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WWEMA Window: The Aging Workforce And The Water Community – A CEO's Perspective

By Michael Dimitriou

No matter if you are a utility, manufacturer, manufacturers rep, or contractor, finding and keeping good employees is one of our most critical future challenges. It has always been an issue, but it has become even more serious as all of us in the water industry age. According to a U.S. EPA Water Workforce Report, as well as other industrywide surveys, our industry faces significant challenges in recruiting, training, and retaining employees. These challenges will only be exacerbated in the years to come, with roughly one-third of the water sector workforce eligible to retire in the next 10 years. Additionally, as the technologies that are used in the water sector become more advanced, there is a growing need to train and employ water industry specialists with particular technical skills and the knowledge to produce, operate, and maintain our water systems. Add population shifts across the country, the changing job expectations of our younger workforce, together with ongoing societal changes, and it becomes even more complicated.



The most important asset in any organization is its people. Their expertise, experience, and dedication to getting the job done is what makes a company successful. That's why our changing demographics pose a serious challenge for us. And it does not matter what size your organization is, where its located, or what part of the water industry you are in. We must learn to do more with less — with fewer arms and legs — so let's get ready for it! We need to develop and implement strategies that will help us retain skilled workers, hire, and train future workers and adopt methods and technologies to help us become more efficient.

So, from my perspective, here are a few simple ideas to help all of us find and keep good people in the next few years:

Consolidate And Think Non-Traditional Organization

Think about streamlining your organization's process and procedures to reduce staffing needs. Minimize management and supervisor layers. This should be a no brainer, but most of us are resistant to change and doing things differently than we have in the past. Sometimes, the traditional organization may not be the best option for the tasks at hand. Matrix organizations, streamlining work by combining functions and simplifying structure, and organizing around functional and task groups can enhance participation and efficiency, allowing you to better meet the expectations of younger staff and get the job done right.

We can also innovate in supply chains and contract services. Use the strength of your suppliers and reduce staffing needs in non-critical areas. Grow and cultivate your supply chain. Sometimes key suppliers can do things more efficiently than you. Recognize and use this where this can help.

Look for new avenues to engineer, produce, and go to market with products and services that may be less labor-intensive or allow you use the latest internet and software-based marketing. Give your manufacturers reps customized web-based sales, engineering, and learning tools that they can access quickly and easily. Work with outside marketing organizations like *Water Online* to help you reach more clients more efficiently.

Focus On Culture

Keep good people by building an "Us" culture that values the individual's contribution and that stresses transparency, responsibility, and teamwork. With clear metrics, let everyone know the company's progress as well as their own individual contribution to that progress. Always reward and recognize those that contribute. Build teams that allow everyone to use their individual strengths. This enhances the overall effort and helps everyone identify with their team and with the organization. Let your employees find the best way to do the job and let them take responsibility as well as be accountable. They will always know more than you do about how best to do the job. Be there when they need you; otherwise, let them do it with minimal supervision.

Work Smarter — Innovate And Automate

Use innovation and automation wisely, to share work and speed communication. Add smart hardware and software to allow employees to manage their work, work collaboratively with others, and access information quickly to communicate and share. This applies no matter where work is occurring — whether at home, in the field, or in the office. Innovation is not just for your products. Many of us

have already successfully adopted 3D printing, instant data links, and remote monitoring. SharePoint and Zoom have added to our ability to work together and remotely. The mobile and remote workforce is growing, making communication and information and document sharing that much more critical. Put all the latest advances in data collection, storage, and sharing to work for you.

Hire Right — Train — Retain

Actively recruit. Implement recruiting tools to allow you to evaluate the candidates thoroughly. Hire right; make sure they are a good fit both technically and culturally. Onboard and train them right. Give them opportunity to grow. Provide clear career paths, and rewards for success but also stress responsibility as well as accountability. Give them the tools and opportunity to succeed. Be open to new ways of working. Be open to change. From flextime to remote work to helping with day care, recognize that one size does not fit all going forward. Be organizationally flexible where you can. Recognize the latest generation is more mobile. They may not stay as long as you would like, so be cognizant of the need to have a good pipeline of candidates for critical positions.

Develop local community partnerships to grow skilled craftsman. Finding manufacturing, operations, and service employees is becoming harder and harder. Work with local high schools and junior colleges on apprentice programs for welding, ironworking, and electrical trades. Support local community programs to train water operators and maintenance personnel. Develop an inhouse program to foster hands on skills such as welding, fabrication, and operations.

Use Older Employees As Teachers

Keep those long-term older employees if you can and if they want. Develop mentoring and apprenticeship programs to pair older skilled employees with new hires. Our older workers have a unique set of skills and knowledge, and a work ethic built over years of experience. We cannot afford to lose this. They can be effective teachers transferring their knowledge to younger new employees. Retain older employees by giving them reasons not to retire. Allow them to contribute. Show them they are valued.

Build Careers, Not Jobs

Make sure everyone in the company has a clearly defined career path. Provide training, inside and outside opportunities to develop their skills, and help them prepare for future growth. Whether its engineers, sales staff, accountants, operators, welders, or field technicians, we must develop and nurture future leaders and managers while passing on the “craftsman” mentality and pride in their work. All of us have skills that can always be improved.

These are just my thoughts. There are plenty of other things that we can do to meet the coming challenges. I am convinced we can successfully attract new and younger people into our water community and give them the opportunity to build successful and satisfying careers all while helping continue to meet the need for clean and potable water.

Michael Dimitriou is President of WRT LLC, which is headquartered in Westminster, CO. Dimitriou currently serves on WWEMA's Executive Committee and has been a long-time active member of WWEMA, most recently having served as its Chairman of the Board of Directors in 2020. WWEMA is a non-profit trade association that has been working for water and wastewater technology and service providers since 1908. WWEMA's members supply the most sophisticated leading-edge technologies and services, offering solutions to every water-related environmental problem and need facing today's society. For more information about WWEMA, visit www.wwema.org or follow us on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/company/wwema/?viewAsMember=true>.