

The right person for the job: Reduce risk, turnover and expense through selective recruitment

Tania Small

Abstract

Stable, long term staff members in animal management lower the chance of risk to themselves, their peers, to their employing Council and are a cost efficient asset to Local Government. This research study investigates the characteristics possessed by those individuals currently employed in animal management and identifies factors which indicate work stability, employment longevity, stress manageability and work performance. Both management and animal management staff have been surveyed. The outcomes of this survey highlight the behavioural and attitudinal tendencies possessed by those who currently consider animal management a vocation and are considered good at their job. This assists managers and recruiters to identify the right person for the job through detailing the characteristics that may be sought upon employment and then ensure staff retention.

Introduction

All organizations employing staff are exposed to the issues of recruitment and retention. Animal Management departments within Council are no exception. In an industry fraught with risk, where turnover regularly occurs, and where expense is monitored continuously, staff selection and retention should be priority. This report has been compiled as a result of surveying Animal Management Officers and supervisory staff currently working in the field in order to determine what behavioural and tendencies to look for in the recruitment of good staff and how to then retain these good staff.

Method

Participants

This study was aimed at Local Government personnel, namely Animal Management Officers. For the purpose of this research, the term 'animal management' encompasses animal control officers, local laws officers, regulatory services, rangers and any individual involved in the regulation of pets in the community. Both field officers and managers or supervisors of animal management units were invited to participate. Invitation to participate occurred via direct email to randomly selected Councils Australia wide in addition to direct email to contacts known to the author. It was intended an email survey would be distributed utilising a snowball effect. Various councils, also randomly selected, received posted versions requesting participants. Local Rangers Associations in Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania were also targeted. The delegates at the Local Government Rangers Association of Queensland, held in March 2006 were all issued with a survey, most of these delegates responded.

Apparatus

Two separate surveys were designed for this research activity. The first was a 15-question survey targeted towards the animal management officers, or field officers. The initial questions on this survey were straight forward quantitative questions gathering information on each individual including gender, age group, number of years worked as an AMO and asked whether animal management was the participants primary job role, or if not, what other functions were performed. The remaining 11 questions were more qualitative based in that each response from the participant was an individual opinion.

For each of these questions, the respondent was required to either give a short answer, or rate their opinions using a Likert scale consisting of Strongly Agree through to Strongly Disagree. Question 12 asked the respondent to rate a series of statements.

The second survey was designed for managers or supervisors of animal management units. This ten-question survey married the Animal Management officer survey by asking questions similar to that of the AMO survey, but required short answers from the manager's point of view. These managers were also asked to state what characteristics they look for in their staff, and rank the characteristics they feel the 'perfect AMO' should possess.

To correlate data, a combination of Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (Student Version 2005) were used.

Procedure

The only criteria surrounding the survey was the respondent was required to be currently working in the field of animal management. Individuals were encouraged to participate by the author offering to post a copy of the completed report to any individual who wished to include their name and contact details. It was stated clearly that all responses would remain confidential and that all names collected would not be used for direct marketing purposes.

Results

In total, 88 animal management officers responded and 22 managers or supervisors of animal management departments. A higher number of responses were expected, however, due to the email nature of the majority of these survey requests, it is possible that many councils utilize spam blockers, thus preventing many potential respondents from participating.

The survey results found that the length of time participants had been employed within animal management ranged from one month through to 44 years. 30% of the respondents had been employed in the field of animal management for less than two years, 53.5% cumulatively had been employed for less than 5 years and three quarters (75.6%) had been employed in animal management for less than 10 years.

Of the participants, 73.9% indicated their sex was male, 21.6% were female and the remaining 4.5% of respondents did not answer this question.

Five age groups were listed, against which respondents were asked to indicate their age. The group with the least number of employees was the 18-25 year old age group consisting of only 3.4% of respondents. Almost a third of respondents (29.9%) were within the 25 - 35 year old age group. 25.3% were within the 35 - 45 age group, and 27.6% within the 45 - 55 age group. This equates to 82.8% of all participants being aged between 25 and 55 years of age. Only 13.8% of respondents were within the 55 - 65 age group.

When asked whether animal management was the respondent's primary role, 67% stated no, it was not.

Other roles performed by these officers included a diverse range comprising:

- o Local law enforcement
- o Parks and reserve maintenance
- o Litter
- o Graffiti
- o Abandoned vehicles
- o Public safety
- o Busking and public trading
- o Bushfires and natural emergencies
- o Camp grounds
- o Off road vehicles
- o Public education
- o Water samples
- o Signage
- o Footpath and public thoroughfare inspections
- o Weed control
- o Pest and vermin control
- o Pool and building inspections
- o Pound management
- o Stock route supervision
- o Airport safety officer
- o Environmental health
- o Tree clearing inspection
- o Burning off inspections
- o Overgrown or untidy property inspections and compliance
- o Rubbish tips
- o Water restrictions
- o Cemetery acting sexton
- o Sharps disposal management
- o Mosquito management
- o Noise investigations.

When asked what attracted the individual to the role of animal management officer, a total of twelve generic reasons were given. These are shown in Chart 1. Some respondents listed more than one reason. A love of or a willingness to work with animals was rated as the highest reason at 25.22% for joining the field of animal management. The least number of respondents at 1.8% each rated money and job role autonomy as the reason for joining animal management.

Once employed within animal management the highest held career goals or aspirations held by the respondents were advancement within the field of animal management. This accounted for 21.3%. Following this group, 19.1% were unsure of where their career aspirations lay. 15.7% of respondents viewed animal management as a conduit into other areas of council within which to work. 11.2% viewed animal management as an opportunity to source a career for the altruistic purposes of 'making a difference within the community'. 11.2% of respondents also stated they were happy within their current position. Other career aspirations held by respondents included finding work away from local laws and animal management. The majority of this 6.7% stated their career goal was to join the police force in various forms. 5.6% of respondents aspired to work with animals in a "non-enforcement" role away from council such as veterinary nursing, joining the RSPCA, opening a pound, animal behaviour or holistic medicine for animals. 4.5% of respondents indicated they desired to work within training and education for animal management or respectively to retire early or healthy.

Respondents were asked to describe their work and their home personalities respectively. Results are shown below in Chart 2. When considering themselves in a work capacity, most respondents stated they were adaptable, reliable and a team player. The areas where respondents are most "adapting", that is, the greatest difference between work and home personalities are, being a team player, relaxed, outgoing, detailed and adaptable. These are highlighted within the chart by the use of an arrow. This does not suggest that the individual is not a team player at home or is never relaxed at work, it simply points out the need to change natural tendencies dependant on the environment.

CHART 1

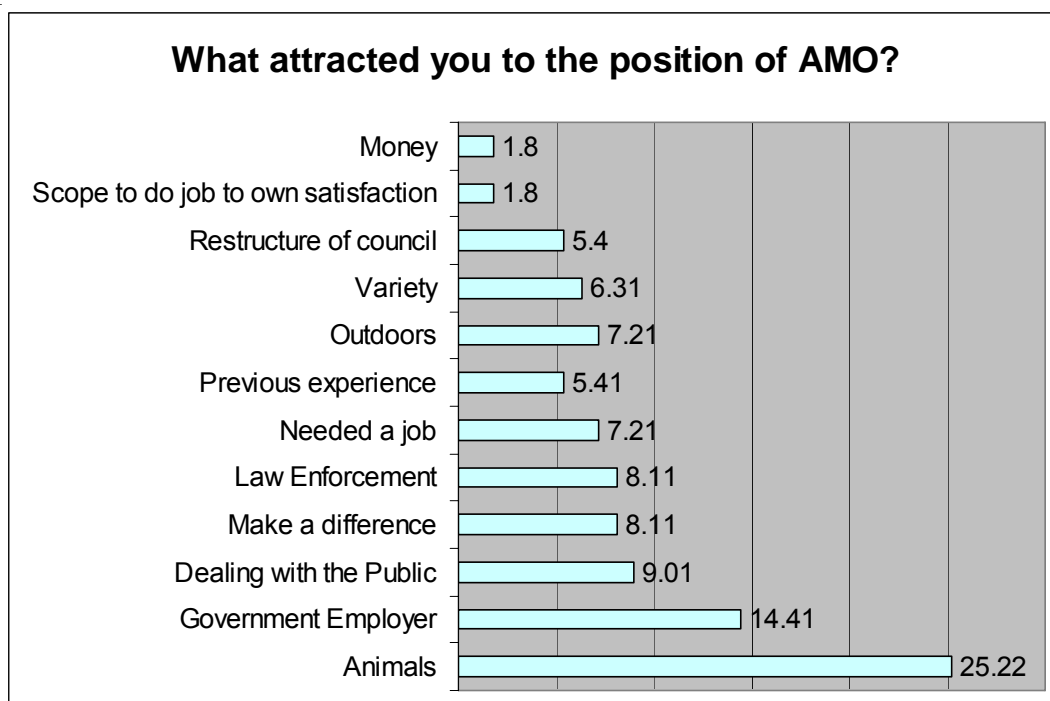
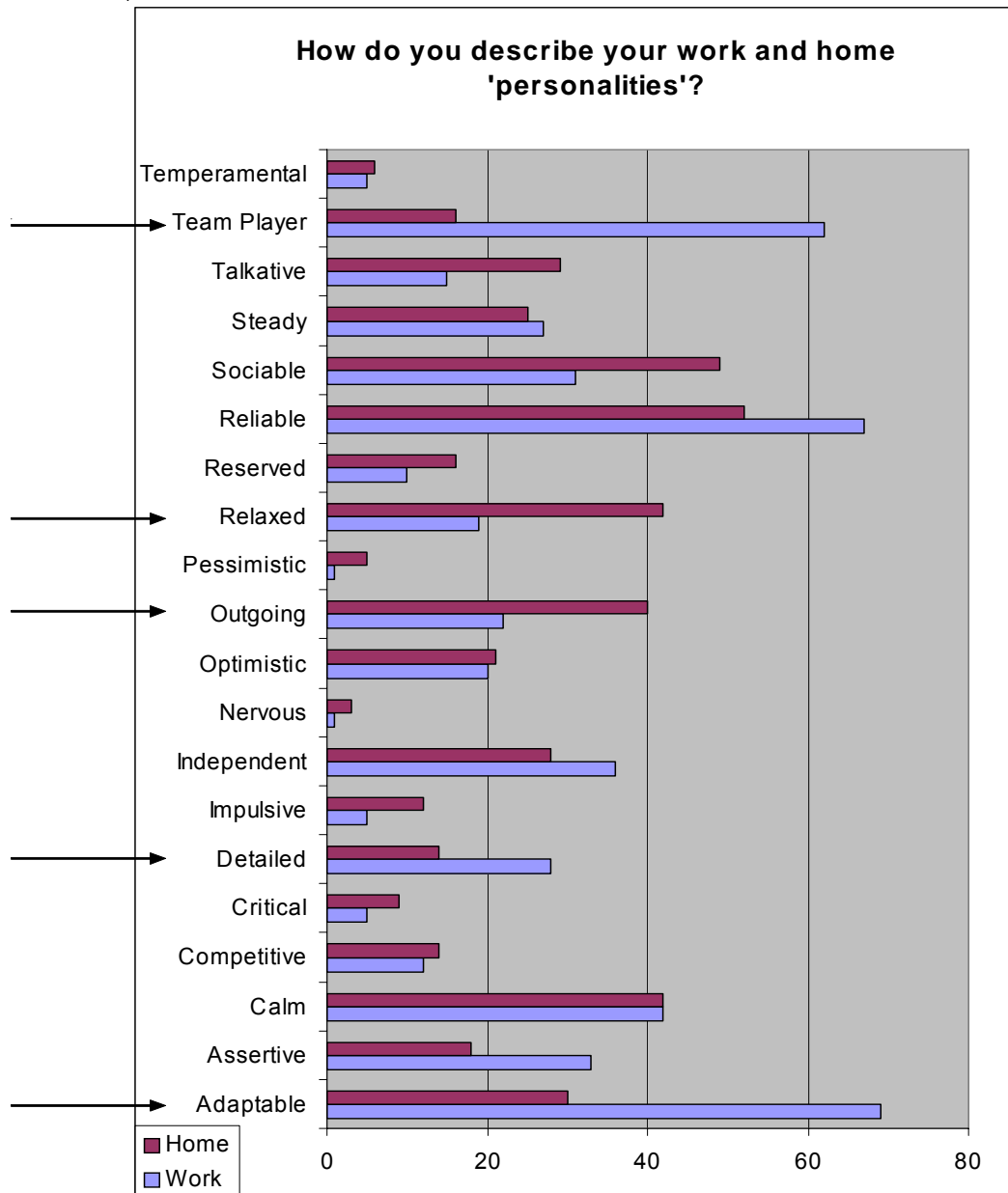
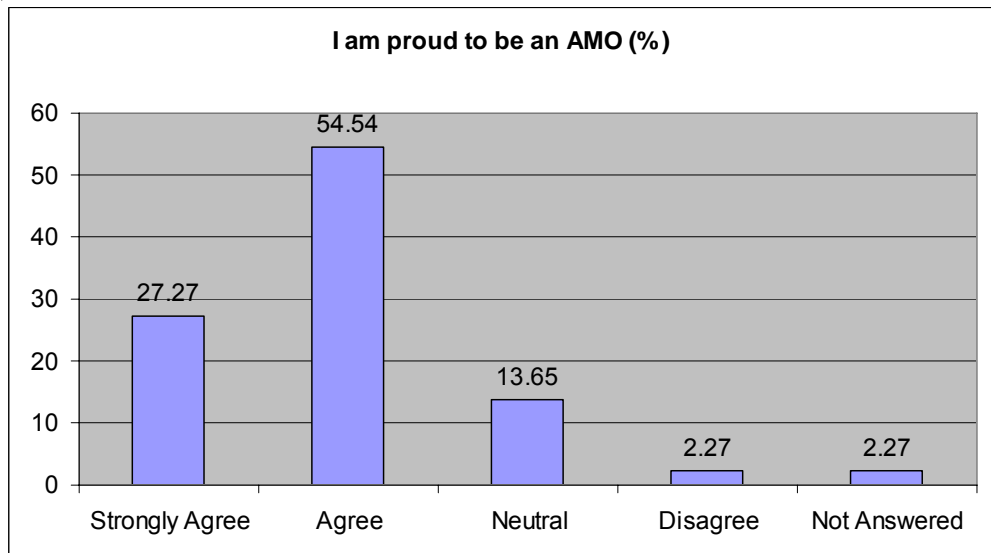


CHART 3



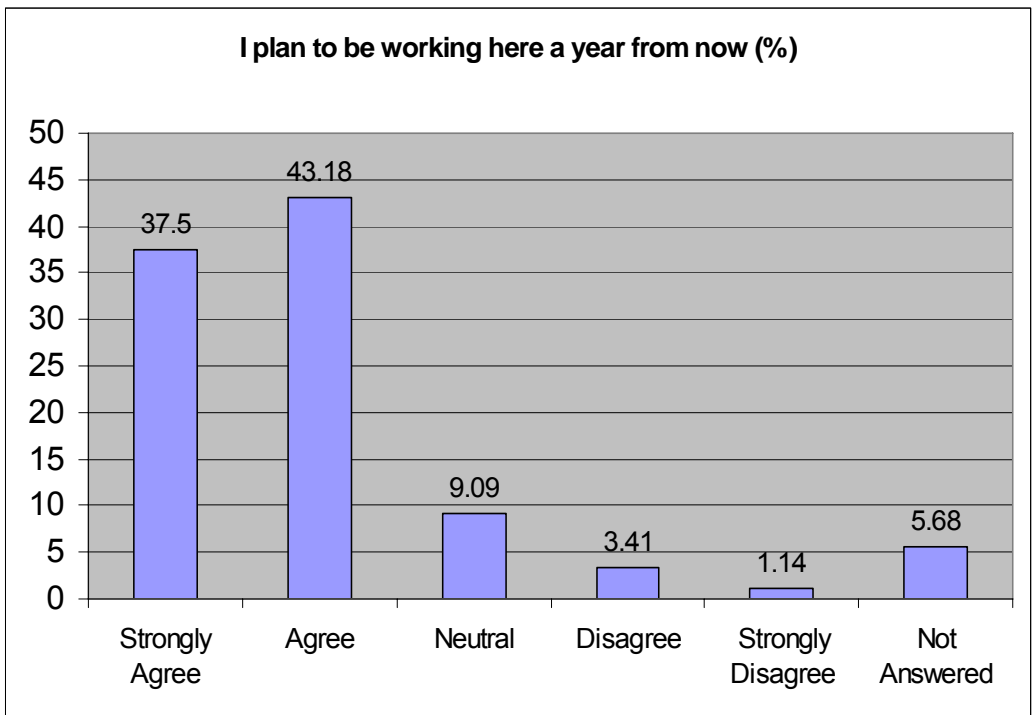
When asked for an opinion on a selection of statements, the following responses of interest were noted.

CHART 4



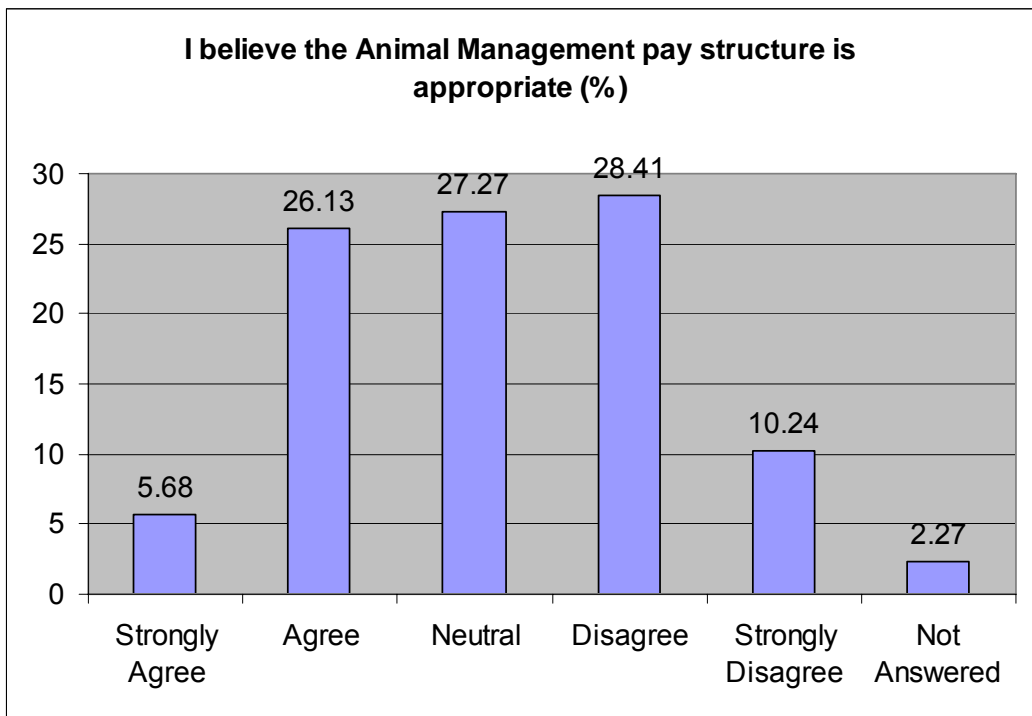
The majority of respondents who stated neutral when asked whether they were proud to be an AMO had been employed between one year and ten years. Those individuals who were not proud of being an AMO had worked in the field for approximately 5 years

CHART 5



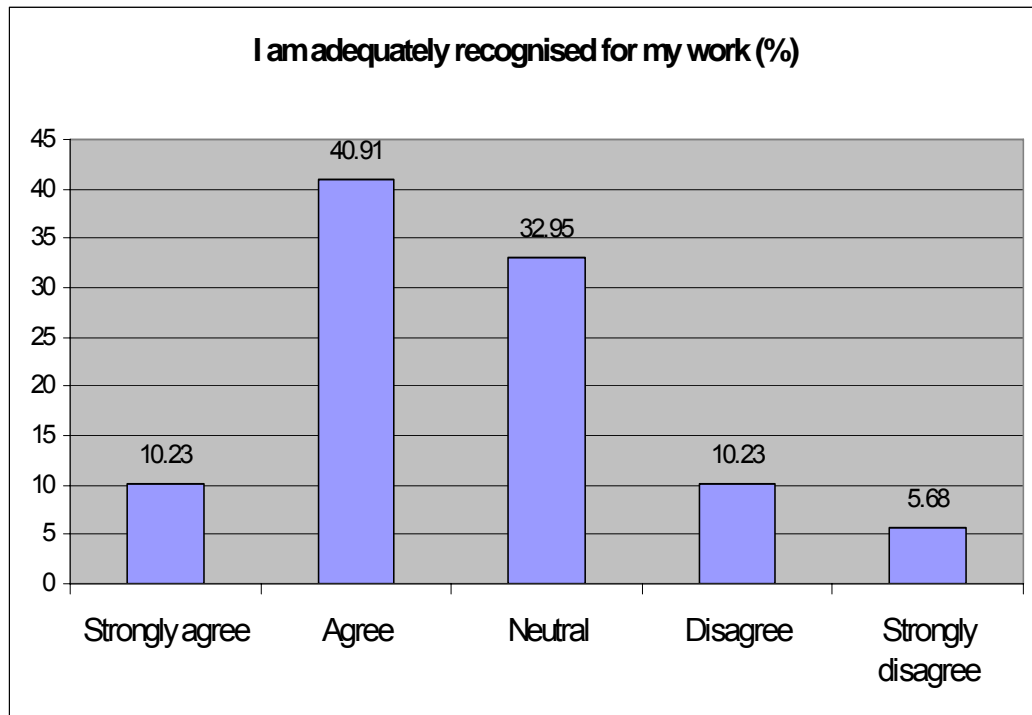
The person who stated they strongly disagreed with being employed within animal management in one year was approaching retirement. All respondents who disagreed with staying more than one year further stated they were seeking work elsewhere, both within and out side of Council

CHART 6



Whilst, 80.68% of respondents stated they planned to be working in animal management a year from now, 40.92% of AMO's stated they believed the pay structure for animal management to be inappropriate or inadequate.

CHART 7



Interestingly, just over 50% of AMO's felt they were adequately recognised for their work, whilst the remaining half feel either ambivalent or unhappy that they are not recognised for their work. Even though this large proportion feel inadequately recognised, 80% of respondents as previously mentioned comparatively felt animal management to be a career, were proud of their work and plan to be in animal management at least for the next year. 45.65% of respondents as shown below in Chart 8 also did not believe they are given opportunities (or sufficient opportunities) for professional growth.

CHART 8

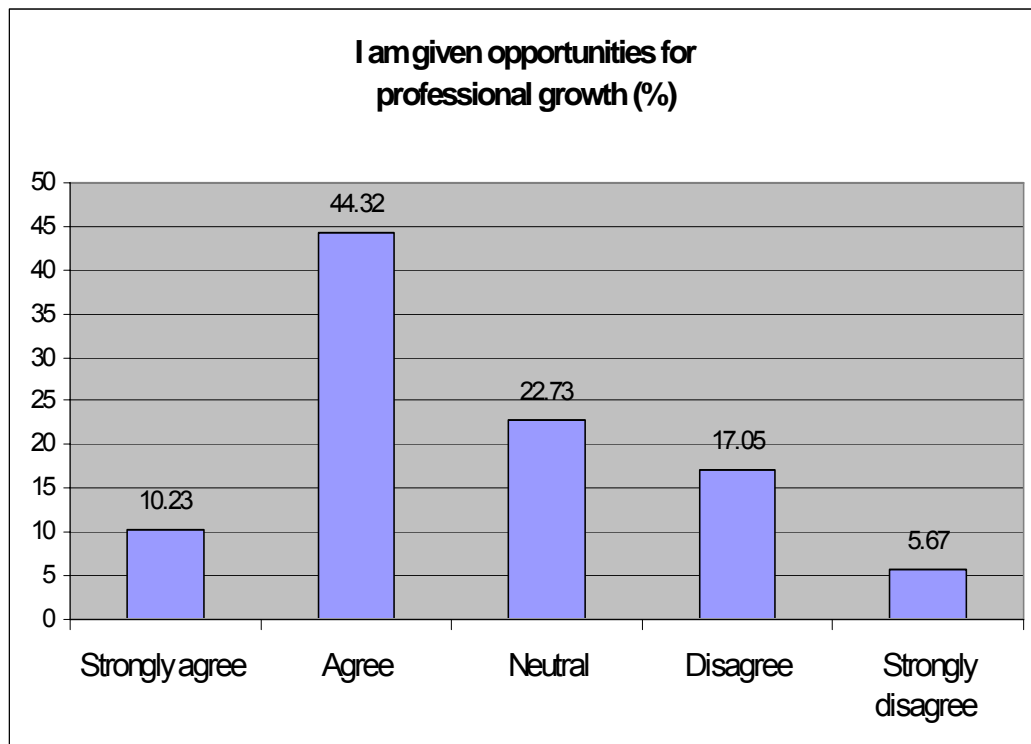
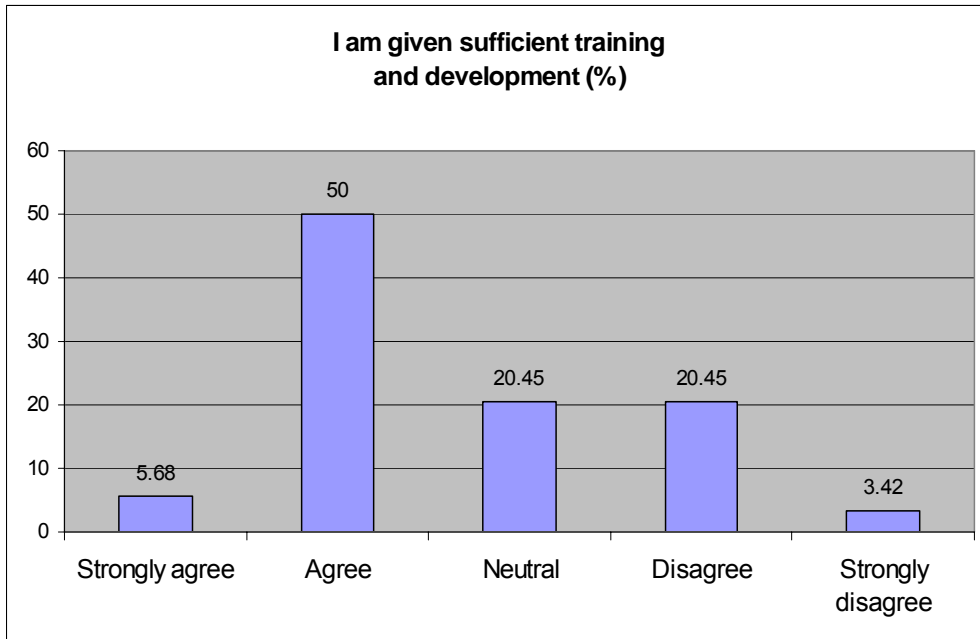
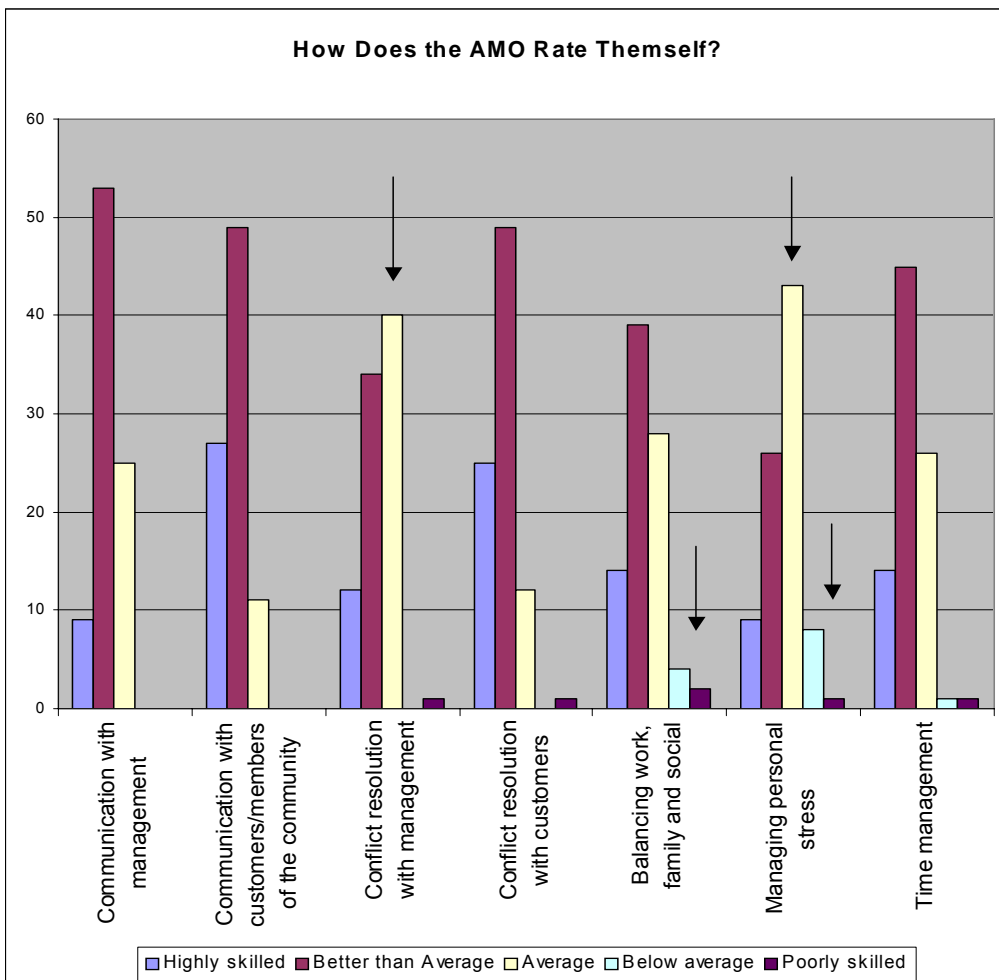


CHART 9



When asked to rate themselves against a number of criteria, most AMO's rated themselves as better than average against the majority of criteria. The exceptions however were in the areas of managing personal stress and conflict resolution with management whereby the respondents rated themselves as average. These are highlighted with an arrow in Chart 10 below. Also highlighted are those areas the AMO considered themselves to be poorly skilled or below average. These ratings were in the balancing work, family and social as well as managing personal stress.

CHART 10



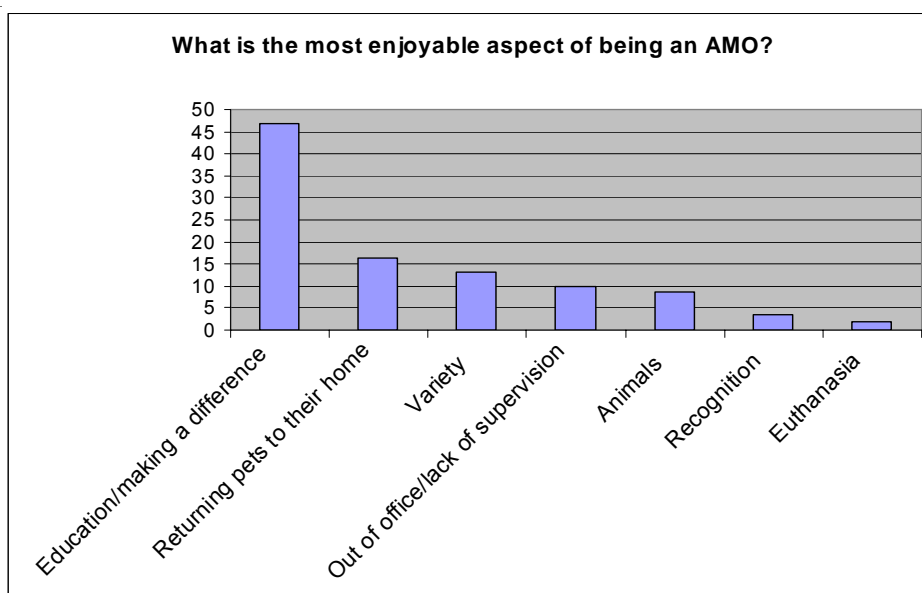
When asked to place in order the characteristics the “perfect AMO” should possess, the following differing opinions between the Animal Management Officer and the manager or supervisor of the Animal Management Department were discovered as shown in Chart 11.

CHART 11

Animal Management Officer Opinion	Manager or Supervisor Opinion
Communication	Positive attitude
Conflict resolution	Communication skills
Fond of animals	Conflict resolution skills
Positive attitude	Ability to work as part of a team
Ability to enforce law	Ability to enforce law
Assertive nature	Basic computer skills
Ability to handle stress	Ability to handle stress
Ability to meet deadlines	Ability to handle deadlines
Ability to work as part of a team	Ability to multitask
Basic computer skills	Assertive nature
Relaxed nature	Fond of animals
Ability to multitask	Relaxed nature
Sense of humour	Sense of humour
Physical strength	Physical strength
Advanced computer skills	Advanced computer skills

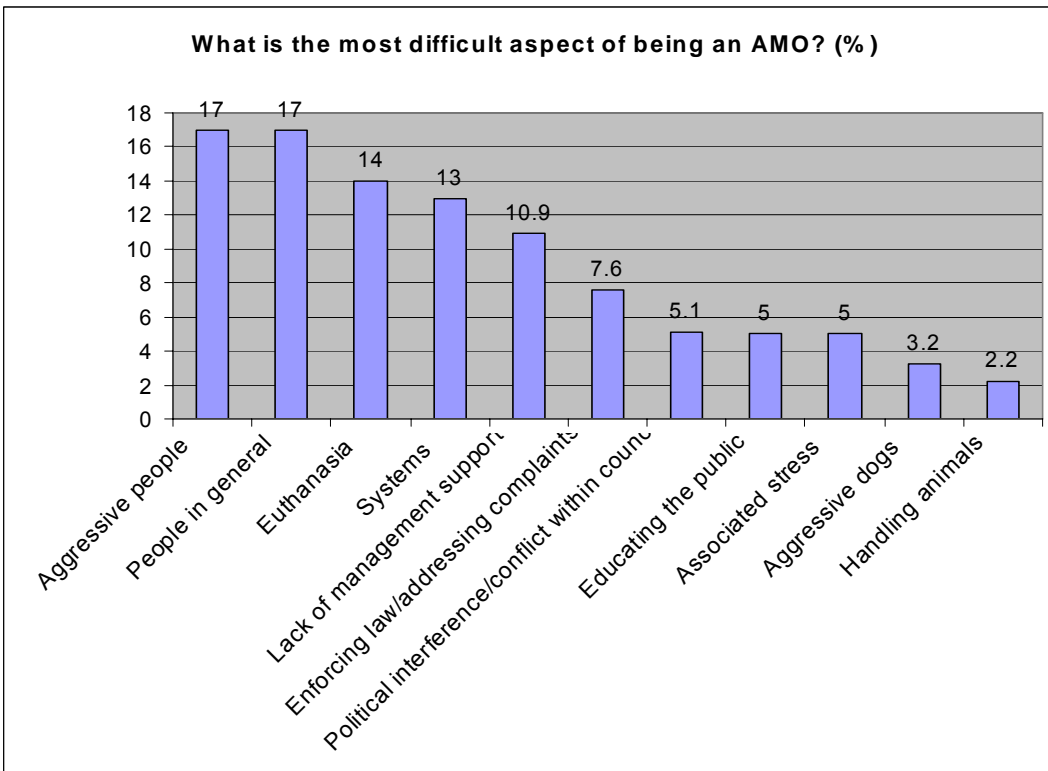
When asked what was the most enjoyable aspect of being an Animal Management Officer, 46.7% of respondents stated education/ dealing with people and making a difference (incorporating resolving a complaint) was the most enjoyable aspect of the job role. 16.3% of respondents stated the most enjoyable aspect of the job was returning pets to their homes. These are all altruistic reasons. 13.1% of respondents enjoyed the variety of the job followed by 9.8% of respondents who stated they enjoyed being able to get out of the office when stressed or enjoyed the minimal supervision. Only 8.7% of respondents stated the animal contact was the most enjoyable aspect. This may be due to the fact that the animals an AMO most likely will encounter could be neglected, stray, nervous, aggressive, injured and difficult to handle. Euthanasia, as shown below in Chart 13 is also considered one of the most difficult aspects of being an AMO. Only 3.4% of people stated receiving recognition or the company of their peers was an enjoyable aspect of the job. 2% of respondents stated they enjoyed the euthanasia components of animal management or using a rifle during day-to-day activities.

CHART 12



Conversely, the areas of concern or those areas the AMO stated as being the most difficult were:

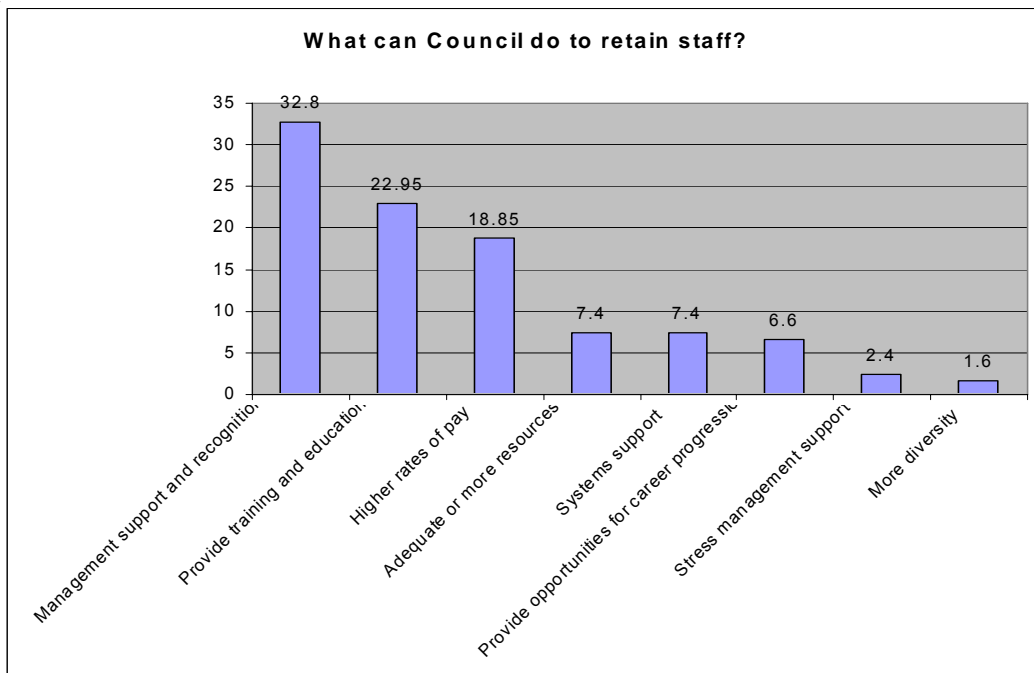
CHART 13



Respondents stated that people were in fact the most difficult to deal with, both aggressive people and people in general at a combined percentage of 34%. Systems (13%) included a lack of training, a lack of time, a heavy workload, a lack of team work, a requirement for after hours work as well as not being able to get holidays at Christmas time. Political interference or conflict within Council rated as being difficult by 5% of respondents. Associated stress was also considered difficult by 5% of respondents and included not being able to switch off as well as seeing animals in distress, it does not include the stress caused by aggressive people or animals.

Suggestions for Council to retain staff put forward by respondents include the following:

CHART 14



Almost a third of respondents rated management support and recognition as the answer to retaining staff. This included the comments that Council should stand by the AMO decision. 22.95% of respondents stated training and education could be provided to retain staff, this is confirmed by a quarter of respondents stating in an earlier response that they did not believe they were given adequate training or education. Comments made by the 7.4% who believe more resources would attract staff retention included the provision of more or better equipment. The 7.4% of systems support included lightening workloads, more teamwork (or being able to work in pairs), and hiring more staff. 6.6% of respondents believe further career progression within animal management be made available in order to retain staff. Stress management support was requested by only 2.4% of respondents despite many recipients rating themselves as average, below average or poorly skilled at managing personal stress. Only one person suggested more diversity, this low number is not surprising considering the range of tasks contained within the job description of most respondents.

Discussion

Should recruitment be based on this survey alone, three employment criteria are apparent, that is, the individual should possess 1) an affinity with animals whilst being practical, 2) some altruistic tendencies and 3) have a behavioural base that does not require a great deal of adaptation.

An affinity with animals, whether the AMO has a broad job base or is solely allocated to animal management is a desirable characteristic of potential animal management officers. This is supported by 25.2% of AMO's stating they applied for the position due to their fondness of animals. Fondness of animals was also stated as the third most valuable trait in the 'perfect AMO' voted by those actually doing the job. Aggressive animals and animal handling was not considered one of the greatest areas of difficulty in being an animal management officer however undertaking euthanasia was. This indicates that whilst a fondness or affinity with animals is required, a realistic approach is also necessary in an animal management officer. This realistic attitude might suggest why only 8.7% of respondents stated that the animal contact was the most enjoyable part of being an AMO.

Having elements of altruistic tendencies was shown in many of the respondents in that many view animal management as a way to make a difference within their community. 63% of respondents stated educating the public, resolving complaints and returning pets home was the best part of their job. Both managers and AMO's rank the ability to enforce law as the fifth most desirable characteristic a perfect AMO should possess. It is shown in these results that because AMO's believe in Local Laws protecting community, law enforcement is undertaken largely with a view to 'making a difference' rather than seeing law enforcement as an opportunity to prosecute for the sake of prosecution.

To have a behavioural base that does not require a great deal of adaptation does not suggest that the individual is exactly the same at home as they are at work, it simply points out the individuals need to change natural tendencies dependant on the environment should not be excessive one way or the other whether it be home or a work environment. The greater the change required or the greater the need for adaptation oftentimes indicates a substandard performance from the employee or a greater tendency for stress or burnout. Bonnstetter and Suiter (p. 157) explain that people who bring with them different natural behaviour than what the job regularly demands "must first focus their energy on adjusting their behaviour to the job. After expending this energy to bring about

the behavioural change, they can then use what energy is left to perform the duties of the job." This lack of energy leads to burn out or stress related incidents or absence. This particular profiling upon recruitment can be ascertained by asking questions to determine how the individual would act in certain work related and social/home situations. Or preferably, by utilizing behavioural or psychological profiling tools upon recruitment, a more comprehensive report can be determined. The utilization of tools such as these or psychological testing upon recruitment is however a topic for a separate paper.

In order to retain staff, the message from this particular survey is largely support and recognition by management and Council is required. This was expressed by a third of respondents and through a number of written comments, such as "stand by AMO decisions". In a separate study undertaken by Commerce Queensland, it was discovered that 45% of employees left their positions due to bad managers or supervisors, in particular the people skills (or lack of) held by these individuals in the role of management. It must be pointed out that AMO's do not simply appoint blame towards their direct managers, often times comments expressed indicate a number of levels of management within Council.

Career pathways were also expressed as a means for retaining animal management staff. Murray citing Toia (1997, p. 307) stated, "the lack of a career path in MPM for [AMO's] was a recurring complaint. Even adequate [AMO] training will not help keep skilled people in [animal management] if they have no dedicated job description and nowhere to go in a vocational sense." This is confirmed in this survey by over 50% of respondents stating they did receive adequate education and training and yet over 30% of respondents state that further education and a career pathway was required in order to keep skilled staff.

Almost 20% of respondents stated an increased rate of pay would retain staff, however this is confounded by the majority of people entering animal management did not do so for the money, nor do the majority of respondents plan on leaving animal management within the next year.

Conclusion

Whilst turnover certainly occurs within animal management as it does in all organizations and departments, the actual turnover rate within animal management units was not a set item for study. Therefore, this survey was conducted on AMO's currently working in the position and should therefore give an indication of what tendencies to look for in the recruitment of good staff and how to retain staff.

This survey concludes that in order to attract staff, suggested recruitment criteria may include a (practical) fondness for animals, altruistic tendencies within the individual, and the requirement for behavioural profiling to eliminate 'adaptors' and thus fill the position with somebody comprehensively suited to the job.

In order to retain staff, support, recognition and career advancement are very much at the forefront of the minds of those individuals surveyed. Support and recognition come not just from the immediate manager or supervisor, but from Council at many levels, in particular the adherence to those decisions made by the AMO.

In order to further ascertain how staff could be retained, additional surveys of those AMO's who have left the position or the industry may prove helpful.

