



AWWA DIRECTOR'S REPORT

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Succession Planning

BEING NEW WITH THE PIMA COUNTY WASTE-WATER MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT IN TUCSON, one of my highest priorities was to meet with and have the opportunity to address almost all of the nearly 500 members of the department. I had two immediate impressions. One was that I was impressed with the level of experience the employees have, and the other was that our staff consists of many graying-haired gentlemen. (I have been informed by one of our female staff members that our female employees appear younger than their male counterparts because of their propensity to hide their gray hair through a variety of hair-coloring products.) It was obvious that many baby boomers who have filled the ranks of our utilities are nearing retirement. Many of those who can retire soon, started in this field when computers were room-sized machines that only a few highly educated specialists could operate within the confines of temperature-controlled facilities.

Today's aging baby boomers, many of whom never dreamed they would operate computers when they began their careers, carry laptops in their service vehicles. Some have been brought to this point kicking and screaming, while others have embraced the electronic advances that have made their way into the water and wastewater fields. However, one thing is certain; computers will play a larger and more significant role in field and plant operations with each passing year. The younger members of the workforce and the future members of the workforce are already computer literate, having grown up with computers and other electronic devices in the classroom and the home, and although, they will have the skills needed to learn and operate new technology, they will not come to the workforce with the years of experience our soon-to-be-retiring baby boomers (those born between 1946-1964) will be leaving with.

A recent survey that was conducted of over 400 water utilities revealed some important statistics. The Water Environment Research Foundation study indicated the current average age of water utility workers is 44.7 and 45.4 for wastewater utility workers. The average retirement age for utility personnel is 56. It is projected that in the next ten years, 37% of water utility workers and 31% of wastewater utility workers will retire. With those retirements comes a loss of knowledge and expertise that is not easily replaced.

The exodus of the boomers from the workforce in the water and wastewater industries will have a direct impact on public health and the environment. The industry will require good capable people to replace them when they leave.

The challenge we face is how to accomplish this task. In light of the number of expected Baby Boomer retirements that will be taking place in the near future, it would be wise for utilities to prepare for this phenomenon with succession planning.

Succession planning addresses future organizational staffing needs by replacing key personnel who will be leaving the workforce with personnel to take their place. A small number of utilities report having succession plans in place. However, many utilities are government-owned and are limited in their ability to implement succession plans due to personnel policies that direct government entities.

Succession planning should incorporate attaining and training workers to fill the ranks of the tenured workers. The average time spent on the job with the same employer for utility workers is 24 years. This number is much higher than the national average for other industries.

The next generation of utility workers will need training in technology due to the increasing automation in the industry. "Knowledge Capture" techniques need to be developed for capturing and documenting existing processes. Newly hired workers can be paired with experienced workers to prepare the new hires to succeed those who will be retiring soon. A more diverse workforce of minority and female workers needs to be developed to correlate with the changing demographics of today's labor force and to assure adequate staffing in a workforce that is dwindling in numbers.

The benefits to the water and wastewater utility companies that implement a succession planning model are great. A better-trained workforce will meet the needs of rapidly changing technology, will be able to adapt to working within a regulatory environment, will be prepared for infrequent occurring events to critical processes, and will not be caught off guard by the retirement of key personnel.

It will be a challenge to meet the personnel needs of water and wastewater utilities, but it is a challenge that must be met.