



THE NEED FOR FIRE DEPARTMENT INFORMATION OFFICERS

Although municipalities and fire departments are inundated with data from varied sources, many departments lack the ability to capture and analyze the data in a meaningful and useful way. Departments also struggle to identify, recruit and train personnel with the skills necessary to translate their data into beneficial information. Even fewer departments have personnel possessing the skills to manage increasingly complex data technology and the ability to integrate disparate external and internal data into decision-making formats. Many fire service leaders charged with data analysis try to emulate known practices of other departments, but without knowing the basic analytical competencies, they struggle. The endpoint is clear but the path to get there needs guidance that an industry standard will provide.

It is time to identify the skill sets for fire department information officer, often known as chief information officer (CIO) and subordinate information officer(s) similar to that in other industries. According to Graeme Philipson, the co-founder of MIS magazine, American industry has had chief information officers since the late 1980's. By law, the Congress established the requirement for a chief information officer in all government agencies through the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996. At the most recent Metropolitan Fire Chiefs' Conference, 75% of the presentations were about data, data analysis, data presentation and data-based decision making. Fire chiefs and fire departments have access to multiple sources of public and private data that can benefit the department and the community. Until or unless there are people with the skills and resources to effectively collect and use this data to produce information in timely and beneficial ways, the data are an incorrectly or under used resource in operational and administrative decision making.

One of the challenges faced by the fire service is the fact that for the most part, the fire service is single-point entry for uniformed personnel. All members, from the firefighter to the chief of department, begin their careers as firefighters, and most officer and specialized skills positions are selected from personnel within the organization. Appropriately, there are standards that identify the skills necessary for these specialized positions in the fire department - from firefighter, to officer, to inspector, to investigator. In some cases, these are non-uniformed positions.

STANDARD FOR FIRE DEPARTMENT INFORMATION OFFICER

The time has come for the fire and emergency services to recognize the importance of data and data analytics and to identify the career path and the necessary skills to manage them. The NFPA has appropriately established a technical committee for such a standard. Leaders must now identify the related positions, skillsets and competency levels necessary to make a data analyst/chief information officer standard a reality. The established NFPA technical committee should include experts in data science industry, commerce, government and the fire service.

As noted, data driven decision making is imperative in today's fire service. Given the potential impact and the need for quality data to inform these decisions, the United States Fire Administration along with the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs support the established NFPA Technical Committee to develop a series of professional qualifications / competencies for Fire Department Information Officer.