Catastrophic Work / Life Balance: Emergency Responder Role
Conflict and Abandonment – Implications for Managers

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Paper presented at
EARTH: FIRE AND RAIN
Australian & New Zealand Disaster and Emergency Management Conference
Brisbane – 16 – 18, April 2012
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Abstract

No one would seriously question the courage of our emergency responders, or their loyalty and sense of duty. But what happens when, in catastrophic emergencies, their duty as responders conflicts with their duty as a partner, parent or child; or in the case of volunteers perhaps, their duty to other organisations?

These dilemmas can result in “role conflict” which can detract from performance at work or result in the “abandonment” of duty. These phenomena have been researched, from time to time, since the 1950’s but the focus returned after Hurricane Katrina that hit New Orleans in 2005. During that event, at a time where a community was in desperate need of police support, 240 of the 1450 strong force did not go to work, some for many weeks. Of the 240, 51 were later fired for “abandoning their posts”. After the storm, another sixty officers resigned and two committed suicide.

In 2011 the University of Delaware, Disaster Research Centre (DRC), reported the results of a meta-evaluation of the research done to examine role strain, role conflict and abandonment in incidents ranging from natural disasters and terrorist attacks to pandemics. The DRC observed that, methodologically, the research fell into two categories; behavioural studies that examined actual incidents, and perception studies that measured what people thought they would do in a hypothetical situation. The results between the groups varied enormously with perception studies predicting up to 70% abandonment in some cases but behavioural studies being far more optimistic to the point that it was suggested that role abandonment would not have a significant operational impact.

This paper will discuss the manifestations of role conflict in emergency services and the potential for role abandonment suggesting that, while the likelihood of mass abandonment is low, there may be a “tipping point” at which it will occur. The Victorian fires of 2009 are examined as an event where one might expect evidence of abandonment. Finally the author will discuss proactive measures that may be considered during the planning, prevention and response phases of a disaster or catastrophe to mitigate against role conflict, thereby increasing performance and reducing the risk of mass abandonment.

Keywords: Role conflict, role abandonment, work/family conflict, volunteers, emergency responders, fire-fighters.
Introduction

The concept of work / life balance is something we have become increasingly aware of in recent times. The need to “have a life” beyond work is seen as not only desirable but also necessary for proper mental and physical health. Organisations have responded with more flexible policies around working hours, location of work and absences. For the most part this revolution in work practice continues, enabled by technology and pushed by generational change. However, there are times where emergency response agencies must insist that people be at work. Communities rely on emergency responders and while routine operations permit flexibility, sudden emergencies and catastrophic events may require people to put work first. This paper examines the literature on the conflicting pressures between work as an emergency responder and other life roles and suggests that under certain extreme circumstances large-scale role abandonment by emergency responders is foreseeable. Proactively reducing the pressures associated with role conflict in the emergency response workforce is likely to increase retention rates, improve operational performance and defer the “tipping point” at which large-scale abandonment is predicted. A number of options and considerations are put forward to assist emergency response managers and agencies in the management of risks associated with role conflict.

Role Conflict and Abandonment

Role conflict refers to the times when it is difficult for individuals to meet the demands of filling multiple roles (Killian, 1952; Westman, 2001). In the context of this paper we are referring to people who have an occupational role as a as a career, retained or volunteer emergency responder; such as a fire-fighter, rescuer, paramedic or police officer. These roles require people to face dangers and take risks that other citizens are not exposed to or expected to confront. Such is the selfless bravery and sense of duty among these groups that during relatively recent “mega-events”, such as the World Trade Centre attacks in New York, the unsolicited convergence of emergency responders became a problem in itself. (See Tierney, 2003) Emergency responders do this work for a variety of reasons but commonly it is an intrinsic and altruistic motivation to serve or protect the community and in this way make a contribution to society. Many make the ultimate sacrifice, losing their lives in the course of their duty. (For example see Mayhew, 2001; Ridenour et al., 2008, regarding the health and safety risks of policing and firefighting.)

1 Career officers are those for whom the emergency response role is the primary occupation, usually full-time. Volunteer and retained emergency responders are those who make themselves available for training and call-out to incidents. The difference is that retained officers receive an allowance for being on-call and may be paid while on duty at a call-out. Volunteers are not paid in this way but the term “volunteer” is used in this paper to describe all “non-career” emergency responders because remuneration is not a key factor.
Of course emergency responders have ‘life roles’ beyond their profession. They are parents, siblings and children with interdependent relationships with others. They have friends and colleagues who may rely on them and, particularly in the case of volunteers, may have a second “primary” occupation and perhaps customers and employees to whom they have various levels of responsibility. Simultaneously meeting the expectations of these various responsibilities can be difficult. Emergency responders often work shift work and have unpredictable hours and may be subject to call outs. In addition, the strains of emergency response work can lead to changed social and family behaviours that can impact on relationships.

Australian communities are heavily dependent on their 220,000 volunteer fire fighters (J. McLennan, 2008) but being a volunteer can put pressure on other life roles. In 2007 the average resignation rate for Australian volunteer fire agencies was 7.7% (McLennan, Birch, Cowlishaw, & Hayes, 2009, p. 40). A study of South Australian fire services revealed that of those volunteers who resigned between December 2005 and December 2007, 51% left due to “work/family needs” (McLennan, et al., 2009, p. 45). The negative impact on work and family roles was described by McLennan, et al. (2009, p. 45) as the most pervasive of the “(notionally) avoidable reasons why volunteers resign”. In addition, research has illustrated the impact on relationships of absences from home and the subsequent fatigue after duty (See Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) as well as other changes in behaviour such as intolerance and emotional withdrawal. (See Schultz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004; Story & Repetti, 2006) To further exacerbate the impact of volunteer work there is also the “stress crossover effect” to the partners of volunteers described by Cowlishaw, Evans and McLennan (2010). Stress crossover effect is the process by which stress or strain from work leads to stress or strain experienced by the partner at home often to detrimental effect. (Westman, 2001)

In addition to the potential for conflict between duty and family there can also be role conflict between duty as an emergency responder and other employment. This is especially prevalent in volunteer forces as volunteers are usually responders in addition to their full time employment or activity. The Australian volunteer agencies are experiencing a trend toward the selective release of volunteers depending on the type of call. For example, like many fire services, the New South Wales Fire & Rescue Service (FRNSW) have expanded their role to include vehicle rescue and HAZMAT incidents in addition to traditional fire fighting and associated duties. Some employers are reported to be making judgments about which call-out volunteers will be released for based on the nature of the incident, such as fires but not motor vehicle collisions; or the threat the incident presents to the local community, meaning within a radius of the local community; or simply refusing to release employees during work hours. For most volunteers the choice between full time employment and the provision of volunteer services isn’t really a choice and there are increasing numbers of rural fire stations that are manned by career fire fighters during business hours. (Brogan, 2012)

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2 This is changing in many areas where volunteer ranks are increasingly made up of retirees. (Brogan, 2012)
Finally, there is the phenomenon of conflict between “duty and duty” which occurs where responders are members of more than one emergency response agency and is referred to as “two-hat syndrome”. A study of fire and rescue personnel in Atlanta revealed that 22.2% also worked for at least one other public safety agency. (Delinger & Gonzenbach, 2002). There is a general paucity of research in this area but it is quite likely that it is prevalent in the Australian volunteer services as well because many country towns and cities have a limited pool of potential volunteers. The result is multiple memberships that, for the most part, don’t create conflict. Police officers may be volunteer fire officers and volunteer for callouts when they are off-shift. Paramedics may work as rescue personnel on a volunteer basis. However, there are times when a conflict may occur. A practical example of this occurred in central New South Wales where an ambulance officer was called to a serious motor vehicle accident. This officer was also a Deputy Captain of the NSWRFS and, on observing the response of the fire service, decided to change roles during the event and take control of the fire service response. Naturally this resulted in considerable confusion and some angst among responders. (Brogan, 2012) Of course it would be unusual for such decisions to be made on-scene, rather they will occur at the time of call out, but this demonstrates the potential for multi-agency events to create role conflict and opens the door to thinking about large-scale multi-agency events which require large numbers of emergency responders. It is not difficult to imagine a multi-vehicle collision involving serious injuries and the need to remove people from wrecks combined with a HAZMAT spill from an involved tanker creating a requirement to evacuate local residents. The range of emergency responses, from traffic management, medical, road rescue, hazard management and evacuation would stretch most regional responses in the first minutes and hours.

Role conflicts, of one type or another, are a part of life for many emergency responders and perhaps this is one of the less visible burdens carried by people working in these professions along with exposure to risk and trauma. Those who do not resign will find mechanisms to mitigate and cope with the demands of competing roles such that it does not unduly affect their work or their life. Others may compartmentalize, underperform, delegate responsibility or turn to others for assistance (See Webb, Beverly, McMichael, Noon, & Patterson, 1999). There are also links between role conflict and work related burnout as well as a lowered intention to continue volunteering. (e.g. Lewig, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Dollard, & Metzer, 2007) In acute cases “role abandonment” may occur. Role abandonment is where a person stops fulfilling the responsibilities associated with a role. It is noted that the word “abandonment” is emotionally charged but in this context it is not used in a judgmental sense. Abandonment behaviours by emergency responders are hard to imagine, and contrary to the devotion to duty and bravery for which these officers are known, but it can and does happen. Abandonment happens where officers are confronted with “wicked” dilemmas, a stark choice between fulfilling their responsibilities to the work and their family. Such a dilemma could affect individual officers from time to time, such as a medical emergency with a family member requiring immediate, unplanned absence from work. Contemporary emergency response organisations have matured sufficiently to cope with such an incident in a supportive manner and without recrimination. However, it is possible to imagine
scenarios where large numbers of emergency responders may simultaneously abandon their occupational role at which time there would be a problem due to reduced operational capability. Needless to say, the consequence of mass abandonment may place the communities who rely on emergency services at increased peril. Considerable research has been done with scenario-based projections of role abandonment in emergency responders and health care personnel.

Precursors to Abandonment

Perception studies generate hypothetical scenarios and question people on their likely responses. The strength of this approach is that it enables wide-ranging “what-if” events to be explored across large numbers of respondents. These can be events of a nature or scale that has not yet happened, such as a “dirty bomb” attack in a major city. The downside is the artificiality of the exercise and the difficulty in writing scenarios that are not contrived. Nevertheless perception studies are widely used and can provide very useful indicators. The results from role abandonment related perception studies are somewhat alarming. A meta-evaluation of such studies conducted by the Disaster Research Centre, University of Delaware, found that role abandonment would be a major problem during many types and intensities of disaster (Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 15) The range of predictions uncovered were from 20% (Quarantelli, 1978) to as high as 68% (Alexander & Wynia, 2003) with the higher levels of abandonment expected for events with chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear elements.

In contrast, behavioural studies examine actual incidents either through observation and interview or the review of official inquiries. The problem of artificiality associated with perception studies is eliminated because the event has actually occurred, but there are other limitations. Among these is the fact that the range of events and access to participants are restricted. These studies have largely focused on natural disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes but have also explored public health emergencies (See Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 13). The Disaster Research Center meta-evaluation concluded that behavioural studies suggest that the role abandonment “will be minimal except under very specific conditions, such as those that were present in the case of the New Orleans Police Department during Hurricane Katrina”. (Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 4). So the question arises, what are the “very specific conditions” for large scale and debilitating role abandonment? As the most well known example of mass role abandonment behaviour, Hurricane Katrina provides some insight.

Hurricane Katrina killed over 1,800 people, affected 28,000 square miles and left tens of thousands homeless (United States Congress, 2006). During this mega-event, at a time where a community was in desperate need of police support, 240 of the 1450 strong police force did not go to work, some for many weeks. Of the 240, 51 were later dismissed for “abandoning their posts” (Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 13). Depending on which of these figures you use this is an abandonment rate of either
3% or 16% - such levels can significantly degrade an organisation’s ability to respond effectively and support a community in need. After the storm, another sixty officers resigned and two committed suicide.

Hurricane Katrina reveals the possibility that there may be circumstances where large numbers of emergency responders may simultaneously put their duty to their family ahead of their duty to the communities they are sworn to serve. This event also lends more credence to the predictions of perception studies which can create scenarios on the scale of Katrina. But what are the potential elements that may impact on abandonment behaviour? The proximity of emergency responders families must surely be one. In the aftermath of Katrina the first few hours of the search and rescue mission was spent retrieving almost 300 officers from rooftops and attics (Testimony of Warren J. Riley, Superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department, 2006) and over 1000 of its 1450 officers lost their homes (Anderson, 2006). Others have suggested that the responders’ commitment or dedication to their role will be influenced by the existence of organizational problems or failures. At the time of Hurricane Katrina the New Orleans Police Department was reportedly suffering from low morale and chronic understaffing (See Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 14). The links between organizational loyalty and role abandonment are not fully understood but it is likely that this was a factor. Perception studies often explore the conditions within an event that may contribute to abandonment. These have revealed two important factors. The first is an absence of mechanisms to care for children and the elderly in the absence of a responder and secondly the ability of the responder to communicate with family members during an event (Mackler, Wilkerson, & Cinti, 2007; Smith, 2007). Both of these factors can be mitigated through action prior to and during an event.

Other studies reveal that the nature of the event may also be an important factor in role conflict and role abandonment. Balicer, Omer Barnett & Everly (2006) surveyed local public health workers and found that nearly half the respondents stated they would not report to duty during an influenza pandemic. Qureshi et al (2005) found that health care workers reported that they were most willing to report to work during mass casualty incidents (86%) and environmental disasters (84%), and were least willing to report during a SARS outbreak (48%), radiological event (57%), or smallpox epidemic (61%). Fear and concern for family and self and personal health problems were the most frequently cited barriers to “willingness.” (Kushma, 2007)

However, a closer examination of the Hurricane Katrina experience suggests motivations for abandonment are more elementary. A case that came to represent the wicked dilemma faced by many officers during that event was that of Paul Schubert who was one of the officers dismissed for leaving his job as a police officer shortly before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. During his disciplinary hearing Schubert said that he needed to take care of his disabled wife, Madeline O’Neill. Madeline required doctor’s care and medicine for her rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes and poor eyesight. Schubert was given leave to evacuate his wife, but was absent for a month as he searched for accommodation, doctors and medicine. During that
time he says that he contacted his supervisors at least three times during that period and was told he should take care of his wife and return as soon as he could. Schubert was reported as saying “I couldn’t just abandon her in a hotel room. I would have been signing her death warrant…it tore me up not being here during the storm.” (Johnson, 2006, p. 1)

Of course this type of individual action is understandable, but when it is widespread it creates major problems for effective response summed up by the head of New Orleans Police Association, David Benelli, who was quoted as saying, “You know, if every single officer said he had to take care of family, there would be no one left on this job. This is not a normal job. Police officers take an oath. They are supposed to stay”. (Johnson, 2006)

If key elements of role abandonment include events of large scale which impact significantly on the families of emergency responders then the Victorian bushfires of 2009 were an event where one might expect to see evidence of this.

In the last week of January 2009 the Australian state of Victoria was subjected to an extreme heat wave with temperatures over 43°C recorded for three consecutive days. By February 7th the State was “tinder dry” and the forecast was for similar temperatures with strong winds, ideal conditions for wild fire. The fire and other emergency services prepared for the worst and the public were warned of the extreme fire danger. On that day 316 fires broke out across the state, 173 people were killed, 7562 people were displaced, over 2,000 homes were destroyed and 450,00 hectares of land were burned. (Teague, McLeod, & Pascoe, 2010a). Many fire-fighters were injured physically and psychologically by the fires of 7th February. Two officers lost their lives but many emergency responders also lost family, friends, colleagues and their homes. For example, more than 30 Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) staff lost a close family member or their homes (Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2009, p. 22) and almost 300 Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers and their families were affected by the fires (Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria Inc, 2009, p. 14). In terms of the impact on the families of responders this event is quite high, but does not reach the figures from Hurricane Katrina.

The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission did not voice any concerns about the incidence of abandonment. To the contrary, the Commission declared that it agreed with the comments of Mr David McGahy, Captain of the Arthurs Creek CFA brigade and believed they were equally true of the entire state. McGahy had said:

I never cease to be amazed to this day at the absolute bravery and professionalism of the men and women of my brigade. There were people in charge of trucks that had no idea—they were from Strathewen—whether their houses were there, they had no idea if their families were alive, and they continued to do what was requested of them. They stayed on the line and
helped other people. My admiration for the bravery, as I said, of the members of my brigade knows no bounds. (Teague, McLeod, & Pascoe, 2010c, p. 139)

The prevalence of the responder role over family roles during the Victorian fires is also evident in the following statement by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, which said that it;

“also heard of the impact of volunteering on the family members of CFA volunteers. On 7 February many were left to wonder if their partner, son, daughter, mother or father would return home. Family members supported CFA volunteers by freeing them to protect the community while they stayed to defend the family home. Further support was provided with catering for brigades, maintaining households, or running the family business. The Commission acknowledges the essential role played by the families of CFA volunteers in enabling the volunteers to give priority to their communities during emergencies.” (Teague, et al., 2010c, p. 138)

Of course the Royal Commission was not looking for examples of the abandonment of duties during the event though it may be reasonable to assume that if abandonment had occurred to a critical level it would have been noted. Equally there is little doubt that there were occasions where fire fighters did abandon their fire-fighter role in favour of other responsibilities. There was one particularly tragic example of a member of Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) who was reported to have “left his crew to help a relative on 7th February. He was subsequently caught by the fire (and died) as he tried to leave.” (Teague, et al., 2010c, p. 132)

The evidence from the Victorian fires is not sufficient to draw any detailed conclusions about the incidence of role conflict and role abandonment during that event other that to observe that both occurred to some extent but may not have had a significant impact on operational effectiveness. This is consistent with the conclusions of previous behavioural research and the Disaster Research Center's overall finding which was that “role conflict and role strain are serious and significant problems across hazards, sectors and time (and that) role abandonment ... is a rare outcome that typically does not have a significant influence on response operations.” (Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 26) So what should we make of the Hurricane Katrina experience?

Hurricane Katrina alerts us to the possibility that large-scale abandonment is possible in certain circumstances, which are not yet fully understood. A useful starting point may be defining the scale of an event which is extraordinary. The distinction between a disaster from a catastrophe may be a starting point. In summary, a disaster become a “catastrophe” when large areas and communities experience major threats to life in a short period requiring immediate responses to restore social order. The result is abrupt and simultaneous interruption of community and social institutions including emergency organisations necessitating outside

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support often at national levels. (Quarantelli, 2008, pp. 874-875) Indeed there are some highly regarded researchers, such as Quarantelli (2008) who suggest that the abandonment experience of New Orleans was more to do with problems within the Police Force than with role conflict (See also Anderson, 2006). However, this is not an entirely satisfactory explanation as organizational dysfunction may actually contribute to role conflict by reducing the loyalty, and therefore sense of duty, to the emergency responder role thereby increasing the influence of other roles. Mass role abandonment did happen during Hurricane Katrina to an unprecedented level, though Quarantelli (2008) suggests that the behaviour of the St. Croix Police Force during Hurricane Hugo was similar. What are not understood properly are the reasons. To conceptualise the “trigger” to mass abandonment it may be useful to visualize a “tipping point” beyond which otherwise inconsequential levels of abandonment will rise dramatically and possibly to the levels predicted by perception studies. This “tipping point” is the point at which the combination of circumstances shifts the primary duty from emergency response to family or other duty for substantial numbers of responders.

**Prevention and Mitigation**

Research suggests that role conflict is a precursor to abandonment, therefore addressing role conflict will not only result in better performance of those who remain in their emergency response role, but may also defer the “tipping point” of mass abandonment. As discussed, the literature reveals many factors that contribute to the incidence of role conflict. In summary these are:

1. **Impact on responders families** – this is the essential ingredient of familial role conflict meaning that the incident must at once require the services of the emergency responder in their occupational role while simultaneously creating a demand for them to fulfill a duty in support of others, primarily family. This concept is discussed in further detail below.

2. **Type of disaster** – perception studies suggest that willingness to work decreases during disasters involving chemical, biological and nuclear agents. (Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 15) Disasters which meet the criteria of a catastrophe may increase the difficulties for families thereby increasing their dependence on the responder.

3. **Health of the organization** – this is the favoured explanation of those who purport that the Hurricane Katrina case was an exception predicated by low morale and poor discipline. See Quarantelli (2008, pp. 890-891) The rationale is that the sense of duty or loyalty to a dysfunctional agency is less and therefore other roles may take a higher priority.

4. **Absence of support mechanisms for the families of responders** – This is the most often cited cause of role conflict and stress in responders. (Friedman, 1986; Qureshi, et al., 2005). According to Trainor and Barsky (2011, p. 23) “emergency workers are less likely to experience role tensions if they know that their families will be cared for in the aftermath of an event.”

5. **Inability to communicate with family** – Emergency responders are less likely to be distracted from their duties by attempts to make contact with family or suffer stress and role conflict if they know their families are safe during an event.
6. **Prevalence of responders who have a role with another public safety organization** – “two hat syndrome” is a potential issue in this regard but the full impact is not known. Multiple memberships of emergency agencies is experienced in Australia but the extent of this needs to be researched and the potential adverse implications during a catastrophe should be assessed to inform policy in the future.

For the managers of emergency response agencies this knowledge provides a range of options to decrease work conflict and increase effectiveness and retention rates while reducing the residual risk of mass abandonment. Most importantly though is the need for emergency response managers and agencies to view the management of role conflict as an organisational responsibility rather than as an individual issue for officers. Role conflict exists because emergency responders are competent people with a strong sense of duty who have obligations to others outside of work. This is not only inevitable it is laudable as it provides balance and a supportive framework for officers. Therefore it is incumbent on agencies to take this into account and take steps to design structures and processes that will reduce the experience of role conflict in its personnel. A range of considerations that require a careful evaluation of the organization will govern the actions that will work for various agencies. For example, how many officers have “two-hats”, what are their roles (Are they critical or not?) and are there policies or contingency arrangements in place for the occasion where the services of that person are simultaneously required by both organisations?

To reduce role conflict the primary area of development should be the facilitation of improved communication with, and support of, responders’ families during the deployment of officers. There are likely to be many ways of avoiding the situation described Mr David McGahy, Captain of the Arthurs Creek CFA brigade who told the Bushfire Royal Commission that “there were people in charge of trucks that had no idea … whether their houses were there, they had no idea if their families were alive” (Teague, et al., 2010c, p. 139) Such uncertainty will inevitably have adverse affects on performance in the field (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005) and concern for family members is the most significant cause of role conflict (Qureshi, et al., 2005). To help address observed work / family conflict in volunteer fire-fighters it has been suggested that “there is a need for agencies to facilitate the development of processes to better support the families of volunteers” (Cowlishaw, McLennan, & Evans, 2008, p. 28) and a family support and safety network was the primary recommendation of the Disaster Research Center (Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 26). Indeed the foremost recommendation of the Disaster Research Center was the development of a Family Support and Safety Framework. Such a framework would:

1. “facilitate family preparedness of an event,
2. provide effective channels for communication from and to the family, and
3. help organise and plan for responder families’ needs.” (Trainor & Barsky, 2011, p. 21)
Family preparedness may be facilitated through information packages and support. This will vary according to the prevalent threat, but in a bush-fire area it would mean ensuring that responders’ families’ have made the necessary preparations and have the resources to deal with a threat or evacuate in the absence of the responder. Family readiness may be incorporated into an agencies pre-season preparations with requirements for officers to report back when arrangements are in place. Support and assistance may be provided officially or through family volunteers.

Regular and accurate communication on the status of loved ones will also mitigate against role conflict. A manager in the Victoria CFA described how the perceptions of danger held by family members can be distorted by selective media coverage:

The TV camera will look for the part of the fire that’s got flames shooting in the air, because that gets recognition on the nightly news. Not that ninety-five per cent of the fire perimeter is black. No, the one bit where they’ve got the flame…even if it was from five hours beforehand. Now the family knows very little about what’s gone on. They know little about what training you’ve done because they haven’t been involved in it. Hence, their view of the world is it’s death and destruction. (Cowlishaw, et al., 2008, p. 26)

It is not always possible for responders to call family from the field due to lack of coverage or the intensity of their role. In catastrophic events the mobile phone network is also likely to be compromised through overload or damage. The monitoring of the status of family members is a task that could be undertaken in the communication centre so that officers can check in by radio, when time permits, and be assured that they would be informed if they needed to be removed from the field. This would require a dedicated landline or other communication system (Such as a redundant service network) for family members to update their status and contact details. The call taker should also be in a position to advise family members on the location and condition of the responder. Such a service, albeit a significant imposition on an already taxed communications room would arguably reap considerably benefits in operational effectiveness by reducing role conflict and minimizing the time taken by the officer to independently seek out such information from the event scene. Group SMS and other communication technologies would minimize the call time requirements as long as the cellular and data networks remain active.

Enabling support for families in the aftermath of an event is another measure that will reduce role conflict. Once again this will depend on the nature of the threat in the region, but the provision of transport or supplies for isolated elderly or incapacitated relatives is an example. Provision of shelter facilities for responders’ families who are displaced is another. Measures such as these can be incorporated during the preparation phase so that family volunteers can activate them easily when they are required. (See Trainor & Barsky, 2011, pp. 21-23 for a discussion of other options in these areas.)
The proximity of responders' area of work responsibility to their families' location is another factor that could be examined. What percentage of officers families live and work in the same geographic area that the responder is likely to be required to serve? What are the roles of these officers in a catastrophic event? Is it possible to avoid this risk by ensuring key personnel will respond from outside the affected area?

In Victoria Police there is an emerging practice to “import” a senior management group to manage an emergency thereby relieving the local command team to focus on the event unencumbered by considerations of affected family, friends and colleagues. The Western Region of Victoria was subjected to extensive flooding in January 2011. Recognising the impact on local commanders and the need for those commanders to show leadership in support of staff and families, an Emergency Response Team from the regional headquarters was dispatched to manage the event. This intervention was supportive and collegiate with the local staff providing support and advice to the Regional team. It was found that this action avoided the risks of reduced performance by key personnel who may have fears for their own families or be providing support for staff with similar fears. It is said that fires can unite communities while floods can divide them. This is partly because floodwaters can be diverted, contained or released to protect some properties, often at the expense of others. Decisions to hold water back, build levies or sandbag critical areas; or release water from containment or demolish existing levies can have positive results for some and dire results for others. The independent commanders were not subject to the role conflict that may have been present in local commanders when it came time to decide which areas would be protected and which would be flooded. The success of the concept of regional Emergency Response Teams to be deployed in support of major events has resulted in steps to extend the model across all regions. (Nugent, 2012) Arrangements to bring in fire fighters from interstate and New Zealand, although motivated primarily by resource requirements, will have a similar effect as these officers do not experience the role conflict of local officers whose families may be in the fire zone.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, role conflict is a part of life for emergency responders and can lead to reduced performance levels during disasters, damaged personal relationships, a transfer of stress to partners and lower retention rates by agencies. While emergency response agencies are keeping pace with modern, flexible work practices there is a limit to which these can be adopted and there will be times, particularly in crises, where role conflict reaches intense levels. This knowledge creates an onus on agencies to take proactive measures to reduce role conflict, as the detrimental effects on capability are greatest during the times of greatest need.

Mass role abandonment is a risk that is not fully understood but there is evidence of a number of factors that contribute to its likelihood and role conflict is at the top of this list. There is clearly a need for more research in Australia relating to role conflict.
and this will occur as awareness of the issue grows. By taking steps to reduce role conflict it is likely that the residual risk of mass abandonment will also be reduced. Some of the measures that are available are low cost and others will increase overheads. In this regard it is worth noting that Australia’s volunteers, the group of emergency responders most vulnerable to role conflict, save state and territory governments 1.5 to 2 billion dollars each year (J. McLennan & Birch, 2005) and no-one can take the risk of mass abandonment during a catastrophe.
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