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Law Enforcement Recruitment, Why It Matters, and Key Management Decisions, Part Two

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Dr. Patrick Oliver

Law Enforcement Recruitment, Why it Matters, and Key Management Decisions

Part two of a two-part Series

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Law Enforcement Recruitment is a Leadership Challenge

What Works in Recruiting Law Enforcement Officers

Do Targeted Selection

The challenge with the law enforcement recruitment process is trying to find suitable candidates among the pool of potential candidates that appears to be diminishing in quality. Law enforcement agencies must identify increasingly larger candidate pools to be able to effectively identify the number of officers needed to fill in many situations a growing number of vacancies. An agency must first identify a flexible profile of an effective officer. In other words, what are the knowledge, skills, abilities, education, training, experiences, behaviors, and traits that make one effective on the job? These are job-critical success factors. What are the dimensions that make people effective at performing the job in your policy agency? Some minor degree of flexibility in selecting applicants based on this job profile is key. The evidence-based profile becomes the organization's target. Once an agency has identified the dimensions of job success, then it must be proactive in identifying individuals that match what you are looking for. This is what executive recruiters do. When working for a client agency, executive recruiters first reduce to writing a profile of an effective job candidate. This information was received from the client agency. They then work to identify a pool of candidates that match this profile. The client agency then screens these candidates, who all can do the job, and then selects the most suitable candidates for final screening based on the organizational fit. This is a process that can work for law enforcement agencies. This process is called "Targeted Selection" and it is hard work. You first must know what you are looking for (key performance indicators) and then you must ask the question, "Where can this type of individual be found?" One way to think of recruitment is to understand that there is an effective recruitment triangle. There are three primary components of an effective recruitment process. First, you must identify a flexible profile of a qualified candidate. Second, an agency must have a position(s) vacancy to fill. Third, there must be qualified candidates. If you have all three, then you have an effective recruitment process. To use "Target Selection" effectively, you must know who you are looking for, you must know where you can find these viable candidates and have a plan of action to effectively recruit them.

Grow Your Own Officers

The book, *Recruitment, Selection, and Retention of Law Enforcement Officers* (Oliver, 2014) indicates that of all the recruitment strategies that are utilized to hire effective law enforcement officers, none is more successful than growing your own officers. The strategy of growing your own officers involves identifying individuals too young to be law enforcement officers that meet all the agency's qualifications and developing and mentoring them until they become of age to begin their career as law enforcement officers. A cadet program is a grow-your-own model. The hiring of individuals in a cadet program after high school provides education, experience, and training for these individuals. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the overall employment for police and detectives is projected to grow 3 percent from 2021 to 2031, slower than average for all occupations. However, despite limited employment growth, about 68,500 openings for police and detectives are projected each year, on average over the decade. Most of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as retiring. This indicates opportunities for candidates and competition for law enforcement agencies hiring. A great way to get ahead of the competition is to identify qualified candidates before they are eligible to apply for a law enforcement job based on age. This early hiring also helps ensure that these individuals avoid activities that would disqualify them as law enforcement applicants. It is recommended that cadets are screened using the same hiring process components that are required for full-time officers. The rules and regulations regarding conduct for all officers should apply to the cadets. They simply lack the age to become law enforcement officers. A mini academy should be developed to provide an orientation to your agency and law enforcement service. Cadets should be given regular assignments and be required to work 20-60 hours per month. College education should be encouraged and ideally, there should be tuition reimbursement available to assist cadets in pursuing their law enforcement-related degree program. If education is

encouraged, a minimum of a two-year degree should be required. Physical fitness training and testing should be mandatory to remain in the program. Police agencies that allow officers to be hired at ages less than 21 should keep an individual in a program for at least 18 months. Since current performance will be the best indicator of future performance an observation period of at least 18 months is preferable for evaluating the individual's suitability for law enforcement service.

Recruit Year-round

A best practice in law enforcement recruitment is to search all year for law enforcement candidates. This is the ideal perspective because the goal is not to get the best candidates available at the time when you are recruiting; it is simply to get the best! This concept is rare in most law enforcement agencies since they are only allowed to hire when there are vacancies consistent with their authorized manpower allocation. Therefore, these agencies only recruit during a hiring period. The agencies that can recruit year-round can land quality law enforcement candidates when they find them. The quality of your organization is equal to the quality of your people. Organizational growth and development are constrained by your ability to hire top talent. An agency needs to gain the ability to hire between five to ten percent of its established authorized strength depending on agency size. If a hire can be made year-round, then an agency can hire quality candidates when they are identified. If no vacancies exist a viable applicant should be hired for a support job that is useful to the law enforcement agency while waiting for the next vacancy to occur or until the next law enforcement academy begins. In most law enforcement hiring processes, the time from completing the initial application to completing field training is typically 12-18 months. This means that waiting until vacancies occur creates a long lag time before officers are available for patrol duty.

Use College Interns

It is interesting to discover that many law enforcement agencies do not use college interns. Many colleges and universities with academic programs in law enforcement-related fields of study require or encourage students to have an internship in their major before graduation. Internships for college graduates have three benefits. One, students gain some job-related experience in their field of study. Two, students perform better in their courses because they can relate more effectively to what they are learning in the classroom as they gain knowledge in the field. Three, students have a more realistic understanding of their career field to determine job suitability. Law enforcement agencies using

interns will be able to evaluate potential candidates separate from their involvement in the hiring process. Thus, they can give them a tryout with no obligations. The interns in which the agency becomes the most interested can then be recruited for a law enforcement job. A law enforcement administrator should visit a local college or university and request to establish an internship program for students in law enforcement-related majors. The law enforcement agency can work with faculty to ensure that the best students in the academic program apply for internship positions at their agency. Professors teaching in these academic programs will know which students are the highest performing and demonstrate high moral character. Instead of waiting for college applicants to apply for law enforcement jobs, local law enforcement agency administrators can pick the fruit right off the tree. I have witnessed several students being provided job offers before they start the job search process. Being the first in line with a job offer has a distinct advantage. An internship program should be structured so that the intern has a job assignment within the agency while being provided with overall exposure to the organization. By being structured in this way, it is a win-win arrangement for the student intern and the agency. Every law enforcement agency should take advantage of this opportunity to proactively recruit top talent at their local college or university.

Hire Between May and July

There is a distinct advantage in structuring your hiring process around the availability of college students immediately following graduation. Those individuals with two-year or four-year academic degrees should be prepared with knowledge, skills, and abilities to enhance their law enforcement performance. Structuring the timing of your hiring process in the months immediately after college graduation (this is typically in early May each year) will allow you to recruit the most qualified applicants ahead of your competition. Hiring candidates at the beginning of the calendar year or in the fall might be in alignment with the fiscal budget period that starts at the same time but is not an effective strategy for attracting the top college graduates. This post-graduation period is important for college applicants and not essential for all other applicants. The official hiring date for the job applicants (which, in many cases, is when the academy starts) should be between May and July. If an agency does not operate its academy, candidates should be hired in a support job and begin their employment during this period awaiting the beginning of the basic recruit academy. One of the things I have learned as a criminal justice professor is that it is very difficult for a college student to turn down an official job offer because they want to wait for a potential job offer (see Table 1. chart).

Provide Ride Alongs

Every applicant for a law enforcement job should have the opportunity to ride along with experienced officers to gain a better understanding of the job. Ideally, this ride-along should be with the law enforcement agency they are applying for. Unfortunately, some applicants lack a realistic understanding of what law enforcement job entail. Many police administrators have had the experience of recruiting and selecting a law enforcement officer who then completes the basic academy and field training, only to discover during their probationary period that they are not interested in the job. Candidates should be offered a ride-along opportunity to gain an understanding of both the job environment and job requirements. An interview with feedback should be obtained from the candidate to evaluate their assessment of the ride-along experience.

A Key Selection Trait

Among the qualities sought for a law enforcement officer job, a history of volunteerism can be easily overlooked. In an FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin article on selecting police officers (Hilal, & Densley, 2015) the authors surveyed thirty-one police chiefs in Minnesota from the ten largest departments and forty other chiefs from randomly chosen departments in the state. The authors chose to conduct the study in Minnesota because it has the most stringent police officer state hiring requirements in the country. Minnesota's process differs from other states in that police officer candidates must possess a 2 or 4-year degree from a Peace Officer Standards and Training approved college, successfully complete a police academy, and pass a comprehensive licensing exam just to be eligible to apply.

Like most chiefs, these survey respondents felt they could teach recruits the mechanics of the job if they possessed the right characteristics. The study participants stated repeatedly that they look for people with histories of volunteerism. Being a volunteer is an indicator that the person is willing to serve others. These chiefs believed that in a profession where the motto is "to protect and serve," this characteristic is an important one. The chiefs concurred that volunteerism is notable because they look for people who want to be involved and active in their communities. Volunteering in small things that make life better shows that the individual cares and is dedicated to the community. Most of the chiefs indicated they did not care where the volunteerism occurred, however, they did believe that serving as a reserve officer is an excellent experience before entering the profession.

Reasons for Joining a Law Enforcement Agency. Why do Law Enforcement Applicants Choose Their Specific Agencies?

Why do applicants for a law enforcement job select the agencies where they are currently employed? What factors lead officers to select a particular law enforcement agency? This question was the subject of a study by the Dolan Consulting Group. In a police officer recruiting and hiring survey 1,673 sworn officers participated between August 2018 and March 2019. This was a diverse group based on ethnicity, gender, law enforcement agency type, and agency size. These respondents came from forty-nine different states and agencies ranging in size from less than a dozen officers to agencies with thousands of officers. It is interesting to know that while officers differed dramatically in the size of the agency or community in which they wanted to work, individual size preference mattered more than any other factor (see Table 1. below). The authors also noted how important personal connections with existing law enforcement officers were to influence people to pursue a law enforcement career.

Table 1. Top Ten Reasons for Joining Your Specific Law Enforcement Agency

REASON	PERCENT AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED
The department or community's size	65.8%
The department's benefit package	60.8%
The department's pension plan	58.5%
The department's starting salary	57.2%
This is an exciting place to work	53.5%
The department's Professional reputation or prestige	53.1%
This is the community where I lived at the time	50.5%
The department's promotional or career mobility opportunities	44.5%
This was the first agency to offer me a job	43.9%
The community's level of crime or call activity	40.8%

Preparing Law Enforcement Candidates for Job Disqualifiers

The law enforcement job is the most popular choice in the field of criminal justice among higher education students. These college and university programs strive to prepare students by teaching problem-solving, critical thinking, written communication skills, and an appreciation for diversity. These universities may be neglecting to inform students about the hiring process for a law enforcement job. In an article titled, "Making and Breaking Careers: Reviewing Law Enforcement hiring Requirements and Disqualifiers" (Wood, 2017), the author provides some advice on how to prepare students for the scrutiny and depth the law enforcement hiring process requires. If your agency is recruiting college students, it is beneficial if you work with your respective university to prepare students for the possibility of realistic employment in law enforcement upon graduation. Even if you are not recruiting college students, your applicants and young people you recruit (people involved with your agency during the gap years 18-21 or earlier), should be made aware of or prepared for the potential to be declared ineligible for the job. Here are five recommendations the author offers for academics and practitioners.

1. Discuss the job requirements for law enforcement/ criminal justice jobs early (during the gap years, particularly in classes taken by freshmen and sophomores).
2. Be realistic when discussing the application process to include disqualifiers.
3. Use supplemental information to reinforce the concepts you are addressing. Have students read the job requirements and disqualifiers on law enforcement recruitment material. This means that every law enforcement agency should publicize their disqualifiers on their recruitment material and their website.

4. Introduce students to other careers outside of law enforcement that are available in the field of criminal justice. Other careers may be available to them based on their background when a law enforcement job is not.
5. Encourage students in college right now to continue to make good character decisions. This is a primary reason to engage students with your law enforcement agency during the gap years or before. Helping them to make good choices can prevent them from making decisions that will disqualify them from police service.

The recommendations provided in this article are based on the experience of law enforcement practitioners and have demonstrated evidence of effectiveness. In today's competitive market for law enforcement officer talent, every best practice strategy should be tested and used to determine if they work for your organization.

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