

BY MARCIA ISBELL, KATIE MCCAIN,
DARLA MEADORS, ARLENE POST,
AND SUE SCHNEIDER

Recruit and retain great employees: Proven approaches you can implement now to address the workforce gap

IN THE FACE OF AN EVER-WIDENING
WORKFORCE GAP, THESE SOLUTIONS
TO WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY CAN
BE IMPLEMENTED NOW AND WITH
MINIMAL FINANCIAL INVESTMENT.

The labor shortage is here. With increasing regularity, utilities are sharing stories about growing vacancy rates and difficulty with—or even complete failure at—filling those vacancies. This is especially true for technically skilled positions such as engineers and plant operators.

The widening gap between open positions and appropriately skilled, available candidates to fill them is a reality. Maintaining sufficient staff to get work done is more and more challenging, and utilities are scrambling to meet the daily workload through use of overtime, contract employees, consultants, and returning retirees. These solutions are by no means sustainable.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION ARE AVAILABLE NOW

Researchers, professional organizations, and academic institutions are developing long-term, systemic, industrywide solutions. In the meantime, innovative, contemporary utilities across the United States are “home-growing” workable and actionable strategies for utilities to bridge the very real and widening workforce gap. Many of the utility professionals creating these initiatives belong to AWWA’s Workforce Strategies Committee. They seek to share their experiences, successes, and lessons learned through new approaches to employee recruitment and retention.

Following are some examples of strategies implemented by utilities, public sector agencies, and other industries that have resulted in recruitment and retention of utility workers.

Grow your own engineers. Pierce County, Washington, is working to meet rising demand for engineers by recruiting candidates from a pool of in-house engineering technicians who are interested in completing their engineering education. Participating employees sign a specific time commitment to remain employed with the county. The county then provides reimbursement for the employees’ tuition and for engineer-in-training and professional engineering exams.

Use multidimensional group interviews. Great employees can no longer be assessed solely on their technical skills. Recognizing this, Spartanburg (S.C.) Water began conducting group interviews to hire key personnel for operational, engineering, and management positions two years ago. The interview panel comprises a

range of professions and perspectives, including the hiring manager, individuals who will be interacting with the hired candidate, and sometimes even potential peers of the candidate. Employers seeking to emphasize teamwork will find this interview format a great advantage. When a fellow team member is involved in the interview process, he or she has a real stake in the candidate he or she has recommended to the company. This approach also helps to integrate employees, because there are a number of key individuals within the organization who are already familiar with and vested in the employee.

The group interview process saves time for both the candidate and the company. Rather than the candidate returning for follow-up interviews, he or she has the opportunity to meet key people during the first meeting. In turn, the group accomplishes a thorough interview and become acquainted with the candidate in several hours. The hiring manager also has the advantage of hearing

the perspectives of the key people who will be working with the successful candidate. That information is invaluable in ensuring that Spartanburg Water has hired an employee who is qualified, capable, and will fit its culture.

Seek trainable workers. In a time of dwindling human resources to fill positions, displaced workers with skills similar to those needed can be an alternative source of personnel. Utilities can monitor local plant closings through websites such as DemolitionX.com. When a local business is downsizing or closing, one possibility is to conduct a job fair at its location to immediately recruit potential employees, then conduct interviews and skill assessments to place those who are a good match. Former military personnel can also be a good source of candidates.

Poach-proof your staff. It is common practice in large urban areas for utilities to recruit from surrounding utilities (poaching). To avoid loss of critical employees, make sure your organization is a place people want to stay:

Additional Resources

AWWA is developing a number of resources to help members with workforce sustainability.

LEARN FROM YOUR PEERS

Learn what your peers are doing to span the gap. Workforce solutions are being posted on AWWA's website. To find out what they're up to click here. Use this information to spur your own ideas. To share your utility's initiatives, e-mail Nancy Sullivan at nsullivan@awwa.org.

CONSIDER A WORKSHOP

AWWA also offers workshops, such as the "Building A Workforce Planning Process," which was a workshop targeted to human resource and operations managers. Taught by Artis Dawson, retired human resource manager from East Bay Municipal Utility District and Terry Brueck, president and CEO of EMA Inc., this two-day seminar provided participants with education on critical elements of workforce planning. It also provided opportunities to jump-start planning for participating organizations.

REVIEW THE RESEARCH

An Awwa Research Foundation project conducted by EMA Inc. and titled "Successful Recruiting, Training and Retaining Operators and Engineers to Meet Future Challenges" was designed to identify successful strategies currently in use by utilities or other industries to meet workforce needs. The results of this research will be presented as industrywide and utility-specific strategies for recruiting and retaining engineers and operators. The strategies represent three targets for action:

- Building positive public awareness of the utility industry and a specific utility.
- Supporting policies and regulations needed to build a sustainable workforce, either at the legislative level or specific to a utility or city.
- Developing strategies to recruit, develop, and retain workers—some specific to an individual organization practice and others targeted to the industry.

- Assess your culture.
- Create an environment that is attractive to younger workers and that promotes innovative and creative thinking.
- Offer ongoing training opportunities to employees.
- Provide challenging and varied work assignments.

Taking these steps will keep employees engaged and committed

to your organization's success and make it more resistant to poaching.

Apply creativity for knowledge retention. WKRP is not just the famous sitcom radio station. It is also the Greater Cincinnati Water Works' (GCWW) Workforce Knowledge Retention Planning (WKRP) Team. Cincinnati (Ohio) formed a diverse team to

assess the utility's current staffing strategies, achieving greater efficiency and a broader range of perspectives. The team's focus is to identify critical gaps in the strategy and develop tools to assist supervisors and managers with preparing for changes in the workforce.

For GCWW, this included developing an easy-to-use electronic standard operating procedure (SOP) template, a library, and training courses. These resources provide valuable support for new employees or employees moving into different positions. As they often are in any business, GCWW's SOPs were scattered throughout the organization. To avoid bogging down the project and delaying the launch of the information library, the existing SOPs were attached in their current form to the new template.

Look for new partners and co-op possibilities. The WKRP team at GCWW is also developing a formal co-op program complete with written guidelines to help managers recruit and retain workers.

WKRP is collaborating with unions and civil service representatives to change the classification specification for entry-level plant operators to include qualifications that better match the skills and abilities needed to do the job and get state licenses. The team is finding new ways to remove barriers to hiring operators from within the organization and to open up the candidate pool. Examples include providing evening classes to assist those preparing for the certification exams and conducting open houses to educate employees and their friends and families about plant operator opportunities.

Use Generation X workers to engage and recruit peers. The city of Tempe (Ariz.) has its young professionals talk with

others in their age range when they recruit at job fairs and at other events on local campuses and in the community. These young employees communicate in a manner that resonates with their peers, telling them about the culture and rewards of public

Focus on performance-based promotions. The old "first in time, first in right" paradigm for promotions not only does not work, it discourages and disenfranchises excellent, driven workers. Generation-X employees expect opportunities to advance that are based

that promotes based only on tenure. This is especially true when under-qualified or underperforming workers move up on the basis of their length of time on a job.

Design career paths for all positions. Traditionally, utilities have focused on providing career paths for technical and professional employees. In today's world and for today's workforce, all employees desire opportunities for advancement, some in their own skill area, others across skill areas. Create a technical career path for individuals whose strengths are in a particular area such as work planning and scheduling, rather than in managing people. The city of Tampa (Fla.) Wastewater Division is currently exploring a process that provides opportunities for growth, development, and financial reward for technical excellence, without requiring

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sector work. Younger generations are interested in leaving the environment in a condition that is as good as or better than it is today. Showing prospective employees how working in the water industry can achieve that goal is one way to attract them and allow them to be a part of that effort.

Develop an onboarding program. When new employees start working in an organization, it's critical to make them feel wanted and to quickly integrate them into the team—a process called onboarding. Companies should strive to onboard employees in a way that makes them value the organization, understand their role in it, be aware of available resources, and want to stay. Design an orientation and onboarding process that integrates new hires quickly. Provide mentors and hosts to guide them through learning the ins and outs of your organization and help them understand the requirements of their new job over time. Attention to effective and sustained onboarding is especially critical for new college graduates who are making a shift from an academic setting to a workplace with new expectations.

on fair, well-communicated, and performance-based policies and won't stay long at an organization

The Workforce Strategies Committee

The mission of AWWA's Workforce Strategies Committee is:

To enhance the visibility and understanding of workforce strategies as a critical element of management; to identify world-class strategies for proactive and effective workforce development; and to build resources and capabilities within the water profession that will enable leaders, managers, and organizations to successfully attract, recruit, train, and retain talented and skilled people who will sustain and enhance the water industry and its crucial services to the public.

Volunteer members are committed to and active in realizing this mission, providing workshops and technical sessions at ACE and the Utility Management Conference; organizing section conferences and workshop keynotes and sessions; and writing timely and useful articles for JOURNAL AWWA and *Opflow*. Most recently the committee developed a handbook, *Building Tomorrow's Workforce*, to share ideas on creating successful internship programs. The newly formed Operator Issues Subcommittee is focusing specifically on how to stem the growing shortage of operators.

New members are welcomed. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact Katie McCain at (214) 724-2924 or Darla Meadors at (513) 591-7966.

We Need Your Input*

The AWWA Workforce Strategies Committee would like to hear from you. Please visit us at <http://www.awwa.org/Survey.cfm?ItemNumber=39618> to answer the following questions:

- What workforce issues are the most pressing for you?
- Which approach from this JOURNAL AWWA article would be most applicable for your organization?
- What other approaches are you implementing or do you know about that we could share with others?
- Please provide any other comments.

*The online survey will be deactivated Sept. 1, 2008. If you have comments after that time please contact a member of the committee.

people to move into supervisory and management roles in order to advance.

Engage those close to retirement to serve as instructors. Provide a platform for retirees to transfer institutional knowledge in their area of expertise to the young

develop and implement. These solutions require planning and relationship development with educational institutions, professional associations, local military bases, and community-based organizations that provide training and access to new worker pools.

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emerging workforce in a classroom setting—through internal training or apprenticeship programs. This process was successfully implemented by Seattle (Wash.) Public Utilities and Phoenix (Ariz.) Water Services.

SUCCESS REQUIRES PLANNING, COMMITMENT

A common theme throughout all of these approaches is that many solutions to a sustainable workforce are long-term, taking time and careful planning to

Given the growing complexity and importance of recruitment and retention, it is essential that workforce planning becomes a strategic priority for utilities. Now that utilities are aware of the labor shortage, they must act to provide a continual supply of human resources to accomplish the work of the organization. In order to attract and retain the newer generations of workers, new perspectives must be embraced. Although both short-term and immediate fixes will help, a firm commitment to longer-term

strategies is required. These strategies need to be integrated throughout the organization, at all levels. Recruitment and retention strategies and initiatives need to be systemic, long-standing, and supported in order to be truly successful.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Marcia Isbell (to whom correspondence should be addressed) is a principal consultant with EMA Inc., 4742 North Oracle Rd., Ste.

310, Tucson, AZ 85705; e-mail: misbell@ema-inc.com; phone: (520) 299-0992. Isbell has BA and MA degrees from Mt. Vernon Nazarene College and Bowling Green State University (Ohio), respectively. She leads EMA's practice in organization effectiveness and workforce sustainability. Katie McCain is a management consultant with CDM in Dallas, Texas. Darla Meadors is a senior administrative specialist with Greater Cincinnati Water Works in Ohio. Arlene Post is a management consultant with CDM in Los Angeles, Calif., and Sue Schneider is the general manager for Spartanburg Water (S.C.). All of the authors are members of the AWWA Workforce Strategies Committee.

If you have a comment about this article, please contact us at journal@awwa.org.