Recruiting the Next Generation of Firefighters—A How To Guide

A whitepaper by APX Data

Recruiting the Next Generation of Firefighters—A How To Guide

We are halfway through 2022, and unfortunately, the staffing shortage situation is getting worse.

In our previous whitepaper, Recruitment for the Modern Fire Department—Are You Ready?, we explored the recruitment challenge, dissecting some of the causes which include the Covid-19 pandemic, the dwindling number of volunteer firefighters and the lack of diversity in fire departments.

This time around, we will concentrate on how to recruit the next generation of firefighters, particularly Gen Z. Afterall, despite the availability of fulfilling careers in public safety—by 2032, more than 270,000 firefighter positions will be available— the younger generations are not lining up to serve and it is due in large part to fire departments' inability to understand them and provide a work environment that appeals to their unique sensibilities.

Fire departments have always benefitted from generational firefighters. Many men and women join because a close relative had "the best job ever". Afterall, who else

Barriers to Attracting Millennials and Gen Z

besides firefighters get to drive beautiful red trucks with lights and sirens while on the way to save people's lives? What other job has Sparky the Dalmation as part of the team?

Another recruiting technique of fire departments is to visit schools during fire prevention week. Seeing the uniform and Sparky gets kids excited about the role. Fire departments have relied on this approach for many decades but in the last 10 years, the results have been underwhelming.

Why are fire departments struggling to attract the younger generations? One possible answer is a combination of three key drivers: population growth, technology, and the generation gap.

Population Growth (or Lack Thereof)

Derek Thompson, staff writer at The Atlantic, summarized the situation in an article from earlier this year: "Simply put, the U.S. has too few births, too many deaths, and not enough immigrants."

According to Thompson, 2021 set the all-time record in the U.S. for lowest population-growth rates. The causes include:

- Nearly 1 million Americans died from Covid-19 between 2020-2022
- Deaths exceeded births in two-thirds of U.S. counties
- A decrease in immigration
- A decline in birth rates and fertility

As population growth rates continue their downward trend and with so many other job opportunities, fire departments aren't just competing with wildland firefighters for recruits, but with relatively safe and stable jobs in the tech sector, which we'll look at below.

Technology

In an article for FireRescue1, Fire Chief Gary Ludwig wrote, "... the younger workforce does not appear to be as interested in jobs related to public safety." Millennials and Gen Z want jobs that allow work-from-home, flexible schedules, and work-life balance.

MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z WANT JOBS THAT ALLOW WORK-FROM-HOME, FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES, AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE.

According to job site Monster, Millennials are working as statisticians, bartenders, financial analysts, advertising and promotions managers, paramedics, physician assistants, web developers, marketing specialists and video editors. A 2017 report from Paychex covered by Business Insider found that leisure and hospitality has the highest percentage of Millennial employees.

Meanwhile, Gen Z gravitates towards careers in business, healthcare and tech found a survey by Firstup. Their accompanying blog post said, "They also might be gravitating toward on-the-go jobs where they usually are not sitting in front of a computer. That means information needs to come directly to them wherever they are – on their mobile devices."

Implementing better, mobile technology is the number one way progressive fire departments are modernizing. The right technology will help reduce risk, increase efficiency, lower costs and potentially even improve culture. It is this sort of technology that will attract Millennials (born between 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997 and later)—two tech savvy generations.

The Generation Gap

As baby boomers and even Gen X retire in droves, Millennials and Gen Z make up a larger percentage of the workforce at over one-third each. What these younger generations want out of work and life is far different than previous generations.

In 2014, Paul Stein and Ettore Berardinelli explored how different generations see the fire service in an article for Firenugget.com. Two of the most significant differentiators they recognized are Millennials' desire to reject the confines of job descriptions and the limitations of organizational guidelines, and their indifference to mission statements—both of which are at odds with the paramilitary nature of the fire service.

Additionally, Millennials are in pursuit of work-life balance. They wish for a fulfilling life outside work, whereas previous generations may have dedicated their life to work and, in the process, lost important relationships.

At the time, the authors posited: "Some people feel that the Millennials are not prepared to work in the fire service. The real question is, is the fire service ready for the Millennials?" Almost ten years after the article was published, the same question must be posed again except this time with Gen Z as its focus.

Understanding the three drivers—population growth, technology and the generation gap—helps illuminate the recruitment challenge keeping fire chiefs up at night. If you have not considered any of these drivers in your recruiting strategy, now is the time.

Understanding Millennials and Gen Z

GEN X (born between 1996-2010)

Gen Z is set to be an essential part of the workforce in the near future. Here is some information about this young cohort and their expectations from the workplace.

Gen Z is estimated to make up **20%** of the working population by 2020. This generation has a deep understanding of technology and its potential to transform how we work and live

53% prefer going to an office versus working from home

DIGITAL NATIVES
52% are confident they have the technology skills employers want

77% are willing to be technology mentors to others

VALUE HUMAN CONNECTION
82% say social media can be a valuable tool

43% prefer in-person communication with co-workers

GEN Z & TECHNOLOGY
80% aspire to work wth cutting-edge technology

91% say technology would influence job choice

75% expect to learn from peers on the job

Source: 'The Gen Z effect' Dell Technologies

Before we learn how to attract the next generation of firefighters, we must first learn more about who these future recruits are.

The Impact of 9/11 on Millennials and Gen Z

Most Millennials were at an impressionable age when 9/11 turned the world upside down. They witnessed the largest loss of life of any emergency response agency in history with 75 firehouses in New York directly affected and 343 FDNY firefighters lost in the line of duty. Never before have more firefighters been honored for their service in a single event and never before has a generation ever been exposed to such a situation captured in real time by the media.
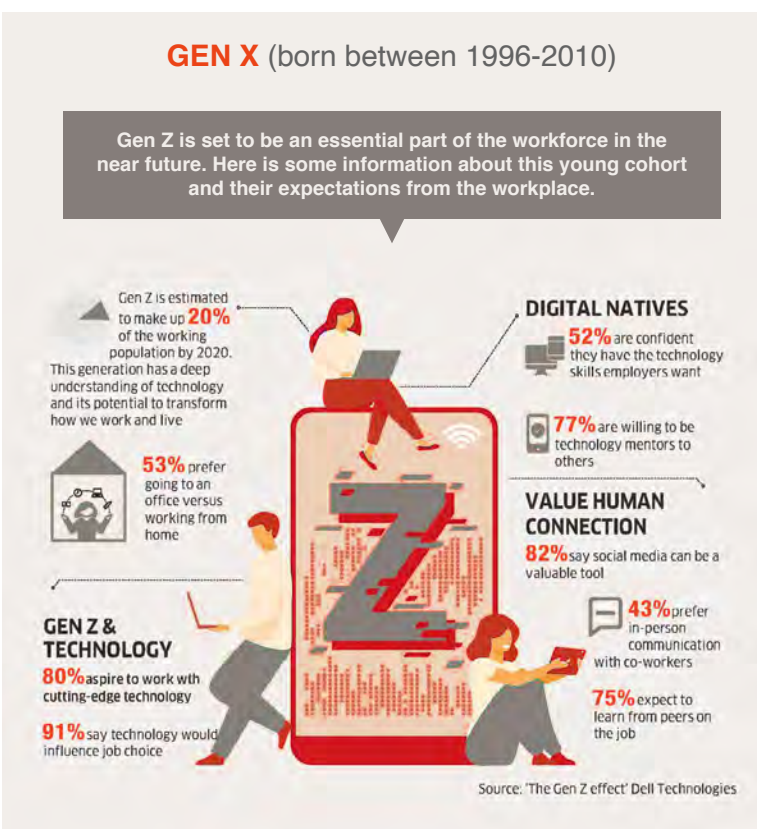
While the earliest individuals of Gen Z were too young to understand 9/11—or even remember it—nonetheless, it cast a shadow on their lives and shaped the world in which they live. Surveillance, security, immigration policies, warfare and public perception of political leaders and religion all changed after 9/11. The events of that day are at least partially responsible for why Millennials and Gen Z are hypervigilant and anxious.

Connected Generations

Connected from birth, Gen Z are the first true digital natives. For them, technology is not a nice to have, but a need to have. In school, they relied more on laptops and iPads than textbooks. Indeed, Tom Miller, National Volunteer Firefighter Council director for West Virginia wrote, "They are not impressed with and may in fact be offended by a three-inch-thick Firefighter I & II textbook."

And let's not forget that Millennials were the first generation to grow up with computers at home. They were witness to a wave of new technologies over the years, such as Windows 95 (1995), Google (1998) and of course, Facebook (2004) which was founded by Millennial Mark Zuckerberg. It is individuals in this generation who are becoming today's leaders in the fire service.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that unless Millennials and Gen Z see real and effective use of technology in fire departments, they are less likely to follow in their relatives' footsteps and become firefighters.
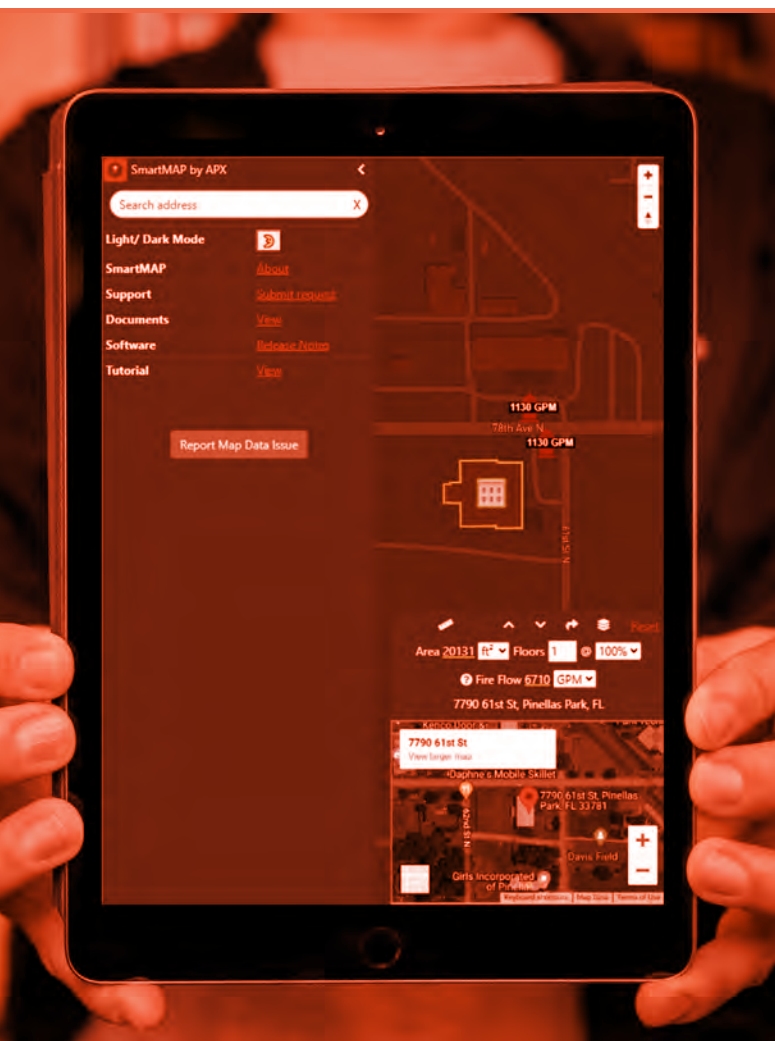
The Big Questions

Let's return to our original question: "Is the fire service ready for Gen Z?"

At least right now, the answer is no. Fire departments are unfortunately ill prepared to recruit and retain the younger generation. However, by answering three smaller questions, we are able to effectively break down the challenge and develop a solution for building a successful recruitment and retention strategy.

These three questions are:

Who is the competition and what do they offer that fire departments can't?

Why would Gen Z want a career in the fire service?

**How** can fire departments evolve to better attract Gen Z?

Who is the Competition?

Last year, Yahoo released the 10 most promising careers for Gen Z. Emergency services did not make the list, but here's what did:

- Wind turbine service technicians

- Nurse Practitioner

- Solar Photovoltaic installers

- Restaurant cooks

- Performer/athlete agents or business managers

- Makeup artist, theatrical and performance

- Occupational therapy assistants

- Statisticians

- Information Security Analyst

- Film and video editors

All of the above jobs have a projected growth of 33-68% between 2020 and 2030. The average median pay is over $75,000.

For any fire chief planning their 2023 budget, this means Gen Z recruits could expect a salary of $75,000 or greater. Compare this expectation to the average firefighter's salary in the U.S. of only $50,940. Simply put, other careers can provide better financial stability.

+ a projected growth
of **33-68%** between
2020 and 2030

$75,000

Most promising careers'
average salary

$50,940

Firefighter's
average salary
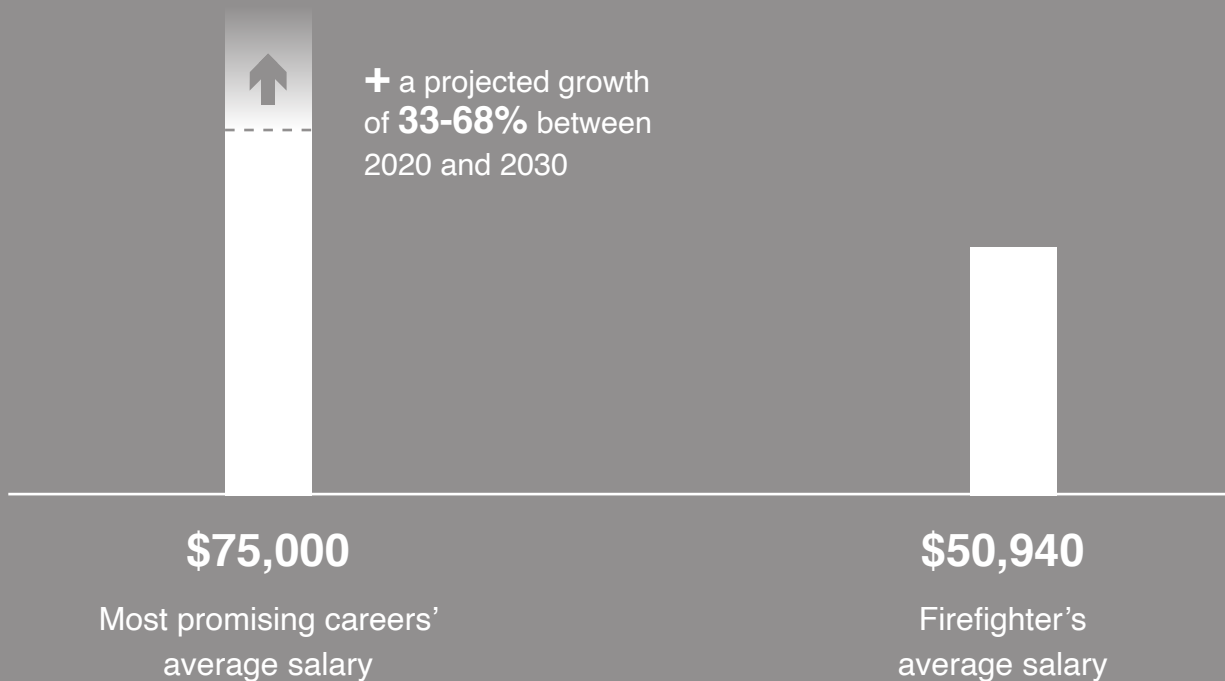
Why Would Gen Z Want a Career in Fire Service?

If they can make better money elsewhere, and enjoy flexible hours and limited risk in a tech job, why would Gen Z want to become firefighters?

The answer is, they're looking for purpose.

In an interview with Fire & EMS Leader Pro, Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell, DrPH, MPH provided a list of ways to build an effective professional relationship with Gen Z. Method two on the list was: "Communicate your organization's purpose. Emphasize the meaningful work over money."

FOR GEN Z, HIGHLIGHTING A SENSE OF PURPOSE IN THE ROLE IS CRITICAL, AS 42% WOULD RATHER BE AT A COMPANY THAT GIVES THEM A SENSE OF PURPOSE THAN ONE THAT PAYS MORE.

According to Dr. Moore-Merrell's list, and to a survey of 32,000 Gen Z employees conducted by the organization Great Place to Work, Gen Z want their jobs to have meaning—for them and for the world. Further proof of this desire is found in a 2022 report from Lever that says, "For Gen Z, highlighting a sense of purpose in the role is critical, as 42% would rather be at a company that gives them a sense of purpose than one that pays more."

While other career options might have the fire service beat in salary, the job of a firefighter is inarguably one of purpose and meaning.

How Can Fire Departments Evolve to Attract Gen Z?

If the next generation of firefighters grew up with computers, was directly or indirectly influenced by a cataclysmic event, and lives in a world forever changed by Mark Zuckerberg, what does a position that has fundamentally stayed the same since Benjamin Franklin created the first volunteer fire company in 1736 really have to offer?

Therein lies the problem: the fire service has not fundamentally changed.

Fire departments will not attract Gen Z until they evolve, which will require adapting their cultures to create Gen Z-friendly work environments and implementing technology that will satisfy Gen Z's need for instantaneous answers and connection.

Creating Gen Z-Friendly Work Environments

Recall that two of the drivers discussed earlier were the generation gap (younger generations want different things from their work and careers) and technology (which we'll talk about below). To address the first driver, fire departments will need to adapt their culture to provide a work environment that suits the needs of Gen Z. Consider this list by Deloitte for creating such an environment:

- Develop the profile of a great employee, establish internal apprenticeship programs, or hire smart, talented people and then match them with a role once inside the organization.

- Consider partnering at the university level to adopt top female talent to attract more women candidates for tech roles.

- Create latticed career paths and multiple work formats.

- Set up internal marketplaces to match projects with needed skill sets.

- Leverage the expertise of Gen X, Gen Y, and Boomers to help mentor Gen Z into strong leaders.

- Consider the attractiveness of the industry you are in and the reputation of your company and plan accordingly.

You'll find that Deloitte's list shares some similarities to the aforementioned list by Dr. Moore-Merrell, which also includes:

- Offer frequent feedback.

- Communicate your organization's purpose. Emphasize the meaningful work over money.

- Tap into their expertise. Ask questions and learn about technology trends and social media from the generation that's been raised with ever-changing technology and social media apps.

- Engage in two-way dialog. Talk to Gen Z often.

- Communicate in their "language." Use visual media (e.g., emojis, memes, animated GIFs).

- Be active on social media. Communicate with them on various social media channels.

- Use mobile devices. Invest in mobile apps for those devices and use them for push notifications regarding schedules, training opportunities, departmental news and more.

- User personalization.

This type of environment is far different from what previous generations were content to accept. Though it will require greater effort on the part of fire departments, accommodating the need for open communication, growth and mentorship, and various forms of technology is the only way of attracting Gen Z.

Diversity

While it was not directly addressed by either list, diversity is another essential work environment qualification required by Gen Z. Unfortunately, fire departments today are not diverse. From 2014 to 2018, among career firefighters, only:

8%
WERE
HISPANIC
OR LATINO

8.4%
WERE
AFRICAN-
AMERICAN

1.1%
WERE
ASIAN

4.7%
WERE
FEMALE
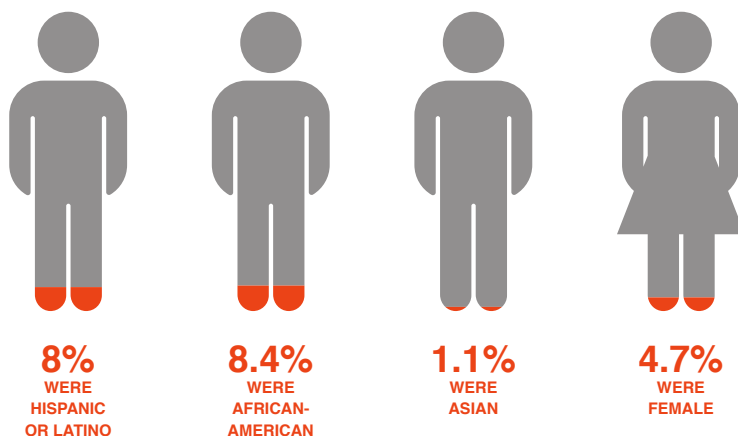
As we mentioned in our previous whitepaper, Recruitment for the Modern Fire Department—Are You Ready?, fire department recruitment materials reflect this lack of diversity. As a result, potential candidates don't see themselves represented by the materials or by the media, which can deter them from applying.

Fire departments that do not make diversity a priority will be unable to attract Gen Z as this generation wants to be employed by workplaces that are serious and holistic about their diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) practices. According to Deloitte's findings, "Diversity matters to [Gen Z] through many dimensions, not just isolated to race and gender but also related to identity and orientation. Companies that can better represent the spectrum of differences in their external branding/marketing are much more likely to diversify their talent pipelines."

Adopting Technology

In 2019, Remy Blumenfield wrote for Forbes, "If millennials were digital pioneers, then Gen Z are the first true digital natives – never knowing a time without technology at their fingertips, they demand seamless, on-demand connectivity 24/7."

This "on-demand connectivity" can take two forms: social media and mobile first technology that provides instantaneous answers.

Social Media

According to Sprout Social, a social media management company, most individuals in Gen Z "have had some kind of social media presence for more than half their lives." Over half (66%) of Gen Z consider social media an essential part of their lives.

OVER HALF (66%) OF GEN Z CONSIDER SOCIAL MEDIA AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THEIR LIVES.

If fire departments wish to attract the next generation they must stop opposing the adoption of social media. While many have made the plunge into the social realm, others remain reluctant due to reasons that Chief Patrick Kelly addressed in a June 2020 paper published through IAFC. He wrote that many fire departments still consider social media:

- A temporary fad

- Designed for kids/teenagers

- Time consuming

- An avenue for complaints, discontent

- A potential source for human resource issues

Despite the challenges adopting a new communications method may pose, social media must be thoughtfully and strategically applied in fire departments. Chief Kelly would appear to agree, as he wrote, "...social media is here to stay. Many corporations and other professions are already using it effectively. For those who are not, the time has come to take a serious look at this communications tool and our ability to manage it."

Mobile First Technology for Instantaneous Answers

Gen Z's 24/7 connection and reliance on technology that provides near instantaneous answers—from Siri or Google Maps—has made them less able to handle uncertainty. Thus, if they are to consider careers as firefighters, their need to know where they are going, what is the risk, and how to maximize their resources, must be satisfied.

Presently, the technology Gen Z is accustomed to is not what is found in the fire truck. If you want Gen Z to join the fire department, your department must become digitally connected. The good news? The technology that will satisfy this need is available now.

How to Make the Technological Leap

It's easier than you might think. Hundreds of fire departments have already made the leap, embracing technology to modernize and attract the next generation of recruits.

Smart Mobile Technology

Mobile first applications are rarely seen in public safety. Most technology in emergency response vehicles, fire houses or 911 dispatch centers are built using the Microsoft approach which is not designed for mobile first. Microsoft has little to no skin in the mobile technology game having sold its feature phone assets in 2016.

Apple's iPad—which uses the iOS mobile operating system—leads the way in instant access to information. Not only is it relied upon in fire departments, but it is the go-to technology for other mission-critical mobile uses. For example, pilots can now rely on iPads instead of hard-copy flight manuals.

How do you know if your department is using mobile first applications today? If you are able to receive real layered data about structures in a near instantaneous manner and prepare your firefighters while en route in your fire truck then you are using mobile first applications.

We all know the importance of the first-to-arrive commanding vehicle. It is essential that the commanding vehicle has the technology required to eliminate ambiguity—technology like Fire Department Mapping Software.

Fire Department Mapping Software

Real, meaningful data will provide the next generation of firefighters with the certainty and information they require. One specific example of smart mobile technology is Fire Department Mapping Software, such as SmartMAP by APX, which allows firefighters to:

- Get notified immediately on their mobile device when there is an incident.

- Use the mobile device to quickly access critical information at the time of an emergency response.

- Get detailed property-specific information like building size, location and type and fire flow requirements, even if the building has not been previously preplanned by the fire department.

- Get information on nearest hydrants including flow capabilities.

- Additional data such as the latest fire preplans and inspection reports.
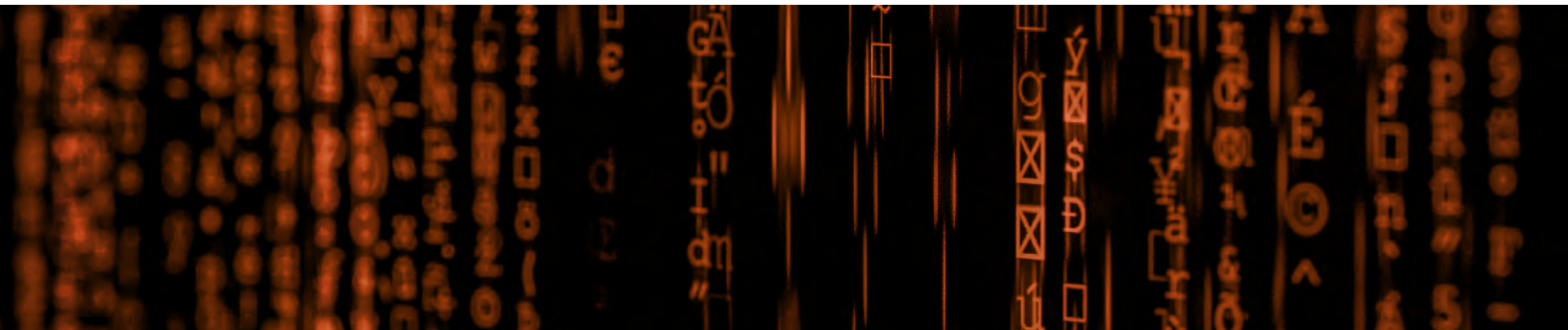
Going into an emergency 'blind', without relevant information, is no longer an option. Timely and accurate information about the incident scene—from efficient routing to hazardous materials —will reduce risk and increase performance in every aspect of firefighting.

If you want Gen Z in the truck, you need to outfit it with the tech that will allow them to quickly process the data and hit the ground running once on scene.

Sourcing the Right Technology

Choosing the right technology or choosing one that is not easy to use may put off firefighters and decrease adoption rates. Consider the following before investing:

1. Fit for purpose. Determine what you hope to achieve by using any piece of technology and look for something that will accomplish that outcome well. Don't get drawn in by features you don't need—you will end up paying extra for software that is more complex than necessary.

2. Managed services. Take advantage of subscription software where the vendor takes full responsibility for running, maintaining and upgrading your software in the Cloud, reducing your need for dedicated IT staff and cumbersome hardware.

3. Ease of use. Software that is complex, hard to understand and difficult to deploy will not achieve widespread adoption. Whereas, well-designed software can be up and running in a matter of days and requires minimal training to use.

4. Interoperability. Software doesn't exist in a silo. Consider who owns the data (do you?) and how easy it is to access. Does the software provide standard Application Programming Interfaces to facilitate easy transfer of data in and out of the system to enable integration between your other systems?

Conclusion

You can't afford to put off modernizing. Millennials are the new leaders. And Gen Z is no longer just the future—they are the here and now and have been in the workforce for five years already.

If you try to fit your new recruits into a mold that suited previous generations—the ones presently retiring in droves, who didn't grow up connected, and who had different requirements of employers—you will continue to face recruitment challenges.

It is only through the adoption of new technology and the adaptation of your work environment that you will appeal to the digital pioneers and natives who demand instantaneous access to information and desire meaningful careers.

So, is your fire department ready for Millennials and Gen Z?

Paul Martin has devoted his career to public safety. He has helped departments across Canada and the United States through his work with Airbus and Motorola Public Safety Divisions.

He is currently the founder and CEO of APX Data, a company devoted exclusively to helping fire departments modernize their fire prevention, response and fire investigations through the use of mobile technology.

APX Data was first to market, introducing smart mobile applications to the fire service in 2013. APX has validated information on over 140 million structures in its database for all of the U.S., and is growing at a rate of more than 50% year over year.

To talk to Paul, please visit us at apxdata.com or contact us at 1-888-240-0591.