

AFL VICTORIA COMMUNITY UMPIRING RECRUITMENT & RETENTION GUIDE



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Introduction

Too often, umpires drift in and out of community umpiring groups. They display a sense of coachability and promise and – before we know it – they've moved on and no-one has kept in contact with them nor has a contact number to reach out to them to enquire about their continued involvement.

Sound familiar?

This guide is designed to prevent these situations occurring and is also geared towards community umpiring groups being proactive with their recruitment initiatives as well as being seriously committed to their retention strategies.

The roles of the umpiring groups' Head Coach and supportive discipline coaches are of paramount importance to create and maintain a welcoming environment – one that entuses camaraderie and one that members are happy to frequent.

An environment that is inclusive that provides opportunities for umpires no matter what their gender, age, ethnicity or background is essential. Furthermore, the variety of delivery methods in coaching sessions that appeals to all forms of learners is equally important to foster a harmonious culture that promotes learning through engagement and stimulation.

This Community Umpiring Recruitment and Retention Guide is a twelve-month resource that contains up-to-date strategies to recruit and retain umpires of all ages.

Thankfully, the recruitment of new members is reflective of the many local strategies community umpiring groups implement and with many current umpires speaking admirably of their active involvement in our great game. Word of mouth is often one of the best forms of advertising and is no different within the umpiring landscape.

It is, though, the retention of these new, inexperienced members that should be addressed more directly – providing clear and obvious guidance to the inexperienced so they develop the confidence to progress with their umpiring learning so much from the supportive and welcoming environment that surrounds them at weekly training sessions.

With the enormous growth of social media within the last ten years, you will see this referred to in this document in many different forms as people now have 24/7 access to their world – a part of which is their significant role they have within the umpiring fraternity.

Russell O'Toole
AFL Victoria



The Environment

Training

Providing umpires with variety within their training program can add to the fun and enjoyment for all umpires. This is especially important for experienced umpires who have completed several seasons and it is also essential for the new, less-experienced members umpiring groups recruit.

Variety in training could include activities including

- Individual skills
- Games
- Team work skills
- Cross sports
- Interactive coaching sessions
- Online coaching sites (Schoology, Moodle etc.)
- Changing venue (Local swim centre/gym/beach/parklands) - particularly in pre-season

Your training environment should cater for the diversity of the umpire group and the specific needs of the umpires, always welcoming and understanding of different levels of umpires.

Your umpiring group should have in place effective policies and standards in regards to weather (AFL Victoria Extreme Weather Policy) that is umpire-friendly.

The focus on incorporating the running aspects of umpiring into skills sessions will give greater impact on your retention of umpires.

The use of guest speakers can provide a change of voice whilst still providing umpiring groups with the opportunity of highlighting key focus coaching points.



A local physiotherapist addresses Ballarat Football Umpires Association members outlining the importance of stretching, hydration and rehydration.



Flexibility

At times, umpires may need your understanding and consideration in relation to their attendance at training. While attendance at training ensures umpires can receive the coaching support and enjoy the social benefits of mixing with the group, there may be times when it is too difficult to attend.

Examples of this are

- School Exams
- School holidays
- School / Work commitments
- Family
- Play football, training clashes
- Other sporting commitments

The establishment of an online coaching resources could help with retention of umpires and make them feel more connected to the umpiring group.

Match-Day

The match-day environment can be challenging at times and some things are beyond our control. Some ways we can be effective so that the match-day environment can be a positive experience for all umpires and assist in the retention of umpires is to

- list any concerning issues on the Umpires' Match Report
- respect each other's space (Male/Female/Culture)
- be Interactive and friendly with fellow umpires, clubs and spectators
- display zero tolerance to abuse and poor behaviour and report breaches in accordance with the Laws of Australian Football and Regional By-Laws.
- welcome and support new umpires and acknowledge milestones
- interact with players and coaches after game – if and where appropriate
- attend umpiring group activities after-match or organised social events

Culture

By promoting a welcoming, social, progressive and supportive environment within your umpiring group, umpires will feel accepted into the group. Understanding today's pressures that people are experiencing with the changing face of industry and social networks will give your umpiring group a greater chance of retaining umpires for a greater period.

Their first contact with umpiring will be the most important factor of their experience and it is these experiences that will decide if they remain actively involved within an umpiring group setting. Coaching should be the most important characteristic of an umpiring group that can have a significant influence on the retention of the individual with the provision of support, education, guidance and skill-development.



Recruitment

Personal Contact with Umpires

- Internally recruiting umpires, through family and friends. Incentive programs can be introduced as an enticement for umpire recruitment.
- Working with Under 16 football clubs, appointing players as boundary umpires. These footballers have great knowledge of the game and many are not ready to go to Under 18 and Reserve level and take up umpiring to keep involved in football.
- Weekly contact via email, social media, Team App in season.
- Out of season, maintaining contact fortnightly/monthly during October November.
- Running groups commence training December/January.
- Pre-season training late January/early February.
- Quality coaching, professional fitness advisor's availability.
- Social environment, activities and functions to develop a vibrant social atmosphere outside of training and match-day.

Introduction, Family and Orientation Session for New Umpires

- New Members' Nights can be conducted where new members can be introduced to the benefits of umpiring and the administrative requirements of the umpiring group – including the completion of any membership forms (to include medical details, requirements for Under 18's), the provision of any Information Booklet, and clear directions on how to formally register on both Footyweb and Schedula.
- Introduction to Coaching Staff, Appointments Officers, Fitness Advisor, Board Members and Umpires. Advise services available including Chaplin, trainer and medical.
- Discuss training requirements and expectations.
- Advise how match-day appointments and succession to senior football can be achieved.
- Issue training uniform, match-day uniform on-field and off-field, AFL Laws of the Game and any associated Handbooks, whistle, flags, score-cards, red and yellow cards – as needed.
- Briefly outline obligations to sponsors and Leagues.
- Discussion to include how match-day payments are processed.

First Year Umpires / Umpire Mentor System

- Attempt to appoint a Mentor for all first-year umpires – no matter what their age!
- Outline Accreditation requirements for first year umpires. Encourage new members to complete Level 1 Accreditation online component by providing them with the applicable web-link.
- Discuss observations and requirements with regards to appointments.
- For new members, younger than 18 years of age, an "Information Night for parents of new members" could also be considered.



End of Season

- Ensure all first-year umpires are recognised publicly and congratulated at end-of-season functions with the provision of certificates, letters of congratulations, trophies, medallions or Accreditation certificates
- Consider conducting end-of-season review meetings with first-year umpires to discuss what strategies are important for their continued development and involvement with the group in future seasons.
- Write personal letters to each first-year umpire during the off-season congratulating them on their achievements and outlining key pre-season training programs / social events.

Retention

AFL Umpire Mentor Program

The AFL Umpire Mentor Program is an education and developmental program that aims to use applicably trained people to assist new and inexperienced umpires during their early umpiring development.



Some umpiring groups offer / provide the new inexperienced umpires with a distinguished umpiring shirt to identify that this umpire is still learning and for coaches, players and spectators to be more understanding and tolerant.

Umpiring groups are encouraged to ensure that all new umpires are provided with the opportunity to participate in this program by outlining the benefits of it as a part of their development pathway.

Ensure a member of the Senior Coaching Panel allocates a senior umpire to mentor new members within their chosen discipline. By offering

experienced umpires these opportunities, it may prolong their interests and involvement, especially if they are considering retiring from their on-field role.

Umpiring groups know that many first-year umpires remain involved for only a few weeks or their first season. It would be an advantage to gauge how new umpires are coping before they give thought to discontinuing their active umpiring. The Basic Umpiring Course and AFL Umpire Mentor Program are useful tools aimed at encouragement and supporting new and inexperienced umpires. It is important that new umpires are made aware of these programs and are provided access to them.



First Year Umpires' Review

A strong recommendation to maintain the interest of first-year members is to conduct a review of the start to the season in a semi-formal sense. This could be conducted by Junior Umpires' Development Coaching staff or Senior Coaches to ascertain how the new members have settled into the umpiring environment and what the group could do to ease their transition. Topics that could be tabled for discussion may include: -

- Observations and feedback
- Do they have all necessary gear?
- Do they have association Handbook/regulations and Law book?
- Do they understand the career path for umpires?
- Do they understand the payment structure?
- Have any other problems arisen?
- Have they experienced any on-field issues?
- How is their Mentor assisting their development as a community umpire?

This session may be conducted in lieu of training one night and should be well publicised to ensure a maximum attendance.

The information gathered from this session could be invaluable in retention of recruits in their first year who sometimes come and go after a brief stay.

It is always an advantage to gauge and review how new umpires are coping with their role and their involvement within the group.

A member of the coaching staff, along with the appropriate umpire mentors, should conduct a review process of the individual umpires' performances.

It is imperative that we do our utmost to retain and strengthen our umpiring fraternity.

Social Media

As is allegedly reported that 16 – 24 year olds spend an average of 7.5 hours each day engaged with their digital device, the importance of social media has never been as prevalent and important with the way communication may occur with your members.

In its first year, the **umpireAFL** social media campaign has provided outstanding results in terms of recruitment – see image below.

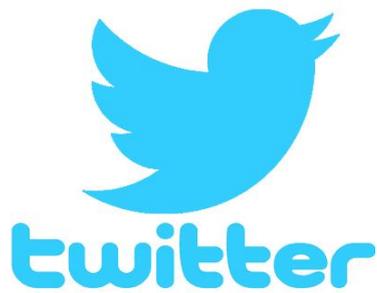
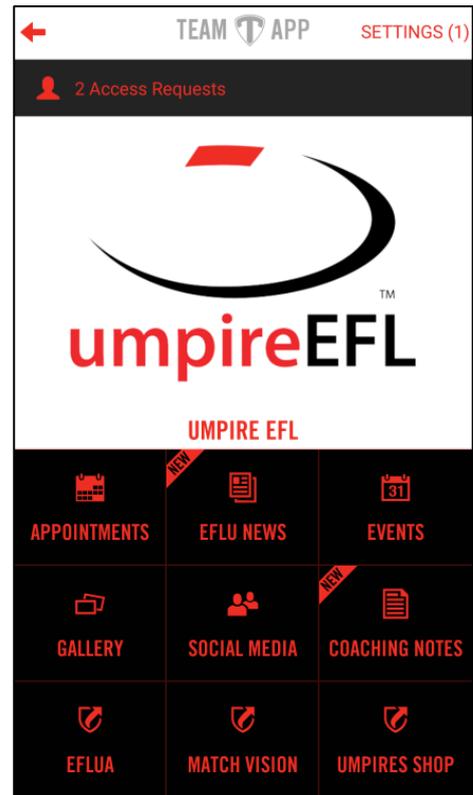


Closed Facebook sites are an excellent way to engage your members and spread the word about training nights, special events, social events and key expectations of all members.

Below are three examples of how community umpiring groups engage with their members via Facebook.



Team App is another applicable platform that umpiring groups use to engage with their members in a safe and secure environment.



Social Functions

Camaraderie

Umpires display a strong bond when they are on the field officiating but ensuring members are maintaining a strong relationship off the field is key to a successful umpiring group.

Conducting a vibrant and varied social calendar plays an important role and allows these friendships to be created and developed.

First year Umpires' function

A great deal of effort is devoted to recruiting and developing new umpires.

As much as the A-grade Grand Final umpire's appointment is important, much time and investment is lost if a first-year umpire does not return for a second or third year.

To encourage their return, umpiring groups are encouraged to conduct applicable social functions for the first-year umpires and their parents and/or partners to demonstrate an appreciation of their introduction to the umpiring landscape.

League executive members are also invited to the function to acknowledge the efforts of the first-year umpires. It is important that Leagues express their gratitude, as throughout the season, the football public – at times – can be unforgiving and unsupportive of these umpires.

It is also important that parents and/or partners of first year umpires get an opportunity to see how appreciative the football fraternity is of new umpires. This strategy is aimed at the first-year umpires receiving further encouragement from their parents and/or partners to continue their involvement.

You may wish to present umpires with their Basic Umpiring Course certificates or National Umpiring Accreditation Scheme (NUAS) level Development Umpire Accreditation certificates. Consider contacting your State Umpiring Development Manager and organising the attendance of State League or AFL Umpires.

These functions may be held early to mid-season and then, again, towards the end of the season or, just prior to the finals.

It would be beneficial for all Umpiring Association Board / Executive members to attend this function so that the entire umpiring group may collaboratively demonstrate support for the new, first-year members.



Some suggested recommendations regarding applicable social events to attract first-year umpires are: -

Season Launch

A Season Launch for all umpiring groups would be a useless resource to welcome and introduce new umpires but to also officially welcome back all umpires from the previous season.

Family Friendly

Umpiring Groups need to ensure that when organising social events that the event is family/all age friendly as umpires range from 12-70 years of age. It will also give the opportunity to involve parents and partners of current umpires and could even boost numbers of members.

Calendar

Associations should try to arrange some sort of function/event every 6-8 weeks. These events need to be made aware to the members via a Social Event Calendar to ensure plenty of notice for members to accept invitations to these events.

Trivia Night

Although a tried and true social event, the Trivia Night provides members the opportunity to engage with other members in a relaxed and semi-competitive environment where individual talents may be highlighted. Care should be taken with the selection of the host, the number of categories and the number of people who make up a ‘team’.

Guest speakers

Often, mid-season, when the group has been training hard for six or seven months, a special night that includes a key note speaker – from within the umpiring fraternity or not – may provide added inspiration and stimulation for the first-year umpires to re-focus. This night may even be used to freshen the legs when the grounds are heavy and allow maximal recovery from the previous weekend’s game.

Presentation Night

Umpiring groups hold an annual Presentation Nights with their members to hand out awards, congratulate each other and celebrate the season just completed. Urging new, first-year members to attend this night that often includes guest speakers, can really make an umpire feel socially included within the group.

Off-Season Activities

Associations should try to keep members in contact during the football off season. Whether these be football related or not. Some examples below;

- Participating in AFL 9’s
- Indoor Cricket or Netball
- Mini-Golf
- Park Run
- Beach activities
- Golf day



This gives the members the opportunity to remain involved with the group 12 months of the year.



Feedback, Coaching

Umpire Coaching

Coaching sessions can be conducted for individual umpires, umpiring teams, discipline groups or the whole umpiring group. Coaching should be conducted both indoors and outdoors depending on how the coach would like to explain the scenario and what the outcome needs to be for the umpire. Individual difference and learning styles can be identified to maximise the learning experience for all first-year umpires.

Outdoor skills sessions will provide the umpires the opportunity to practise umpiring skills relevant to their applicable umpiring discipline. This will provide game-sense simulation opportunities to allow the umpire to develop skills for match day implementation. Often these skill drills can engage multiple umpiring disciplines to foster engagement and communication with members of other umpiring disciplines.

Umpire Coaches should aim to conduct regular indoor-coaching sessions with the umpiring group. These sessions should be well prepared and informative for the audience. Indoor coaching should be interactive with the coach using a variety of techniques, which may include;

- PowerPoint presentation to lead discussion
- Video examples for discussion
- Workshop scenarios in small groups then present back
- Coach led discussions
- Umpires from the group to present on key topics
- Handout notes for discussion
- Q&A session on a topic with everyone included in the discussion

Match-Day Feedback

It is vitally important that umpires are provided with feedback regularly during the season. This will provide the umpire with direction and support to improve their performance and make the most of their involvement in umpiring. Umpires who receive very little feedback are likely to feel neglected and may affect the likelihood of them returning the following year.

Feedback to the umpire can take several methods, some formats you may consider are;

- Individual and team verbal feedback during match
- Individual written feedback following the match
- Edited clips of vision to be shown where discussion may follow identifying areas performed well as well as how they can improve
- Post-match feedback vision for individual and team feedback
- Have the umpire complete a self-evaluation of their performance and discuss with their coach following the game
- 360° team review, where the umpiring team on the day will discuss events from the match including areas that were handled well and areas where improvement may be needed

There are a variety of apps for tablets and mobile phones that can assist with providing feedback.



Coaching Squads

Certain umpiring groups may consider breaking their group into smaller groups to provide specific coaching for those groups. The specific groups could be Past Players, 1st and 2nd Year Umpires, High Performance Umpires or Older/Experienced Umpires. These groups may vary depending on the demographic of the individual group. Each group would then receive specific coaching relevant to their needs.

The coach should also seek further opportunities for identified umpires to join possible Academies / Rookie Squads within their state that are geared towards the further development of these umpires who display the capacity and potential to be developed at a quicker than anticipated rate.

Umpire Reviews

The Umpire Coach should sit down with individual umpires and discuss their performance over the past season. The identification of the areas that individual umpires have been performing well should be highlighted and discussions could also include strategies on how to improve areas requiring attention. Ideally this process would also be undertaken at a mid-point in the season. These sessions do not need to be lengthy discussions, rather just an identification of strengths and some areas where improvement could benefit the individual.

The discussion from the end of season review can be used in the pre-season by the coach to assist in developing an improvement plan for the umpire to develop in the areas that were previously identified.

Questionnaires / Surveys

It is good practice to survey the umpiring group on all areas of the umpiring operations including coaching sessions, feedback, training methods, venues, social activities, uniform and umpire payments. This feedback will assist in identifying areas where the umpiring group can improve the umpiring environment to assist in umpires returning the following year.

The survey should be constructive in its style and the umpires should be made to feel that their opinion is important in assisting the umpiring group in the future.



Recognition

Once the season has finished it is important that you recognise the contribution of umpires across your group – particularly, the first-year umpires. This could be through a final training night thank you BBQ or a Presentation Night to recognise achievement by the umpires in the season that has just concluded. State Umpiring Departments provide recognition certificates for this recognition that could also include personalised letters & trophies to assist you with this recognition.

Individual or group email communication, combined with social-media and website communication thanking umpires for their involvement at the end of the season is important to show the umpiring group’s collective appreciation. Digital technology allows umpiring groups the opportunity to provide regular communication during the off-season period to keep umpires engaged and up-to-date with any activities that may occur and to invite them to training sessions.

