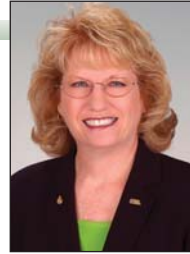


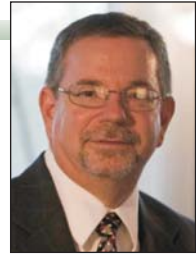
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Keeping the Economic Crisis From Wreaking Havoc in the Utility Workforce

The economic crisis has hit public utilities hard. Utility executives live it every day as they make operational decisions about how to spend money or deploy staff to get the work done and maintain service levels. The budget crunch frequently hits first and with the greatest impact on the human resource areas, i.e., hiring decisions, layoff decisions, salary and position freezes, cuts in employee benefits, and reductions in services provided.

Each year, the August issue of JOURNAL AWWA focuses on workforce issues, highlighting strategies and practices to build, manage, and maintain a workforce with the appropriate depth and breadth to meet the operational needs of today's water utilities. This year's workforce issue will feature stories on several utilities that are successfully implementing the "people" strategies presented here and realizing a positive effect on their organizations.

EIGHT STEPS TO A STRONGER WORKFORCE AND A BETTER BOTTOM LINE

The AWWA Workforce Strategies Committee has identified eight key human resource issues that will affect most, if not all, utilities this year and has developed strategies for dealing with these challenges in the current lackluster economy.

Minimize recruitment risk. Given the expense of hiring and training new employees, utilities need to safeguard this investment by ensuring that any additions to staff succeed in the organization and stick around for the long run. To

help employees get up to speed, institute strong onboarding and mentoring programs to systematically provide the orientation and assimilation into utility culture that employees need to build positive relationships and outcomes early in their careers.

Build a case to avoid hiring freezes.

Environmental and public safety are among the issues that differentiate a utility from other public departments. Utilities that are able to document efficiencies already implemented (during those lean years of the 1990s) have the data required to build a case with public officials for maintaining current staffing levels and filling vacant positions.

Think out of the box to get the job done despite a hiring freeze. What if a utility makes its case to public officials but still faces a hiring freeze with no diminishment in service expectations? This is the time to get creative in determining operational strategies. Utility management may need to consider a nontraditional approach to defining organizational roles, reevaluate the criticality of every activity, and determine what work is indispensable to meeting the utility's primary mission.

Communicate to maintain morale during a difficult economy. People are most fearful of the unknown, so minimize this fear by keeping everyone in the loop as much as possible. Remember that information does not need to be "prettied up" before it is shared. Above all, communication should be honest and straightforward and address the issues of most concern to the audience.

Effectively integrate transferred workers.

It is common practice for enterprise-funded departments such as utilities to accept workers from other departments that have been downsized because of the economy. Although this practice is commendable, the reality is that some of these employees may have been marginal performers in their previous departments. Even at best, these individuals will not possess the exact skills needed to fill their new positions. To facilitate their effective integration into the utility organization, internal transfers should be treated in all respects like new hires and undergo the same assessments and training processes used to ensure that new employees realize success.

Pay attention to skills, knowledge, and natural talent when filling positions. During economic booms, utilities may be able to get away with inefficiencies in their operation, but in tough times, they need every employee in the organization to work at full potential. In order for employees to perform to the best of their abilities, they must be in the right positions. Maximize employee performance by assigning individuals based on their natural talents and the skills and knowledge they have acquired.

Make the most of older workers postponing retirement. In light of current economic conditions, some employees who were ready to retire may not keep to their exit date. On the one hand, this gives utilities the opportunity to hold onto the knowledge held by these employees; on the other, it means that utilities may find themselves struggling to get the job done with a workforce that is potentially less physically capable. The two-edged sword of postponed retirements demands a two-pronged approach. Reassign the more physical demands to those better able to perform these tasks. Workers approaching retirement can be strategically assigned training and knowledge-sharing roles within the organization. Some employees will be terrific hands-on trainers, some will be pros at documenting processes, and still others will excel at verbally transferring knowledge to other employees. Implementing a knowledge management program to capture older workers' experience and know-how while they are still with the utility both preserves organizational knowledge and allows training to continue during an economic downturn.

Keep training programs up and running. In an economic downturn, training programs often are one of the first areas cut. The result is that employees are not prepared to move up in the organization when they're needed. Again, using workers approaching retirement is one way



Stuart Karasik, training program manager for the City of San Diego Water Department and a member of the AWWA Workforce Strategies Committee, discusses the importance of onboarding during a workshop presented at the Utility Management Conference in February.

to maintain an internal training program so that younger employees continue to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to advance within the organization.

When a sagging economy threatens a utility's bottom line, the bottom line is, don't panic. Yes, tough times require utilities to

do more with less, but that goal is achievable provided utility executives think creatively and carefully about their operations and make the most of their human resources. So be on the lookout for opportunities to deploy some of the ideas suggested here as well as upcoming strategies that will be spotlighted in the August JOURNAL AWWA.

—The authors of this article are members of the AWWA Workforce Strategies Committee. Marcia Isbell, a frequent conference speaker on workforce topics, is owner and principal of Positive Purpose Coaching, a Tucson (Ariz.)-based firm providing business and performance coaching to individuals and organizations. She can be reached at marciaisbell@comcast.net. Since her retirement from Dallas (Texas) Water Utilities, Katie McCain, former AWWA president, chair of the Workforce Strategies Committee, and a long-time supporter of workforce development initiatives, has worked in sales and marketing in the pipe industry and as a consultant. She can be reached at klmccain@aol.com. Brad Jurkovic has worked at several utilities and has been a consultant over the past 23 years. He is currently a project director with Woolpert in Tampa, Fla., and can be reached at brad.jurkovic@woolpert.com.