

Recruiting Replacements



If you are currently employed as a water or wastewater operator, chances are you see gray hair when you look into the mirror. It is no secret that the workforce is aging and a very large number of retirements are imminent. The evidence suggests that many of the faces we'll see at the 2022 Annual KRWA Conference & Exhibition in March will not attend too many more before they retire. Many utilities find recruiting and retaining talent a challenge. The looming question is: How are utilities going to recruit those replacements?

Many occupations have defined career paths. A high school student who desires to be a doctor has a list of items to check off in order to become a MD. There are extremely competitive college programs designed to find the best doctors. Engineers, attorneys and

even park managers have defined educational programs to train potential employees and also provide a pool for companies to recruit from. Vocational programs exist to train students on a specific career like dental hygienist, web developer or wind turbine technician.

My brother-in-law works in management for a Fortune 100 company. His company spends considerable time and money traveling the country and recruiting potential employees. They target specific university career fairs for different jobs; think K-State for farmers and KU for pharmacists. That company is concerned about the aging workforce and how they will operate after the retirements start coming. That Fortune 100 company is having trouble filling vacancies.

How does a utility recruit talented employees when a Fortune 100 company has problems? Let's not only think about this problem at a single utility level, but what about the water and wastewater industry as a whole? Not only do the actual utilities need good employees to keep the water moving, but they also need support from many other industries to stay afloat. It takes engineers and geologists and pump guys and backhoe operators and regulators – you get the idea. Yes, even the regulatory community struggles to recruit and retain quality employees. There is a wave of retirements coming in all sorts of industries and occupations that will impact water and wastewater utilities. The challenge we face is competing against those other industries that are also trying to recruit talented people to replace this generation of workers.

I am fortunate to be able to travel all over the state and talk with operators. There is not a singular path taken to become an operator. Many times, an operator is simply thrust into the job, it works out and a long career results. One thing is very common – most operators did not set out in life to become an operator. They all have different backgrounds, education and paths that led them there. It will be crucial for us as an industry to recruit people who may not even be aware that it exists, or at least exists as a career option. One thing that utilities can, and should, do to make it easier to recruit is

COMM-TRONIX

MONITORING & CONTROL SYSTEM

Ask Your Neighbors

Comm-Tronix has over 200 Systems in Kansas and Oklahoma

TELEMETRY AND SCADA SYSTEMS



Comm-Tronix
1735 McCormick
Wichita, KS 67213

CALL 1-800-717-7155

to have a positive presence in the customers lives. I wrote an article about that in the July 2021 issue of *The Kansas Lifeline*. Here's a link: <https://krwa.net/portals/krwa/lifeline/2107/Out-of-Sight-Out-of-Mind.pdf>

Until the prestige of careers in this field is increased it will be difficult to recruit talented employees from other industries or careers. There are many different jobs that good operators have left the industry for. I believe that pipeline should run the other way! For most former operators, the decision to leave came down to mediocre pay and loads of responsibility. Everybody wants to be paid more money, but many governing bodies do not empathize with the amount of responsibility felt by operators. I wrote an article for *The Lifeline* article about that topic already too (March 2021). Here is a link to that article that was entitled "What is an Operator Worth?"

<https://krwa.net/portals/krwa/lifeline/2103/What-Is-Operator-Worth.pdf>

College sports have "recruiting pipelines" that sort of funnel athletes from certain areas toward specific teams. That's what our industry needs -- a program to train potential employees to become certified and find gainful employment. Not just a job, but a long-term career pathway. The Kansas Rural Water Apprenticeship Program is working to fill that void. The program provides a curriculum for potential employees to get a jump on the "book learning" and learn the industry. There is an ad for the program on page 40-41

As of September 20, 347 water and 243 wastewater exams have been proctored in 2021 with another test date set for December 9, 2021 in Emporia.

A recent survey completed during several training sessions by KRWA found the average wage of operators with less than five years of experience was \$14.55 per hour; the average overall wage was \$18.85 per hour. These studies are far from scientific, but they appear to show that entry level wages are comparable to the average.

in this issue. The program is a Registered Apprenticeship Program through the Kansas Department of Commerce. Graduates from the program receive a nationally recognized credential.

It is not all gloom and doom! There are hundreds of water and wastewater operator exams given each year in Kansas. As of September 20, 347 water and 243 wastewater exams have been proctored in 2021 with another test date set for December 9, 2021 in Emporia. Applications for this exam are due to KDHE by November 21! There were 782 exams attempted in 2019, the last "normal" year. Many of those sitting for

an exam are new employees attempting the exam the first time. There is new blood coming into the industry, but is there enough interest today in water or wastewater careers to keep the flow moving 10, 20 or 50 years from now? I truly hope so.

Daryn Martin began work with KRWA in August 2019. He previously was a Water Program Inspector and Environmental Program Administrator at KDHE's Wichita office. Prior to joining KDHE, he worked as an operator in the El Dorado Water Treatment Plant. He holds a Class IV water operator certification.



B&B Services

Since 1993 specializing in water control valves like: Cla-Val, Watts, Ames, OCV. For all your valve needs, and more! With fair pricing, 6 mo. warranty, and sizeable inventory. Over 20 years experience on rural water systems.

Services include:

Consulting, Scheduled Preventive Maintenance and Emergency Services.

Call Rodney today for pricing, estimates, and references. 620/341-2698 cell; 620/364-8036 home.

Or e-mail bbservices@kans.com