

“Beyond the Algorithm: Firefighter Recruitment in the Age of AI”

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When I began my fire service journey, I knew it wouldn't be easy. Even early on, it was clear this job demanded everything—mentally, emotionally, and physically. That demand has remained constant. It's one of the few things that doesn't change, even as the world around us continues to evolve. Over time, I've come to understand just how deep that commitment runs, and it's only made me respect this career even more. I still remember the image of people lining up and flooding city blocks to prove they were the perfect candidate. You'd spend hours polishing your resume and sharpening your interview skills, knowing that even the smallest mistake could cost you your dream. It felt like running a marathon just to reach the starting line.

But one thing I don't remember? Being recruited! No one had to sell me on this grand idea. There were no flashy campaigns or targeted social media ads trying to draw me in. It was just me, and I was driven by this raw, personal desire to take on one of the hardest and most rewarding professions out there. It was a calling, never a career pitch.

That's no longer the case today. The landscape has changed, and fire departments are now working harder than ever to recruit qualified candidates. But the challenge isn't just about attracting interest. It's about understanding who we're competing with. Especially here in the Bay Area, the competition looks very different. We're no longer just up against other fire departments. We're competing with major tech companies that offer high salaries, stock options, and rapidly growing career paths. For many, the realities of shift work, increased cancer risks, and sleepless nights seem far less appealing when placed next to the comforts and incentives of the tech world.

Now, multiply that with the COVID-19 pandemic. It forced the widespread shutdown of fire academies and paramedic programs, choking off the traditional pipeline of new firefighters. What was once a process of filtering massive candidate pools down to the best and brightest suddenly became a struggle just to attract enough qualified applicants. The game had completely changed.

But once again, the landscape is shifting, and we find ourselves in a unique moment in time. The very industries that attracted our applicant pools are now starting to push them back our way, and this trend is only accelerating. The question is, will the fire service be ready to receive this wave of potential recruits when it arrives?

I'm talking about AI and the world of automation. People are quite literally coding and innovating themselves out of future employment. Algorithms and AI-driven technologies are transforming entire industries, resulting in mass layoffs and workforce reductions. Take Microsoft, for example. They recently laid off approximately 6,000 employees – about 3% of their global workforce – as part of a strategic pivot to focus on AI¹. Chegg, a once-thriving

¹ Krishnan, S. Microsoft layoffs: My husband worked 25 years, rarely took leave, but was laid off by algorithm, says wife in viral post. 2025. The Economic Times. Mumbai, India: Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd.

education technology company based in Santa Clara, slashed over 20% of its workforce in response to competition from AI tools like ChatGPT². Even cybersecurity giant CrowdStrike cut 500 jobs, approximately 5% of its staff, as it moved to integrate more AI-driven systems³. It's a trend that isn't slowing down. A recent World Economic Forum survey found that 40% of employers anticipate reducing their workforce between 2025 and 2030 as AI takes over more routine tasks⁴.

The question for the fire service is clear: will we be prepared to catch this wave of potential recruits? Recruits looking for purpose, stability, and a career that AI and algorithms can't replace. Where will these employees go? The fire service can be an attractive option, but only if we're willing to change the way we think and recruit. Many employees, especially from Generation Z, are already shifting toward traditional trades and public safety. These fields offer the stability and the satisfaction of hands-on, meaningful work.

But switching careers isn't easy. The cost to self-sponsor through a fire academy and paramedic school is significant. And even after making that investment, candidates often face long and uncertain waits before they can secure full-time employment. It's time to rethink how we recruit people into this profession. Let's go back to a model where we hire "off the street" and handle all the training in-house, just like we did decades ago.

It's a bold move, but it has real advantages:

Lower Barriers: This approach has massive implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion. It shifts the focus back to hiring for character, while trusting that we can teach the skills. It's about finding the right people, then molding them into the firefighters we need.

Culture Building: In a time when we constantly talk about culture, this is our opportunity to truly shape it. By training recruits from the ground up, we create a culture that reflects our values, mission, and standards from day one.

Stronger Retention: This model builds loyalty. It's about giving people a home. It's about giving them a place where they feel valued and invested in. Employees who might have bounced from one tech job to the next can find a long-term, purpose-driven career in the fire service. A place where loyalty creates loyalty.

² Allday, E. *Chegg lays off 248 employees amid AI competition*. 2025. *San Francisco Chronicle*. May 13, 2025. San Francisco, CA: Hearst Communications.

³ O'Donnell, L. *CrowdStrike to cut 500 jobs as AI changes landscape*. 2025. *Investor's Business Daily*. Los Angeles, CA: News Corp.

⁴ World Economic Forum. *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*. 2025. Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum.

Long-Term Investment: It's costly up front, but the goal is to create generational change. We're not just filling positions. We are building a sustainable legacy for future generations.

But all of this is great in theory. It requires action. It requires a strong and willing change agent to swim upstream. Someone to challenge the normalization of deviance that has crept in. Yes, the way we have always done things has its place. It provides perspective, foundational knowledge, and institutional experience. But it can't be the end-all, be-all. We often talk about being "here for them." You know, the people we serve. But maybe, it's time to redefine who "them" is. Maybe it's time to expand our community to include the people we desperately need in our ranks. In the end, this approach will pay dividends in the form of service provided to those living within our jurisdictional lines. It is going to take a complete shift in mindset.

It starts by asking a different question: "What do you need from us to get started?"

For too long, we have put the burden on the applicant, asking if they have the right certifications and if they have done enough to be considered. And with that, the industry has built a profitable market around training and preparing people for the fire service. While the investment may be the same, the profit of this change in mindset stays in-house.

So, what needs to change? Let's start with Recruitment. First, I don't feel like we should pull back from our efforts with high schools and middle schools. Programs like junior fire academies, explorer posts, and community outreach are essential. They help plant the seeds of interest early and build lasting connections within the communities we serve. These initiatives remain a key part of our long-term recruitment pipeline, even as we expand our focus to reach new demographics.

But they can't be the only way we attract candidates. If you look at the average age of new firefighter recruits and compare it to the average age of employees being laid off from the private sector, it's clear we need to broaden our focus. We should be actively recruiting college students and adults in the 25-35 age range. People who have life experience, maturity, and the readiness to make a meaningful career change.

We also need to recognize that each generation is driven by different values and aspirations. What inspired millennials to join the fire service won't necessarily resonate with Gen Z, and it may miss the mark entirely with Generation Alpha. That's why recruitment alone isn't enough. If we fail to consider these changes, the consequences will not just be hypothetical. In many departments, they are already unfolding. Staffing shortages are becoming more common, and the operational risks are growing. The inability to maintain adequate staffing leads directly to mandatory overtime, which erodes morale, disrupts families, and accelerates burnout. We put everything into this profession; our time, our energy, and our well-being. In return, firefighters require a circle of safety. If we continue down this path, we risk facing sentinel events that could have been prevented. This is a crucial moment for the fire service and a chance to act before the crisis deepens.

Once someone steps forward with the desire to serve, we must be ready with a clear, intentional path. When a person walks into a firehouse and says, “I want to be a firefighter,” our job is to meet that moment. It’s our responsibility to provide a streamlined, structured process that supports their journey in a reasonable amount of time, not years down the road. This can't just be about filling positions – it’s about building a legacy of service, one firefighter at a time.