

# Recruiting the New Generation of Police Officer

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Today we see dramatically declining numbers of individuals who are interested in law enforcement careers. Concurrently, agencies are also under pressure to hire those more “representative” of the community. Recruiting individuals today presents additional challenges such as cultural and work/life issues that make hiring even more difficult when abundant alternative career options exist.

Making law enforcement agencies appealing to a new generation begins with an understanding of generational types that are not necessarily defined by age but by values, beliefs, motivations, and patterns of behavior.

## The Traditionalist Generation (prior to 1944)

These individuals are gone from the law enforcement workplace today but their impact on the work and our organizational systems lingers. This generation of police officers was primarily male and white holding working class values. They were raised in the aftermath of WW II and the economic struggles and changes that took place in the 1950s and 1960s.

The traditionalists found comfort in sameness, hierarchical arrangements, clear authority structures, and stability. Preferring order and predictability, they had trouble with rapid change and tended to be resistant to new practices, procedures, and technologies. Ambiguity is the enemy of the traditionalist; they crave consistency and certainty when it comes to human behavior.

## The Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

This generation presented an evolutionary change from the traditionalist. These individuals sought a greater, modern influence on traditional attitudes and orientations; not radical change but a more incremental evolution in thinking about life in organizations. Women emerging in the workforce brought a contrast to the predominantly masculine field with new ways of approaching policing problems.

Certain characteristics associated with the baby boomer generation reflect how most people perceive police officers; and although few of these individuals remain in the field, these characteristics provide a framework for understanding individual accountability.

Baby boomers are hard workers and self-assured. Their sense of “value” comes from their work and doing their best at it. They are attracted to professional achievement and

individual recognition and are less concerned with collaborative arrangements and teamwork. These are the workaholics who can be depended upon for their conscientiousness and motivation.

What appeals to them?

The baby boomer, like the traditionalist, is attracted to stability. Uncomfortable with rapid change and ambiguity, “fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants” management does not suit them. Following procedures and protocols is their place of safety and comfort.

What they don't like.

Boomers grew up quickly and assumed life's responsibilities at a young age, adolescent behavior from adult individuals is troubling.

No longer recruited due to their advanced age, these characteristics exist in the population and are valuable in a law enforcement agency. The advantage is that our established organizational arrangements are suited to Boomers, so placing an emphasis on recognition, job security, benefits, vacation time, shift work, and career advancement opportunities in our retainment efforts is key.

Generation X (1965-1976)

This generation is now in charge of our businesses, educational institutions, social, and political institutions. Generation X represents a more profound evolution from traditionalist and baby boomer values. They seek enjoyment from their work and are not afraid to challenge the status quo. Generation X wants work to be fun, enjoyable, fast-paced, less formal, and part of a fulfilling life.

What appeals to them?

Generation X is attracted to a challenge and the potential for reward. Working hard to prepare themselves for career advancement, higher education is a must so agencies that offer educational incentives and a work-life balance through alternative or flexible shift plans are attractive.

This generation drove a change in the policing sub-culture. In traditionalist and baby boomer generations cops hung out with other cops, but that is no longer the case. Generation X

challenged the isolation with many innovative thinkers pushing back and forcing police leaders to see the value of thinking beyond and outside the police sub-culture.

#### Millennials or Gen Y (1977-1995)

Millennials are not well suited for careers in traditional law enforcement agencies. In general, millennials crave a workplace that is fun, collaborative, and achievement-oriented. Determining what might be done to recruit these individuals is a tall order but understanding where they are coming from is a necessary first step.

The preceding Generation X parents felt the need to be closer to their millennial children in a dramatically different way than their parents had been. Rather than focusing on guidance and correcting behavior, parents took a gentler approach to avoid resentment from their children. The inclination to be friends with their children caused confusion in the relationship with far too many parents abdicating their parental responsibilities to correct, discipline, and properly guide their children simply to avoid conflict.

At the same time, these parents became overly protective of their children, with virtuous parental behavior defined as standing up for their child against the perception of arbitrary and authoritarian positions of relatives, teachers, school officials, and other parents. Our modern world also put parents in genuine fear for their children as daily threats of violence, terrorism, and injustice abound.

The result is a generation of over-managed adolescents who have been protected from life's conditions, stresses, and situations that lead to adulthood. Our modern society has allowed for a style of parenting that has made life for our young people healthy and carefree, but it has also made them fragile to the realities of the real world.

#### What they don't like.

Millennials do not like to wait; they want it now. They want instant gratification and recognition. They also do not like to be "cast-a-drift" with no sense of support or collaboration with others. They have been raised to value teams and working with others, being assigned a task or project with the expectation to perform it with minimum support is frightening.

Perceptions of unfairness are profound with this generation. It's not enough that outcomes resulted from following correct procedures, these individuals struggle with a sense of

injustice without being able to communicate the reason, i.e., “It’s just unfair! I’m not sure why.” Reason often takes a back seat to emotional agitation, and this can lead to unmanaged conflict and depression.

This generation hates boredom. They want to be challenged and they want feedback without being told what to do. Routine work is commonplace, but necessary, in policing. Absent innovative ways to keep these individuals engaged, fighting boredom will be a constant challenge.

Given these generalities, one might conclude that recruiting millennials into law enforcement is more trouble than it is worth. However, police agencies are much more effective when they reflect the makeup of the communities they serve.

Today, our craft presents one of the best opportunities any individual has to make a positive difference in the lives of people each day they work the street. This is exceedingly appealing to this generation because, quite frankly, their lives can lack a sense of deep meaning.

Consider that the traditionalists, boomers, and Gen X had religion; the belief in a God that transcended self-interest and provided a moral grounding as well as social cohesion. The millennials all but reject religion as a source of moral guidance.

Recruiting these individuals can be accomplished by incorporating just a few sound principles:

- **Tell them the truth and paint a realistic picture of what life is like in the police agency.**

Millennials want a pleasant work-life balance. Generation X was willing to set personal needs aside for the greater good, but millennials feel entitled to run their lives as they see fit. Tell them how to be successful in the agency.

What does an outstanding police officer look like, sound like? What are their priorities? How do they behave and how do they make people feel? Tell stories about officers overcoming adversity and what challenges await recruit officers.

- **Connect with them personally.**

As the agency head, reach out with personal messaging. Create a team of salespeople within the ranks, who can follow up as time permits and maintain a personal connection with potential recruits.

- **Offer Internships and ride-a-long opportunities.**

Use the natural fascination with law enforcement to entice interest. Challenge recruits to experience what the job is actually like and expose them to the sometimes-harsh realities of their own communities.

- **Put your best people and their stories out front.**

Today we have the opportunity to promote policing and law enforcement craft like never before. Officers can record videos about themselves and their experiences and upload them to the department's website for recruiting. Police body camera footage is a completely untapped resource available everywhere that overwhelmingly shows officers engaged in difficult and challenging situations and performing exceptionally. Agencies should be continually on the lookout for these opportunities and tasking millennial officers with this responsibility can go a long way toward providing meaning for them.

#### Generation Z or I Gen, Centennials (1996 to current)

Generation Z is the largest generation in American history, making up over 25% of the population, their impact is going to be huge. This is the most ethnically and racially diverse generation with its members fully accepting and embracing differences to the point where the distinguishing characteristics among groups are overlooked. This places them at odds with many millennials who remain stuck in the morass of conflict over racial and ethnic identities; Generation Z is ready to just "get over it and move on." This generation is much more accepting of other identities, viewpoints, and perspectives. An organization that rejects the value of diversity will not appeal to them.

Unlike the millennials, this generation has never felt safe. They have grown up anxious and living in fear of terrorism and they understand that no one can really protect them.

These are the new recruits and they are different from the millennials. We are seeing a return to more traditional values in terms of the desire for job security and independence, which may provide an advantage in recruitment. There may also be some interesting conflicts that emerge within our agencies between these two generations.

The traditional nature of law enforcement work is not immediately appealing to this generation. However, there is a profound, even notorious, sense of community in this craft that is very appealing to Gen Zers. The law enforcement sub-culture may provide an advantage in establishing a sense of belonging and community desired by this generation.

Like the millennials, this generation searches for meaning, but Generation Z wants meaning from their work and will make the needed investment. Recruiting this generation demands that they be informed on exactly what it takes to be successful, not just that the job is important.

Some specific suggestions for recruiting Generation Z include:

- **Develop an apprenticeship/mentoring program.** Take the typical internship beyond the normal limits by introducing recruits to the intricacies of police operations such as records management, communications, jail operations, and in service training in advance of them obtaining sworn status.
- **Partner with the local university, college, and school district.** Share veteran officers as occasional instructors or lecturers not just in criminal justice programs but in liberal arts courses. Develop and maintain ongoing relationships with local school districts where the best veteran officers are welcomed and regularly interact with students, faculty, and parents.
- **Offer a multitude of career or task specializations that are technology-based.** So much of what the police do today is social media-based, take advantage of the tech savvy Gen Z in monitoring and even running stings to combat the multitude of problems that emerge in this area.
- **Task Gen Z to develop innovative and modern approaches to traditional policing problems.** Make them believe that they are valued in this way.

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