurture it and at the same time bring about organizational change that will support it.

Police services have a crisis to address: a lack of potential candidates to fill increasing vacant positions. To recruit new applicants in Canada's fast-changing communities, police organizations need to anticipate candidates' lack of knowledge in three important areas: their knowledge of the job, their understanding of the competitive process into which they enter, and their awareness of what happens after they are hired.

Zero to minus five: Before recruitment even begins

The objective of any police outreach program is to ensure all candidates who apply are at

what I call the zero baseline. In other words, everyone about to enter into a race against 30 other people who are applying for the same position has to feel confident that he is as informed, prepared and qualified as he can be to win that position.

For the most part, people born and raised in Canada have a good, general understanding of how policing in general is done in this country. However, an individual's social, cultural and familial surroundings may affect how she views policing. If this set of perceptions negatively overpowers the first set of understanding, I consider that a minus five, which requires effort on the recruiter's part to overcome.

This is not about recruiters making efforts to make a person qualified for the job. Nor is it about recruiters having to convince people to join something they don't want to join. This is about recruiters making an effort to simply address an erroneous perception. People's perceptions form their reality. Unless recruiters put in the effort to point out the differences between perceptions and reality, good candidates will not come to the fore.

Minus 10: A candidate enters the recruitment process

The second set of knowledge that has traditionally helped people get into policing is the fact that they know someone in a police service somewhere who is willing to give them advice. They can tap this contact for tips on how to prepare for the hiring process or ideas about policing as a career. They can get a ride-along — even more than one if their friend or family acquaintance is willing to help them out. Or they attend a workshop at the community college or the university to get information that they need.

Zero effort required here. The candidate is already well-informed thanks to friends and family connections and needs no further help.

But some candidates don't have this advantage. It may be that they are too new to the community to have met anyone who works for a police service, or they come from communities that generally don't understand or trust the police.

These people therefore do not have the contacts needed to allow them the opportunity to start on their career path. They are at minus 10. Reaching out to them requires extra effort on the part of police service recruiters.

Recruitment information sessions at colleges and universities are not necessarily comfortable places for some excellent candidates. Sitting in a group of 30 potential candidates may not be the best way for some people to get information they need or raise issues that they do not want to share with strangers. It can indeed be difficult to ask questions, especially if the question touches on societal or cultural perceptions that most others in the class may not share.

Recruiters need to put effort into meeting these people one on one. They can set up special information sessions at venues where potential candidates feel most comfortable. That may mean a discussion over coffee or tea with one or two potential candidates. Our

recruiters have had more success with small groups of five or six curious youths, at meetings set up by community leaders, than at job fairs where 500 people walk by our booth.

Candidates born and raised in Canada may already know about the ride-along program. However, someone who doesn't know anyone involved in policing in Canada may find it difficult to access that opportunity. If the person is further fighting a distrust of police, the long and involved application process for a ride-along may seem intrusive.

An effort must be put into making sure all candidates who want this experience are given the opportunity. That means making sure they understand not only what to expect in a ride-along, but also why we ask what we ask in the application process. It helps to have a list of volunteer officers who are championing your recruiting efforts, who can look after the candidate during a ride-along. A call from such an officer after the ride-along goes a long way in helping the recruiter determine the next move with the potential candidate.

Unsuccessful candidates

All recruiters know how complex the process to become a police officer can be. The interview, the tests for physical agility, fitness, aptitude and communications, the background investigations and psych tests are all very intrusive and complex. A person can spend days, weeks and months making his way through the process only to be rejected at the very end.

Police organizations today are not good at doing debriefings to explain to candidates why they didn't make the cut. Certainly there are times when police services cannot share the information we have obtained through our work, but people with friends in the business can generally find some explanation about the end result.

But an individual with no such connections, lacking an explanation, may come up with her own ideas and opinions about what went wrong. These ideas will form the person's own explanation of what happened, which the person will share with friends and family. If these versions are spread widely enough, police service recruiters will find all efforts thwarted in the immediate future with that particular community. Hence, recruiters must have well-devised strategies to close the files positively on unsuccessful candidates.

It is up to us, as professionally prepared and well-trained members of well-established organizations with years of tradition, to reach out and figure out how to do things correctly. It is not up to individuals with no support, with conflicting traditions or with misconceptions to step up to the plate and figure things out for themselves and fix things for us.

Minus 15: If the candidate becomes an officer

Family and friends take a great deal of pride in candidates who are hired to become police officers. They celebrate the event, help the new officer set up the move to a new

community if need be, attend the graduation ceremony and show their pride in the fact that their son or daughter is now a proud member of the local police service.

Zero effort required here. The candidate is already well-supported by friends and family and needs little or no further help.

When a minus 15 candidate is hired, by contrast, there is a very good chance that his family members may be shocked that their child has chosen policing as a profession. They may view the profession through their memories of how police operate in their home country, where perhaps police officers don't make any money unless they are corrupt, or amount to little more than an enforcement arm of a corrupt regime.

Minus 15 candidates may find very little pride exhibited by the family and understandably so. Friends and relatives may not celebrate or even attend the graduation ceremony. In some communities, friends can turn into enemies — not only of the recruit but of the family.

Minus 15 candidates who are hired need a great deal of support from the police service in their transition into policing. This goes beyond recruiting and involves the police training centres, coach officers, supervisors and platoon peers.

Police services that recognize the complexity of recruiting in today's Canada and in their communities in particular will put the resources and expertise required where it is needed. Traditional means of recruiting, which for the most part required not as much effort in recruiting as in processing files, are no longer effective. It's now absolutely essential for recruiters to have an awareness of, and an ability to work with, the changing demographics of Canadian communities, in terms of education, age, religion, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation and culture.

The leadership required to support the ever-changing approaches to recruiting is also crucial to the future successes of police services, and that includes moving beyond the usual rhetoric about wanting to reflect the diversity of the community. It's time to bring such statements into reality.

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