Developing the “effective detective” of the future

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Introduction

The world is changing and the nature of detective work is changing with it. For instance, the rapid rise of technology has arguably changed how crimes are committed and investigated. Globalisation may mean that crime is more likely to cross international and domestic borders. An increase in the demand by global and domestic communities for government agencies to be more transparent and accountable may require police services to adapt criminal investigation processes to meet this expectation (Mulgan, 2000). A failure to do so may erode public trust and confidence in police.

An additional challenge for any police service may be a greater value placed on the balance between work and leisure by prospective investigators. This may affect the ability of police services to successfully recruit detectives where the demands of work generally outweigh other facets of life (see Smith & Flanagan, 2000). Identifying the immediate and future challenges faced by detectives has important implications for the strategic planning of police services. The purpose of the present study was therefore to explore the views of experienced detectives in Australia and New Zealand about future challenges for ensuring that detectives remain effective.

Method

We interviewed thirty qualified detectives, from five different police services in Australia and New Zealand. Using a series of open-ended questions we asked participants (1) to identify the top three challenges for ensuring detectives remain effective in the future, (2) to describe those challenges and (3) propose ways for overcoming those challenges. To get a broad range of views we interviewed a mixture of detectives, detective sergeants and detectives senior sergeants from a variety of roles; including those working in specialist and general squads, detective training, and those in both metropolitan and rural areas. Table 1 further describes the participants.

| Time in police | 15 years (mean) |
| Time in detective branch | 10 years (mean) |
| Age | 40 years (mean) |
| Gender | 19 Male, 11 Female |

Table 1: Description of participants

Results

We systematically content analysed the interviews for emergent themes. The responses from detectives suggested that six different themes were of particular importance to them. As illustrated in Figure 1, these challenges include retention and recruitment, technology, training, accountability, resourcing and legislation.

1 For a full report on this study please contact the first author.
The loss of experienced detectives was seen to result in an overall decline in investigative effectiveness and costly for police due to the considerable amount of time and money invested in their training.

Detectives’ ideas about how to address Future Challenge 1

- Find the motivators for, and recruit from, police and community members with the appropriate attributes who have a genuine desire for detective work.
- Image management that sets realistic expectations for potential candidates, but also highlights what makes detective work attractive. Detectives working more closely with uniform officers and providing work experience in the detective branch to potential candidates to improve the attractiveness of the role and identify appropriate candidates from within the police.
- Provide remuneration that reflects the responsibilities of the role, including the level of accountability, workload, resources under their control and degree of scrutiny.
- Provide organisational recognition by senior management valuing and acknowledging the contribution detectives make.
- Incentives for experienced detectives to remain such as specialist promotion streams, not having tenure in specialist squads, or simple gestures such as receiving a gold badge after five years as a qualified detective.
- Provide organisational support by minimizing bureaucratic processes to reduce the de-motivation of detectives by allowing more time to be spent actually conducting investigations.

Future Challenge 1: Retention and recruitment

Most critically, detectives were concerned about the difficulty in retaining experienced detectives and finding suitable applicants to recruit into the detective role. These concerns were attributed to:

- High stress levels and a poor work-life balance due to the serious nature of the work, a high workload, growing amounts of paperwork, working over-time, and the requirement to be on call to respond to serious crime as it happens.
- A vicious cycle where an inability to fill detective vacancies means those who remain become even more over-worked, stressed and de-motivated, and hence more likely to leave. The resulting increased workload and the loss of experience, were perceived to reduce the attractiveness of the role to suitable applicants who could help fill these vacancies.
- A reduced number of experienced detectives available to mentor trainees and in doing so expedite trainee development.
- De-motivation due to a lack of both organisational recognition and remuneration.
- Limited career pathways and low manager vacancies within the detective branch restricting promotion opportunities.
- Experienced detectives leaving for alternative employment, by promotion into a uniform role or entering the private sector for less responsibility, better work-life balance and more pay.
- Younger generations expecting more of a work-life balance and no longer seeing the detective role as a lifetime career.

The benefits of the evidential trail created by technology advances meant that gathering this type of information was now seen as a routine investigative task. Detectives were, however, concerned that they were struggling to keep up with increasingly technologically savvy criminals for three main reasons. First, an inability to access the data. This occurred in several ways:

- Criminals using electronic systems that are encrypted or untraceable.
- A dependence on private industries, such as telecommunication companies and website providers, to store this electronic data. Many companies are reluctant to carry the costs of storing and providing data and, as profit making ventures, are concerned about losing customers to other service providers that give more anonymity.
- Bureaucratic processes causing delay e.g. time spent preparing search warrants and requests for information to different states or countries.
- Some detectives experiencing difficulty conducting investigations at their workplace due to a limited number of computer terminals available and police internal internet abuse prevention systems blocking employee access to relevant websites such as Facebook.

Secondly, the speed, scope and volume of technology-enabled offending, means detectives have the difficult and time consuming task of analysing large volumes of electronic information, adding to an already heavy workload. Thirdly, regular training, that is time and resource intensive, is needed to keep detectives up-to-date with technology advancements.
Detectives were also concerned that some detectives were relying on the abundance of electronic information when conducting investigations instead of face-to-face communication, causing this core skill to be neglected and lost.

**Detectives’ ideas about how to address Future Challenge 2**
- Research and development to keep up to date with the changes in technology.
- Share information on advances in technology internationally across jurisdictions with police agencies that perform highly in this area.
- Legislators keeping abreast of the changes so that legalisation enables access to emerging forms of technology generated information.
- Build partnerships with private sector providers to ensure technology generated evidence is captured and stored.
- Resourcing to match the influx in the need to collect and analyse technology generated information. This could include administrative support and taking advantage of other advances in technology assist, such as laptops in cars and handheld electronic smart devices.
- Specialist technology support.

**Future Challenge 3: Training**
The variety of concerns that detectives had about the future challenge of training were:
- Initial training was perceived as laborious and sometimes a hindrance to recruitment. There is a need to update to new methods of learning; to get back to basic investigative skills; and make the training more relevant, flexible and timely.
- The need for regular training so that detectives are kept up to speed with the rapid developments in legislation, technology and forensic science.
- Increased specialisation of the role resulting in an inability to do more generalist work.

**Detectives’ ideas about how to address Future Challenge 3**
- Incorporate performance evaluation into field training or through job realistic workplace assessment.
- Develop formal systems to mentor trainees and up-skill supervisors to perform the mentor role.
- Expose detectives to a broad range of roles to counter the effects of specialisation.
- Regular on-going professional development for qualified detectives including keeping up to date with developments in legislation, technology, and forensic science.

**Future Challenge 4: Accountability**
An additional challenge was accountability. Detectives noted that there was a growing need for police to be accountable, open and transparent in order to maintain public trust and confidence. They were concerned that this increased public scrutiny, and need to justify decision-making, added to the workload. This was especially the case because police agencies are responding to the public desire for accountability by increasing oversight through audit processes. Many participants noted that these processes may improve the consistency of service delivery and reduce corruption, but produced the following concerns:
- Less time was spent conducting investigations due to the burden of bureaucratic processes, a problem exacerbated by a reduction of support staff available to assist with these processes (e.g. typists, data entry operators).
- Frustration about the additional administrative workload, which was often accompanied by a duplication of effort, and was another factor contributing to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining detectives.
- Detectives feeling they were being micro-managed to avoid the risk of adverse public scrutiny, which at times resulted in investigative decisions being driven by management rather than detectives.
- Increased transparency resulting in the public having a heightened awareness about police investigative methods, which may facilitate crime.

**Detectives’ Ideas about how to address Future Challenge 4**
- Find a balance between risk mitigation, preventing corruption and efficiency.
- Adapt to society expectations and ensure transparency and accountability from the beginning rather than waiting until an investigation is questioned.
- Managers trusting detectives to do a professional job and support them to gather the information needed efficiently e.g. wait for detectives to complete initial investigative actions before expecting a full briefing.
- Employ data entry support staff, who are appropriately skilled and are a cost effective alternative to detectives inputting data.
- Consult with detectives when audit systems are under development to ensure they are driven by end-users, are intuitive to operate and efficient.
- Reduce duplication of effort by using technology to amalgamate police systems.

**Future Challenge 5: Resourcing**
Detectives also perceived resourcing as a future challenge. This included a need for more detectives and administrative support to meet the increase of information generated by technology and data entry required for accountability measures. Resourcing investigations for covert methods and forensic evidence scientific analysis was also cited as important.

**Detectives’ ideas about how to address Future Challenge 5**
- More administrative support.
- An all of policing approach where other police services such as forensic and electronic evidence support are available 24/7.

**Future Challenge 6: Legislation**
Another challenge cited by detectives was for legislation to keep up to date with contemporary policing needs and thereby enable detectives to do their job effectively.

**Detectives’ ideas about how to address Future Challenge 6**
- Legal reform that keeps up to date with crimes trends, allows access to information generated from different sources of technology, gets a balance between human rights measures and the ability to investigate, and improves the court process for victims.
Conclusions

Detectives need to do more than keep pace with a rapidly changing world, they need to be ahead of changes. In this study we examined the challenges for ensuring detectives remain effective in the future. The findings indicate there a variety of challenges that are consistently faced by different police services. Recruiting detectives and retaining experience was considered the biggest challenge. Responding to rapid changes in technology and increased public expectations of accountability were also seen as important. Although not simply resolved, many of the challenges identified are under the control of the police themselves, whilst others require a more proactive and collaborative approach (e.g., legislation and accountability). Whatever the case, finding innovative ways to address these challenges will help ensure that those in who hold the complex and demanding role of detective are supported to investigate serious crime effectively.

Recommended reading


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