

# EMERGENCY DISPATCHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINING EXPERIENCES

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite long-standing calls for consistent training practices, very little is known about the methods used in emergency dispatcher training, their relative efficacy, or the topics or competencies addressed.

A previous study helped provide a baseline perspective on what training methods are being used and which are considered most successful, specifically in “in-house” training conducted at emergency communication centers. However, the large majority of respondents to that survey were communication center managers and trainers, not emergency dispatchers themselves. The aim of this study was to identify emergency dispatchers’ own perspectives, and compare those with the previous study’s findings.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a non-randomized, non-controlled, prospective cohort study. An online electronic survey, created using the Survey Monkey™ software (Survey Monkey, Palo Alto, CA, USA, ©1999-2014) was used for data collection.

Targeted survey participants were line personnel at International Academies of Emergency Dispatch (IAED) Accredited Centers of Excellence (ACEs). Specifically, the survey targeted certified Emergency Medical Dispatchers (EMDs), Emergency Fire Dispatchers (EFDs), and Emergency Police Dispatchers (EPDs). The survey solicited information about what training methods had been most successful, what training topics respondents believed were most important, and what training preferences they had.

Qualitative data were summarized, and STATA for Windows® software was used for quantitative data analysis—specifically descriptive statistics including frequencies of common answers. In addition, open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic coding to identify common categories that emerged from the responses.

## RESULTS: COMPARISON OF EMERGENCY DISPATCHER AND SUPERVISOR RESPONSES

A total of 127 EMDs, EFDs, EPDs, and personnel with multiple certifications completed the survey. All emergency dispatchers showed a strong preference for “real-world” training, including on-the-job coaching, “hands-on” or role-play activities, training provided by external or “out-of-house” instructors, and training about field operations (Table 1). In terms of protocol-specific training, emergency dispatchers showed nearly identical preferences to their trainers and supervisors, prioritizing “obtaining the location of the emergency” and “providing DLS instructions” (Table 2).

Measure	CCM/Supervisors <sup>5</sup>		Dispatchers/Calltakers	
	Top categories/themes	n (%)	Top categories/themes	n (%)
Preferred training method	Direct instruction	37 (37.0)	On-the-job coaching	20 (29.4)**
	On-the-job coaching	24 (24.0)	CBT (e-learning)	13 (19.1) **
	CBT (e-learning)	17 (17.0)	Practice scenarios	13 (19.1) **
	Practice scenarios	16 (16.0)	Direct instruction	12 (17.7) **
	Group discussion	6 (6.0)	Group discussion	10 (14.7) **
Successful experience	Relevant, targeted training topics	24 (14.6)	Hands-on/roll-play*	17 (21.8)§
	Training by outside expert	16 (9.8)	External/out-of-house	8 (10.3) §
	Protocol scenario practice	11 (6.7)	Listening to real calls	4 (5.1) §
	Consistent, 1-on-1, monitoring and feedback	8 (4.9)	Learning as a group	4 (5.1) §
Unsuccessful experience	Bad hire/not a good job fit	15 (12.2)	Trainee “pushed through”	10 (12.8) §
	Dispatchers didn’t transfer learning to their job	14 (11.4)	Lack of hands-on/“real-world” experiences	10 (12.8) §
	Ineffective instructor	12 (9.8)	Not enough training	10 (12.8) §
	Inadequate time	12 (9.8)	Did not apply to their job/irrelevant	9 (11.5) §
Training participation motivating factors	Relevance of training topic to job	28 (24.3)	Engaging and Interactive Learning	13 (17.6) ¥
	Communications Center-paid training	25 (21.7)	Incentives (e.g., pay, prizes)	12 (16.2) ¥
	Engaging, interactive training	17 (14.8)	Seeing progress, receiving feedback	12 (16.2) ¥
Top 3 most important non-protocol related training topics	Customer Service	41 (41.0)	Customer Service	30 (42.9)**
	Dispatch software	21 (21.0)	Field Operations	20 (28.6)**
	Caller management	18 (18.0)	Interpersonal Communication Skills	14 (20.0)**

CCM: Communications Center Managers. CTO: Communications Training Officer. CBT: Computer-based training  
 \* “Real-world” experiences included for example ride-alongs and working directly with response crews  
 \*\* Out of 70 responses    ¥ Out of 74 responses    § Out of 78 responses

**Table 1:** Preferences on Training Methods, Successful/Unsuccessful Experiences, and Non-Protocol Topics

Preferred training topic	Agency’s need: n (%)					
	CCM/Supervisors <sup>5</sup>			Dispatchers/Calltakers		
	N*	Overall	High	N*	Overall	High
Obtaining Location of Emergency	106	73 (69.0)	63 (59.4)	60	42 (57.5)	38 (52.1)
Providing DLS Instructions	102	89 (87.3)	58 (56.9)	64	53 (72.6)	37 (50.7)
Chief Complaint Selection	94	76 (81.0)	47 (50.0)	64	51 (69.9)	31 (42.5)
Key Questioning	89	70 (78.7)	41 (46.1)	61	47 (64.4)	28 (38.4)
Completing Case Entry	94	67 (71.3)	41 (43.6)	60	46 (63.0)	25 (34.2)
Using Diagnostic Tools	87	77 (88.5)	32 (36.8)	48	37 (50.7)	20 (27.4)
Determinant Code Selection	86	51 (59.3)	30 (34.9)	56	37 (50.7)	18 (24.7)

\*Excludes neutral ratings  
 DLS: Dispatch Life Support  
 Bold: percent of group who considered that topic of “high” importance

**Table 2:** Dispatcher-preferred protocol-related training topics

## DISCUSSION

This study found substantial agreement between emergency dispatchers and their trainers/supervisors regarding the most important or relevant topics for training. However, there was far less agreement on the most effective or desired methods of training and the causes of successful or unsuccessful training experiences.

Specifically, emergency dispatchers were far more interested in “real-world” training, roleplay opportunities, and training on field operations; they seemed to want to develop a broader range of skills and better understand their place in the system. Supervisors were more focused on training job-specific skills such as how to use the dispatch software.

Also, supervisors and trainers tended to see individuals as the drivers or causes of unsuccessful training outcomes (for example, suggesting that unsuccessful training was the result of a “bad hire” or someone not “transferring their learning” well), whereas emergency dispatchers saw system issues (such as pushing a learner through too quickly because of the need to “fill a seat”) as the driving force.

## CONCLUSION

Training perceived by the learner as more relevant and aligned with their needs can reduce turnover and job dissatisfaction. A better understanding of learners’ training needs is thus a critical part of developing effective and impactful training in the communication center.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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Also, please see the full report in issue 6.2 of the *Annals of Emergency Dispatch & Response*, coming out in July/August, 2018.