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PUBLIC POWER MAGAZINE

AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION



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THE WORKFORCE ISSUE

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The American Public Power Association is the voice of not-for-profit, community-owned utilities that power 2,000 towns and cities nationwide. We advocate before federal government to protect the interests of the more than 49 million customers that public power utilities serve, and the 93,000 people they employ. Our association offers expertise on electricity policy, technology, trends, training, and operations. We empower members to strengthen their communities by providing superior service, engaging citizens, and instilling pride in community-owned power.

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A CHANGING INDUSTRY NEEDS NEW TALENT

BY JOY DITTO, PRESIDENT AND CEO, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION



Our workforce is our greatest asset, but also our greatest challenge. To put a finer point on it: People are essential to operating a public power system, and the right people are essential to achieving our mission of delivering reliable, affordable, and safe electricity to our communities. These are seemingly obvious statements, but they

might not be obvious to the average American. I would venture to say that most Americans have no idea how much work it takes to deliver such a reliable service day in and day out. This lack of understanding has roots in how much we learn about science, technology, engineering and math (the STEM subjects) in our schools. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress by the National Science Board, in 2015, only about one-third of eighth graders and less than one-quarter of 12th graders in the United States showed proficiency in science.

The American Public Power Association and others in the energy industry have been working to support STEM education, and build energy literacy, in our secondary schools, but in the interim we have sought other ways to tell our story. And our public power story must be told — it is an inspiring one that often spurs those who hear it to consider careers in our communities. Public power utilities have developed relationships with vocational schools, community colleges and universities, in addition

COMMUNICATING CUSTOMERS' OPTIONS, INTERFACING WITH THEIR TECHNOLOGY, ANALYZING DATA, AND APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED FROM THAT DATA WILL REQUIRE WORKERS WITH DIFFERENT SKILL SETS

to trying to find creative inroads into secondary schools. They have used social media to highlight utility activities, including during Public Power Week (the first full week in October every year), provided scholarships to worthy students, and created competitions to entice aspiring engineers, among many other efforts. They have done a lot. But the absence of knowledge persists. And that lack of knowledge about the energy industry affects everything from recruiting to hiring to retaining talented staff. It also affects decision-making by policymakers who have little sense of what we do and how we do it.

As we continue to tackle this education and communication challenge, there are some bright spots for public power. First, our not-for-profit service orientation is very appealing to many people. Second, the ability for a talented worker to effect positive change at the utility is more possible given public power's smaller size and lack of bureaucracy compared to our investor-owned utility and oil-and-gas brethren. Third, the changes facing our industry require determined and innovative thinkers of all kinds. Fourth, the public power utility of the future is not just about engineers and line workers. (In reality, the present public power utility isn't, either, but bear with me, and don't get me wrong — we still love and need them 24/7/365!) What I mean is that the public power utility of the future will be even more dynamic, for example as we seek to enable our customers' distributed energy resources in interacting seamlessly with our distribution grids. Communicating customers' options, interfacing with their technology, analyzing data, and applying lessons learned from that data will require workers with different skill sets than we've needed previously. And that is exciting.

As we continue to respond as a society to the coronavirus pandemic, there might be one more thing many public power utilities can bring to the table to entice such highly skilled, motivated and dynamic workers. Our small and medium towns could be appealing to many city dwellers tired of living so tightly packed or to those whom the pandemic gave time to reflect on the drawbacks of the rat race. We'll see. And I think our larger, city-based public power members are well situated to demonstrate how their utilities have risen to the challenge in their own communities.

Regardless, the changing focus of our industry can be an opportunity to enhance our incredibly talented and effective public power workforce by attracting workers of different skill sets and backgrounds. This variety in our talent pool will inevitably lead to more innovation, which will help us help our communities spur economic development, improve our customer service, and lead the industry into the future.



GOING REMOTE: FROM CLOSED DOORS TO OPENED OPPORTUNITIES

BY DAVID BLAYLOCK, CONTRACTOR
TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Rarely does a crisis in the electric sector happen to every utility at the same time. But COVID-19 offered exactly that type of crisis. As businesses across the country began to shut down in the face of the pandemic, utility management had to rethink traditional job processes and break the seal on “open in case of emergency” procedure plans that had been waiting in the event such a crisis came on.

For employees who began working from home, public power entities put into play a number of practices, policies, and technologies to alleviate some of the complications that came with a swift transition to teleworking.



ESTABLISHING A POLICY

“It was Monday, March 16, when everything changed here,” said Tracy Reibold, vice president of human resources and administrative services at American Municipal Power, Inc., aka AMP, a multistate joint action agency headquartered in Columbus, Ohio. “We came in that morning and made the decision to close the office, never imagining that we were looking at this taking place as long as it has. As everyone went home, we had to start making sure everything was right for us to make this work for a while.”

Before the office closure, AMP had only two employees who did regular telework, because they performed specific functions in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., that required remote status. Field employees who travel to facilities and member communities were doing a minimal amount of work from home.

“We didn’t have a telework policy in place because, outside of some one-off occasions for individuals, people didn’t telework,” Reibold said.

The situation was similar for the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority. When it became clear that the pandemic was going to impact the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Authority activated its Incident Command System. The incident command team, along with its safety department, developed protocols and procured personal protective equipment to ensure the safety of employees on the job. At the same time, the Authority realized that it would be important to remove as many employees from its locations as possible and transition them to telework. The idea of a telework policy had been discussed but repeatedly shot down. The mindset was that there were too many risks and fears surrounding a remote workforce, said Sabrina King Léonce, VIWAPA’s director of human resources.

She identified a number of key reasons

utility managers worried about remote work, such as quality of service, new costs, accountability, security, productivity, lost collaboration, communication, risk, and governance.

Meanwhile, her colleague Julius Aubain, VIWAPA’s chief information officer, had some tough conversations with management about the technical side of launching remote work, bringing up the topic often, well before the pandemic changed the calculations being made.

Though buy-in was tentative across utility leadership, there was interest from new CEO Lawrence J. Kupfer. When King Léonce came onboard, Kupfer told her that he wanted to rethink business practices and be open to change. This direction gave Aubain and King Léonce an inroad to begin to put together a telework policy and a plan for implementing it when the time was right.

“We had a meeting of the minds,” King Léonce said. “Julius had the background on what had happened before, and I was coming in new, so we put our heads together — him on the technology side and me from the employee-management side — and crafted this


policy. We knew that this was a change that was necessary; we just didn’t know when it could be put in place.”

Having the plan set out ahead of time would prove fortuitous; not too long after they crafted it, the pandemic began, and the fears that people had voiced about telework had to be put aside. “The fears hadn’t diminished; people just had to get used to it, because there was no other option,” she said.

“The policy we’d already created hadn’t been approved, but this forced it to become approved policy,” Aubain added.

“On day one of the office closing, we were lucky to have the policy ready to go,” King Léonce said. “We just needed a couple days to do a quick scan over and then could do a training for all of the leadership on the topic. From there, within days, we could do the big rollout to the entire authority.”

Top-notch leadership also played a key role in getting a telework plan hammered out at the last minute for AMP, Reibold said. “We had to get the policy figured out while people were heading home.”



**“THE FEARS HADN'T DIMINISHED;
PEOPLE JUST HAD TO GET USED
TO IT, BECAUSE THERE WAS NO
OTHER OPTION.”**

SABRINA KING LÉONCE

DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES
VIRGIN ISLANDS WATER AND POWER AUTHORITY

ENABLING TECHNOLOGY

As luck would have it, AMP had already switched all employees' computers to laptops, offering one less hurdle to the technology capability for employees to do remote work. "We were lucky that we had changed out all of our computers to laptops, so we could be sure on March 16 that everyone was going home with a laptop computer to use," said Reibold.

That didn't mean there wasn't still work to do to fully enable remote capabilities. "We had to make sure that everyone had the necessary VPN access to do their work once they

got there," she said. "Our IT team was there working last minute to make sure everything was right for every employee before the end of the week."

VIWAPA wasn't as lucky from a technology standpoint: Only a few members of the staff had been issued laptop computers. Rather than having employees carry home large desktop computers or connect to secure networks with their untested personal devices, Aubain and his team sought different approaches. They rolled out a remote desktop solution for each user to allow access to work computers from home devices. This created a secure connection without allowing any direct access.

For both VIWAPA and AMP, teleconference software has proved key, with staff relying on it

to see each other on calls, still feel able to reach each other quickly, as they previously could by looping by an office, and making use of the software's chat function to get quick responses on items rather than flooding overburdened email inboxes.

Teleconferencing has proved especially advantageous for VIWAPA. "As an example, we have HR offices on two different islands that would often require that I travel between the two to connect with the staff at each," King Léonce said. She noted that the shift to telework isn't just helpful for her efficiency — it also gives employees more opportunity to work together. "Now, instead of splitting time between St. Croix and St. Thomas, I have the entire team meet face to face."

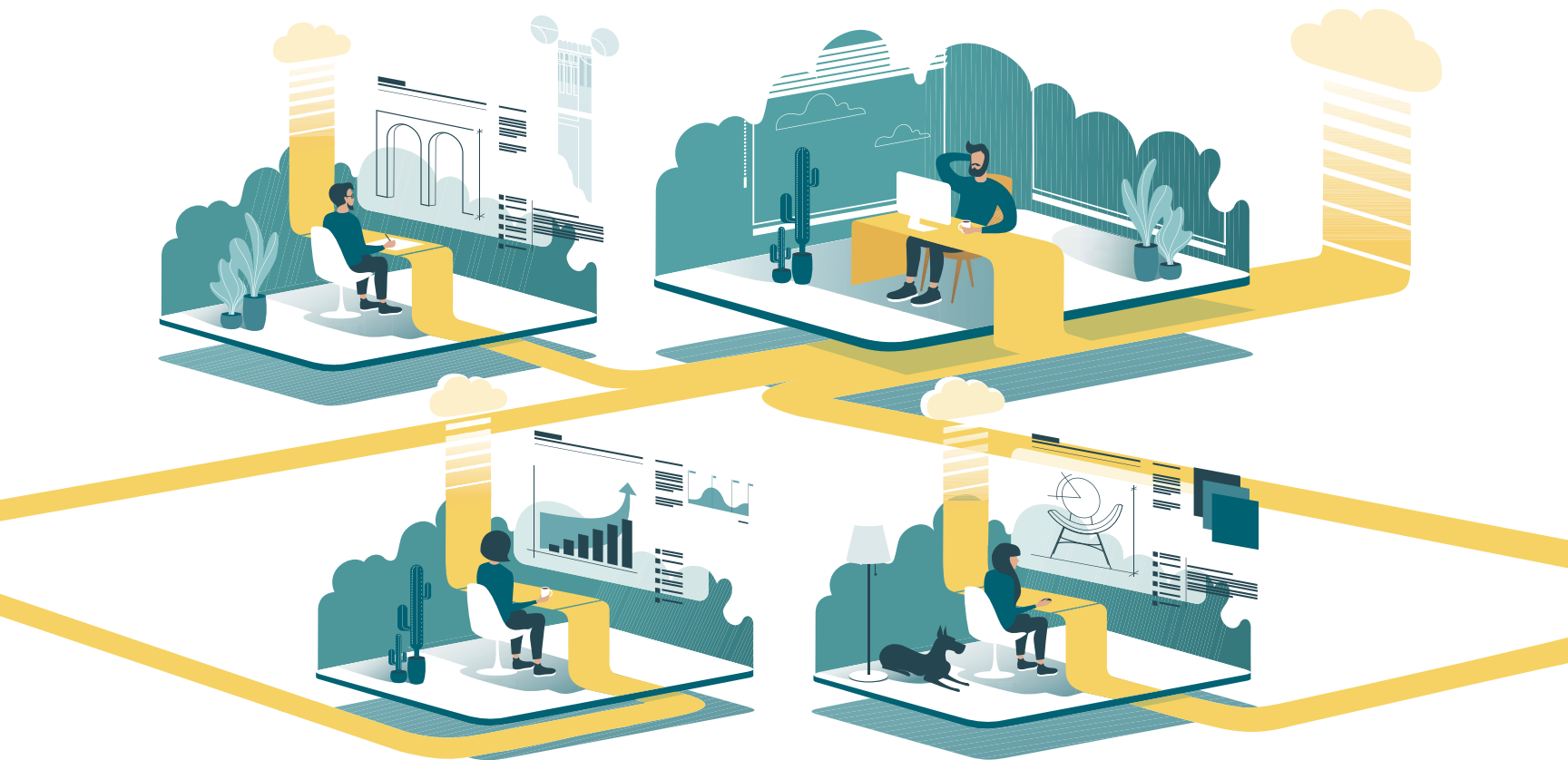
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ENCOURAGING ENGAGEMENT

Once the remote work setup was in place and the company's telework policy had been hammered out, the next step was to make sure that employee engagement wasn't lost. For both AMP and VIWAPA, having never had a remote workforce or regular telework meant that all their existing engagement activities were built around in-office interactions.

"We recognized that we couldn't lose that connection," said AMP's Reibold.

Before the office closure, AMP senior leadership would hold quarterly meetings with staff to update them on what was happening in the company and explain upcoming changes and news. To keep up with staff needs in an unusual time like the pandemic, CEO Jolene Thompson, who assumed the role in April, decided to convert the quarterly event into a virtual town hall and increase it to every two months.

"With a new CEO, it was important to not lose those first few months of Jolene getting to interact with all of the staff and hear from them on what's going on," Reibold said.

"This was always a really useful meeting to go over everything with staff, but the office closure actually made one improvement: Now all staff could be there," she said. Reibold explained that the in-person town halls had been effectively limited to the employees at AMP's headquarters, leaving out field staff and people working at hydropower facilities or other operations roles who could not work away from those locations.

"The employees appreciate it because they are getting consistent interaction with the CEO and executive management team that they weren't getting before," she added.

On top of the town halls, Thompson hosts virtual "coffee chats," which are half-hour meetings between her and up to five staff members over video chat. The idea, said Reibold, is for employees to talk about anything they want to bring up and to get to know each other.

"[Thompson] wants people to understand that, even as CEO, she is still very accessible to them, and I think this is a good way to have done that, giving everyone that ability if they want to use it to talk about anything from work to football to their dogs," said Reibold. "It's great having this way to get to know the new CEO in this personal interaction."

These activities, plus technology that enables employee connections, are integral to keeping a happy and healthy staff under these conditions, Reibold said. "While we've lost that ability to do a face-to-face in person, communication needs to be a strong focus regardless of what our format is."

Having this connection isn't just about productivity, but also wellness. "We can all do our jobs remotely, but at some point we still need to be connected as people," explained Reibold. "We have employees who live by themselves, we have employees who might be dealing with things at home — the more we can support them, even if it's through a five-minute conversation, the better off we are in the long term."

LASTING CHANGES

Both organizations said these changes have created improvements that can become permanent.

“Honestly, I think you’re getting more production out of many employees than you did before,” Aubain said. “Gone are those in-office distractions; no one [is] coming by your desk and taking you from what you’re trying to focus on. I know many people are getting deeper into their work and end up working longer hours than they did in the office.”

“I foresee this to be the future of the authority,” King Léonce added. “When we put together the policy, we had been ready for the pushback, only to have this create the easing

“WHILE WE’VE LOST THAT ABILITY TO DO A FACE-TO-FACE IN PERSON, COMMUNICATION NEEDS TO BE A STRONG FOCUS REGARDLESS OF WHAT OUR FORMAT IS.”

TRACY REIMBOLD

VICE PRESIDENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES
AMERICAN MUNICIPAL POWER, INC.

into it that was needed to prove its value.”

Working remotely this year has helped the authority take a different look at how it makes use of its office footprint and understand the way people respond to remote working, said King Léonce. “Both from a productivity and an efficiency standpoint, this has been a prime example of how to continue providing services to your customers under unusual conditions while testing out something that might be advanta-

geous under normal conditions,” she said.

For a public power utility, where service to the community is key, the pandemic meant more than just closing the doors of buildings — it meant rethinking every part of the business plan to ensure that customers could rely on their electricity provider to keep them powered through what would be months of at-home work, school, and entertainment.



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Are Public Power Workers Teleworking?

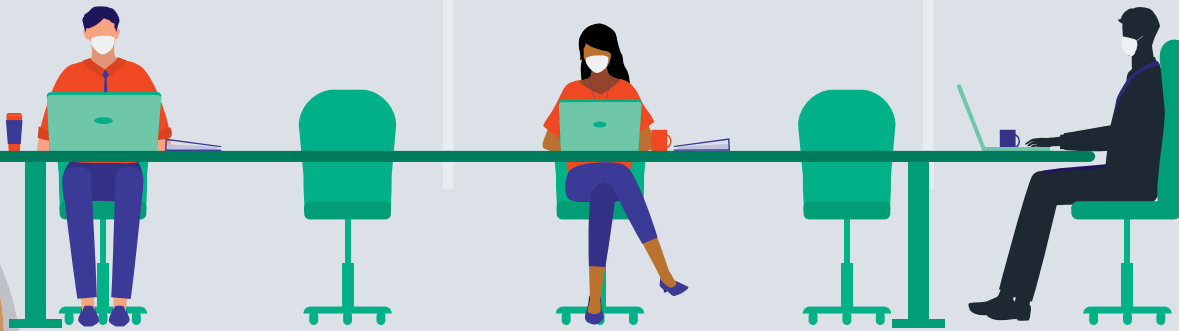
Utilities have a unique blend of essential workers who can only perform their duties onsite, those who can telework full time, and everything in-between. In May and July 2020, the American Public Power Association conducted surveys to gauge where member utilities stood in terms of having employees work remotely and their expectations for returning to a shared workplace — even if on a limited basis.



IN MAY:

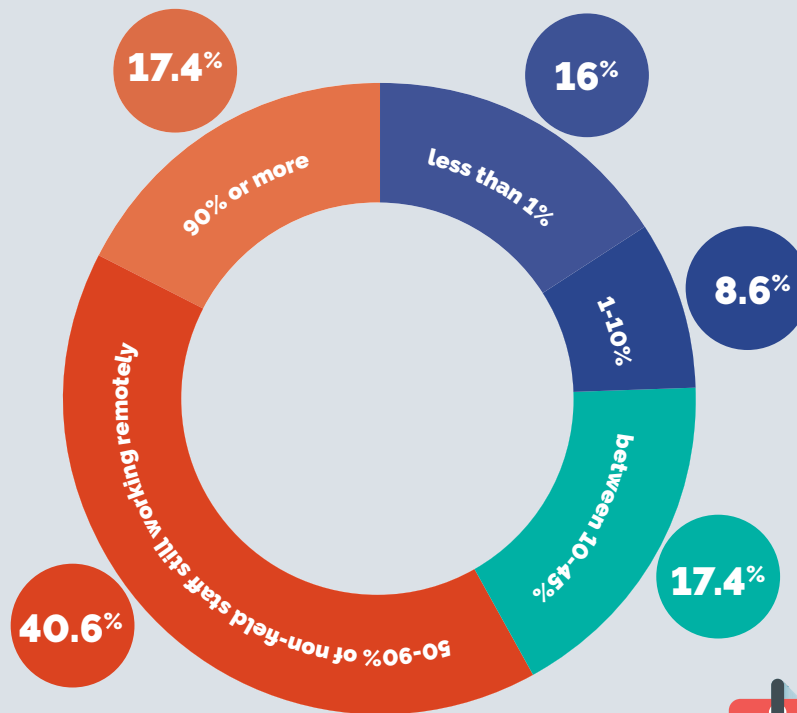


AS OF JULY:



More than **two-thirds** of respondents (**71%**) had begun to allow employees who had been working remotely back into the workplace.

Of these, the share of non-field staff working remotely was:



Of the respondents who had not yet transitioned remote workers back into a shared workplace,

65%

did not have a set re-entry timeline.



60%
expected

90%
or more

of employees to return to the office (at least in part) by the end of the year

DECEMBER

31

23%
expected

less than half

would return by the end of the year

OPEN DOORS AND WELCOME SPACES:
*BOLSTERING
DIVERSITY, EQUITY
AND INCLUSION IN
PUBLIC POWER*

BY SUSAN PARTAIN, SENIOR MANAGER, CONTENT STRATEGY,
AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION



Public power utilities are taking a look at the diversity of their workforce and how they can address and counter disparities inside their utilities and in their communities. From supporting a diverse talent pipeline to setting and monitoring performance metrics related to diversity, equity and inclusion, utilities are working to make lasting change.

“This is not a feel-good function; it’s not there to judge anyone; it is actually a business imperative,” said Nancy Harvey, chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer at the New York Power Authority. “To do well financially, you need to attract diversity of thought, diversity of perspective, and you need to value people’s differences. And leverage it so they feel like they belong.”

“It is a strategic imperative for us to think about diversity and inclusion,” said Tim Burke, president and CEO of the Omaha Public Power District in Nebraska. “Those are important elements because our customers are diverse, and we have to think about that in our delivery of what we do.” OPPD has had a manager of diversity and inclusion since 2005.

MEASURING CHANGE

Manar Morales, president and CEO of the Diversity and Flexibility Alliance, a group that advises organizations on developing a culture that embraces diversity and flexibility, stressed the importance of measuring diversity and inclusion in a variety of ways.

“The numbers tell you some of, but they don’t tell you the full story,” said Morales. She said that organizations should look beyond simply counting the demographics of employees and take a granular look at where these

employees are and “are people advancing across the board — who are we retaining, who are we losing, what experiences are they having?”

Morales helps clients create metrics dashboards that not only show employee representation across all levels of the organization, but also map out how effective certain activities are in driving change.

“It isn’t just about throwing out and doing a bunch of different things, but is what we are doing effective to move the needle,” she said. She noted that having conversations with employees on these topics, such as through focus groups or insight interviews, can help utilities to “start to solve for the right problem.”

She stressed that organizations have to dig deeper and explore how employees actually experience the organization. “Do people feel valued for who they are? Do they feel like they are valued as individuals and that they can bring their whole self to work?” asked Morales.

“Often, organizations have a mission statement, but if you actually ask them what they are doing, they aren’t doing much,” said Morales, adding that organizations truly committed to diversity, equity and inclusion will ensure leadership can communicate the organization’s strategy of what it means to be diverse and inclusive, have looked at how to align its activities accordingly, and invest the time and resources into measuring progress.

She encourages looking at every aspect of the organization — from how it recruits, advances employees, retains them, and more. At each step, she said, look at how diversity and inclusion play a role, and where bias might be serving as a roadblock to being the kind of organization that you want.

ALIGNMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Morales emphasized how having specific data points for leaders to work off of makes training and policies on these topics more meaningful. If there is only training held or policies created, but no way to assess how individual managers play a role in supporting diversity and inclusion efforts, then “they aren’t really thinking about how they need to be changing their behavior or making sure that people are getting the opportunities they need,” she said.

“If we say it matters to us, are we actually holding people accountable for it? Are we asking people if they are inclusive leaders, what are they doing to advance diversity and inclusion, are we setting expectations, are we giving them a toolkit to understand what they should be doing?” asked Morales.

“Accountability is a big part of how we will mature our programs,” said Harvey, who mentioned that NYPA will be working toward setting dashboards that capture metrics year over year for managers to gauge where they are in hiring diverse employees or in developing internal talent. Harvey was recently elevated to the C-suite as part of NYPA’s new initiative to increase representation within its workforce.

“We’re looking at what is the best way for us to keep ourselves accountable and to keep leaders accountable, at least for this lofty goal of improving representation across NYPA,” said

“THIS IS NOT A FEEL-GOOD FUNCTION; IT’S NOT THERE TO JUDGE ANYONE; IT IS ACTUALLY A BUSINESS IMPERATIVE.”

NANCY HARVEY

CHIEF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION OFFICER
NEW YORK POWER AUTHORITY

Harvey. “At this moment, we know what we look like from an HR perspective, but the goal is to make sure the entire organization knows what is happening.”

Harvey said that NYPA will measure progress against industry benchmarks and is planning to expand and train leaders on better recognizing and measuring for diversity and inclusion within their departments. She hopes this approach will help leaders across the organization to identify and discuss where overrepresentation or underrepresentation is occurring and determine where processes should change. NYPA has included a question on diversity and inclusion in its annual workforce survey, and Harvey plans to conduct a separate survey that will go more in depth on the topic.

Harvey said that NYPA is forming a governance committee on diversity and inclusion that would gather feedback from a representative cross section of employees in all departments and report back to her office. Her office’s charge is to capture the metrics, measure where progress is happening, understand where gaps are, and reassess the strategies needed to deliver on the commitment. She said the office will also be looking at all processes to make sure they are equitable.

RETHINKING RECRUITING

As for recruitment strategies, both NYPA and OPPD emphasize developing a diverse talent pipeline within the community.

According to Harvey, the new initiative will “touch on all aspects” of business — from how NYPA attracts and retains talent to the roles it plays in building a pipeline of STEM-focused workers and supporting businesses owned by women and people of color in its supply chain.

In 2002, OPPD participated in a program called InRoads, which brings in college freshmen, primarily from communities of color, for internships focused on building technical talent. Burke said that students could intern throughout their college career and that OPPD hired many of the participants for full-time positions once they graduated. OPPD has since developed a program for high school students, called the Legacy Initiative, which provides insight into all kinds of jobs the utility (and energy industry overall) offers, such as line technicians, call center representatives, engineering, and accounting.

For utilities who have found it difficult to recruit diverse talent, Morales emphasized that it is important to reflect on the recruitment process and where it might need to change.

“If your hiring is done [through] word of mouth, and if all of your employees are from one particular identity, then likely their circles are also from that similar identity,” said Morales. “If your employee base is not diverse, then likely the types of recommendations you are getting [are] just replicating the types of people you already have within your organization.”

Recruiting for diversity and inclusion isn’t just about diverse demographics, stressed Harvey, but also about making sure that employees and managers share the commitment to championing these values. She suggests that utilities define required competencies for leaders to help employees reach their full potential, such as active listening, taking intentional steps to counter and confront microaggressions, and being mindful about employee development.

Burke also makes an effort to share OPPD’s values on diversity and inclusion throughout the community. He serves as chair of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, where he has put the conversation around diversity, equity and inclusion front and center. OPPD also takes measures to show support of different communities, such as flying the Pride flag in June.

“From a talent recruitment perspective, I need to show the public that we are a diverse and inclusive organization,” said Burke. “I’ve heard it over and over again from people who have come to our organization ... ‘I knew I was coming to an organization that was going to be accepting of who I am and that I could bring my authentic self to work’ — and that’s what we want.”

DEVELOPING LEADERS

“You can always attract diverse talent, but the real question is can you keep them,” said Harvey. “One of the things that is really important is how we measure and look at compensation and movement across an organization — whether it is up or out in the experience of certain demographics.”

OPPD looks at what kind of community representation exists at all five levels of the organization. Burke noted the change he has seen in his more than 20 years as part of OPPD’s executive team. “In 1997, when I started, I was one of 10 white guys. In 2020, [of the same set of] 10 senior managers, five are female, and of the five males, one is Hispanic and one is part of the LGBTQIA community.”

This leadership development is intentional, said Burke, in that OPPD looks at inclusion and diversity when training and developing its people. He said the utility looks at “how can we begin to stimulate that training and development, so when senior level positions become available, we can have people ready to take on those accountabilities and responsibilities.”

Burke said that OPPD’s human capital division looks out for any “unintentional inequities” on a regular basis. For example, he said, if there are engineers with similar tenures and performance records but who have differences in salary, “we might find differences in how they came into the organization or how we work our merit process.” Burke said that the discovery and remediation of these inequities usually only affects a handful of employees in any given year, but that employees have moved to different parts of their salary range. The process also helps OPPD reflect on — and resolve — factors behind any differences.

“FROM A TALENT RECRUITMENT PERSPECTIVE, I NEED TO SHOW THE PUBLIC THAT WE ARE A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATION.”

TIM BURKE

PRESIDENT AND CEO
OMAHA PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT

SUPPORT AMID CHANGE

Morales pointed to how new or expanded flexible working arrangements, such as remote work opportunities, don’t take out the legwork for managers in supporting an inclusive environment — they just change the approaches.

“It is important that with less face-to-face time, people don’t feel like they are out of sight, out of mind,” said Morales. “Within flexibility, we still need to create inclusive leadership. Often times, people will say ‘I didn’t feel seen or heard in the office, and now being out of the office, I’m worried about getting the kind of face time that I need, the kind of feedback that I need.’”

Morales advised that in a flexible environment, managers should continue to look at who is getting work, who is being included in meetings, and making sure that they are creating an environment where everyone is being seen or heard virtually.

“This is a place where people care about each other — it is a very collegial environment — but we could be more active to make sure we are as inclusive and diverse as can be,” said Harvey. “In this moment, there is no denying

all the different ways that we have been affected these past few months. We have become more in tune, or sensitive to, what people of color have been enduring — from the murders of unarmed Black men and women to the disproportionate way that we’re impacted by the pandemic.”

Harvey credited a robust diversity, equity, and inclusion program and organizational mindset in supporting employees in the pandemic and social unrest that have occurred this year.

Harvey said that membership in employee resource groups has risen during 2020, and that the virtual format has allowed the groups to meet more regularly. The groups have discussed disproportionate impacts to certain communities and shared ideas and needs for staying safe.

NYPA’s president and CEO, Gil Quiniones, also produced weekly videos that aimed to reassure employees and keep them feeling connected. The video topics range from what NYPA is doing to keep people safe to general reminders about resources that are available. Harvey also cited daily virtual standup meetings that helped people feel connected and identify any needs.

“The big takeaway was to treat each other as human, and not so much as manager and employee. And really meet people where they are,” she said.

Over the past few years, more than 125 OPPD employees have participated in various “gatherings,” which Burke described as cohorts of people with a common interest, such as a women professionals group or a professionals of color group.

“If and when things occur within the organization, they have a support mechanism to talk and can raise issues as a cohort, which sometimes is easier than raising issues as an individual,” explained Burke.

Some of the solutions from the gatherings have been to expand on employee resource groups. OPPD has a wide variety of such groups, such as for women, veterans, Latinos, and LGBTQIA individuals. Burke mentioned that employees also suggested starting a parent’s group to share challenges and strategies for coping during the pandemic.

INTENTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Burke noted that the white male executives at OPPD have been taking a 3.5-day training and deep dive to “focus in on white male privilege and culture, and also to examine racism, sexism and homophobia.” Burke was among the first group of 17 leaders who participated. “It has been one of the most powerful trainings I have ever been in in my life,” he said. “It may not be my fault that I have white privilege, but I certainly have an accountability and responsibility as a leader to understand that and to use that in a positive way for the organization.”

Burke says the plan is to find a way to have conversations on these topics with the rest of the employees by the beginning of 2021. “It’s to make sure that we have folks that have a support mechanism and that we have leaders that can now answer some of the tough questions from their own perspective, because they’ve done the deep dive and engaged in this conversation.”

Burke credits the intentional leadership focus on diversity, equity and inclusion for annual increases in OPPD’s employee engagement scores in each of the past five years.

Harvey stresses that support from the top, including the utility’s board, is important. “If there are no resources, and if it’s not being made aware to other leaders that this is a priority ... then it will not go as it should.”



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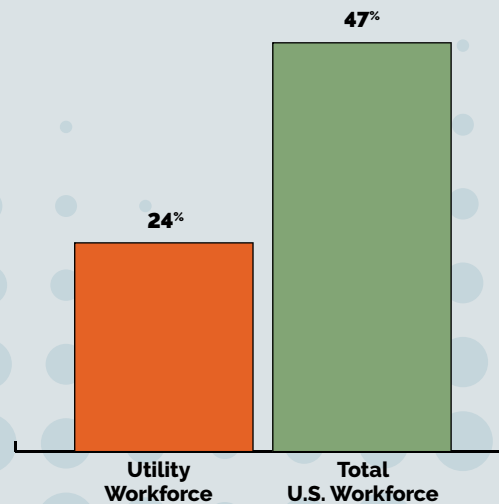
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How representative is the public power workforce?

The Center for Energy Workforce Development estimates that there are **96,200 public power employees** — representing **16%** of the utility workforce. As the utility workforce grows, here's how it compares to the demographics of the overall U.S. labor force.

Women are underrepresented, especially in key jobs.



This percent remained steady 2016-2018;

27%

of new hires

in 2018 were female

Women accounted for only **8% of key jobs**, which according to CEWD includes engineers, plant operators, technicians and lineworkers.



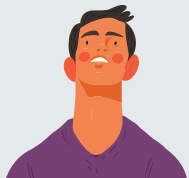
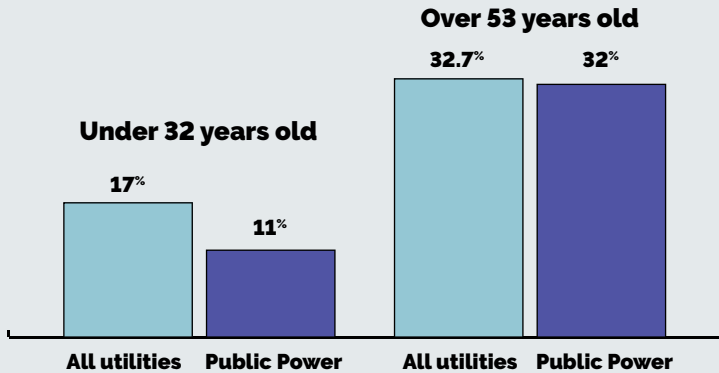
SOURCES:

1. *Gaps in the Energy Workforce 2019 Survey Report*, Center for Energy Workforce Development

Public power has a smaller share of younger workers than the industry overall.



In 2018:



Public power's share of workers under 32

was half

the proportion of cooperative workers under 32

Across the US Workforce



23.3% of workers are 55 or older,

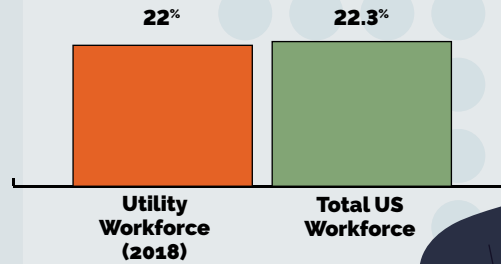
35% are under 35



Median age of all workers in the U.S.:

42.2

Attrition outpaces recruitment among non-white workers.



The proportion is down from

26% in 2016.

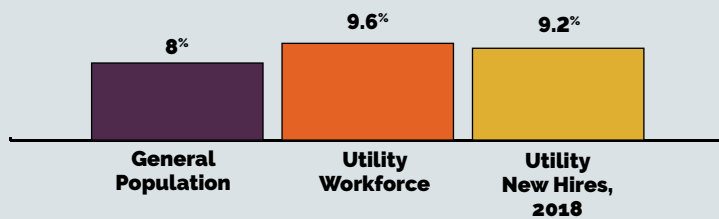


27% of all utility hires in 2018 were minorities

35% of all non-retirement attrition for workers who left within the first 5 years was from minorities

28% of minority hires in 2018 were engineers

Veterans are slightly more represented, although decreasing



In 2016, veterans accounted for

11%

of the utility workforce.

2. Labor Force Characteristics from the Current Population Survey, 2018, US Bureau of Labor Statistics





VIRTUAL RECRUITING, REAL WORK:

HIRING UTILITY EMPLOYEES IN THE COVID-19 ERA

BY BETSY LOEFF, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Unlike other parts of the economy, the electric utility sector wasn't shut down by the pandemic, and hiring activities didn't take a dive. Jennifer Rockwood, managing director at the human resources consultancy Russell Reynolds, said her book of business is up 15% year over year.

What changed, according to utility recruiters, is how interviews, technical assessments, and recruiting happen.



Changing up interviewing

Imagine hiring someone you've never met in person. "If I proposed that to clients a year ago, they'd probably have thought I was crazy," Rockwood said. But, as head of her firm's power and utilities practice, she's now seeing her clients hire people they've never met face to face. Many other companies are doing the same. It's the virtual reality of recruiting and hiring in the COVID-19 age.

"Face-to-face interviews are increasingly being replaced with virtual interviews," said Carl Mycoff, founder and managing director of Mycoff Frey Partners, a firm that supplies recruiting services and temporary personnel to the power sector.

He reported that his team recently completed two executive searches where candidates had no in-person interviews at all. Rockwood has seen the same. In other instances, initial interviews might be conducted online through a video platform like Microsoft Teams or Zoom, and then utilities employ some creative ways to enable face-to-face interaction.

"We have one executive search happening in a somewhat rural area, and one board member is hosting interviews at his farm," Mycoff said. "We're doing the interviews outside so we can use social distancing and conduct meetings without masks." This particular search is for a chief executive, and Mycoff noted that "the interaction between the board and the CEO was vital to the decision-making. There's a certain chemistry that happens or doesn't happen in an interview that can drive a decision."

For similar reasons, Rockwood said some of her candidates have had interviews that included walks in a park or meetings at an outdoor café — tactics now employed as a way to shed masks and see the whole candidate live. As Mycoff said, "Masks make interviewing difficult in two ways. It's more difficult to hear questions and answers, and you can't see facial expressions. It's difficult to read people."

Hiring professionals are well aware of the shortcomings virtual interviews present.

Among those drawbacks are the uninvited "guest appearances," said Rockwood. Kids, cats, dogs, delivery people, "power going out. All sorts of things happen," she explained. She also said that people are getting used to the disruptions and generally shrug them off with a smile.

Here's something that doesn't make interviewers smile: bad dressing. On Zoom, no one can tell if you're wearing trousers, but they can see if you're wearing a sweatshirt, as one candidate did in an interview for an executive position. "I get it: They're working from home, but it's still a job interview," she said, reminding that appropriate attire is still necessary.

There are some positives to virtual interviews. Ease is one plus, and three out of the four experts in this story mentioned that it's now easier to get interviews coordinated. "It's easier to schedule people," said Tammie Krumm, director of human resources at Missouri River Energy Services. Rockwood agreed, particularly concerning the C-level and upper-management people she places. "If you're flying someone in for the interview, you're going to try and arrange multiple meetings for the day to make good use of the candidate's time while traveling," she said. "The fact that we can do these interviews virtually and not require traveling ... I honestly could see that being more of a norm going forward."

New challenges

Other aspects of online recruiting and interviewing present more concerning issues and challenges. One is the lack of one-on-one interaction, said Krumm. “You don’t get the handshake. You miss some of the nonverbal cues and body language,” she explained.

Another downside: Virtual interviews take away a utility’s ability to see how job candidates fit into the environment in which they’ll work. “We have outside line workers, we have plant operations, we have schedulers,” said Krumm, and many of these positions require the ability to work with specific technology. “It’s important to be able to bring somebody in and walk them through the area to get their take and see their comfort level with what’s going on,” she added.

Tracy Reibold, vice president of human resources and administrative services for American Municipal Power, Inc., agrees, but her organization has chosen not to bring technical people in before hiring them. “Sometimes the résumés and the experience speak for themselves. We haven’t had anything detrimental happen because of virtual interviews,” she said.

However, Reibold does see one problem with online video conferencing tools, particularly when hiring for craft positions. She said sometimes a little extra coaching might be needed because, often, people who run power plants have less experience using something like Microsoft Teams than someone who uses it for meetings day-to-day. “Our recruiter will get on-line with someone 20 minutes early and work through any technology issues they may have. He’ll help people get set up and comfortable for the virtual interview,” she explained.

“Sometimes the résumés and the experience speak for themselves. We haven’t had anything detrimental happen because of virtual interviews”

TRACY REIBOLD

VICE PRESIDENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES
AMERICAN MUNICIPAL POWER



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“We’re having a better response on getting the paperwork back in a timely manner because people don’t need to sit down and fill out paper, then scan it and send it back to us. We’re getting real-time acknowledgements.”

TAMMIE KRUMM

DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES
MISSOURI RIVER ENERGY SERVICES



Virtual interviews also eliminate the candidate's ability to evaluate the potential work environment and, in some cases, even a different town where that candidate might need to live. That was a problem for two midlevel managers Mycoff saw recruited, interviewed and hired virtually. "Because of the difficulty with relocation during the pandemic, these people were working from home after getting hired," he recalled. "When it came time to physically relocate, the people quit. Our clients had them on payroll working from home for three months and then lost them."

Less paper, more efficiencies

One nice surprise for some human resources professionals was the process improvements born from pandemic workarounds.

Both AMP and MRES closed corporate offices but kept people working nonstop. Both organizations still have many employees working remotely.

"When you're in the office, you can make a copy or grab a file," Krumm said. "Many processes now need to be converted so you don't need to scan 85 sheets of paper" for a personnel file or new employee orientation.

AMP was already in the process of making that conversion, said Reibold. The organization had started streamlining new-hire paperwork and found it relatively easy to accelerate the process.

"We put in place DocuSign, and we're using electronic signatures," she said. "We're having a better response on getting the paperwork back in a timely manner because people don't need to sit down and fill out paper, then scan it and send it back to us. We're getting real-time acknowledgements on things."

AMP had also started scanning personnel files in an effort to convert them to digital assets, and people hired in the past few months no longer have a physical personnel file. "We are storing those files electronically, and it's much more efficient. If we're working virtually from another location, we can access information more readily," Reibold said.

"You're not creating all of this paper, making copies and putting binders together," said Krumm. This applies to both personnel files and electronic training or onboarding, which MRES has put in place. "Across the board, there are process improvements."

Expanded options

Even the process of attracting applicants has seen some changes that have worked surprisingly well. "Our recruiter has explored hiring options," said Reibold, who referenced indeed.com as one recently added way the organization looks for talent. "He now has the ability to do more headhunting though electronic platforms."

In addition, AMP has found virtual job fairs at colleges to be a new talent-scouting venue. "We try to have a strong presence at those job fairs because of our location in Columbus, Ohio," she said, adding that both nearby Ohio



State and the University of Cincinnati have strong engineering programs. Reibold said that both schools recently held virtual job fairs.

At these fairs, students could sign up for 10-minute interviews with representatives from the attending organizations. AMP brought two representatives — an engineer and an environmental expert — along with their recruiter. All three kept busy. "They each received about 75 résumés," Reibold said. AMP generally finds its interns and entry-level workers through college job fairs. "To be able to make this shift and still generate such a high level of interest, that's great," she added.

Although virtual processes have some drawbacks, they also have surprising advantages. Clearly, recruiters, students and other job candidates have quickly gotten comfortable with the switch to virtual options, something Rockwood called unexpected. It's also, she said, "a testament to human flexibility."

QUIZ: How Attractive is Your Utility?

Utilities might not be thought of as employers of choice at first, but they certainly have many of the common factors that employees value. Here are a few questions to get you thinking about how you present yourself to prospective (and current) employees, and where you might have areas to improve your odds of landing — and keeping — a pool of employees with the right fit for you. Choose the response that sounds the closest to you.



QUIZ: HOW ATTRACTIVE IS YOUR UTILITY?

How does your compensation compare to other similar employers in your area?

- a** People could probably make more elsewhere, but a job is more than salary
- b** We're on par with utilities in our region, I think
- c** We have competitive salaries and we have a process to regularly benchmark them against utilities and other area employers

How do prospective employees know about you?

- a** Everyone in the area knows us, because they get their monthly electric bill from us
- b** We usually have a booth at job fairs and maintain contact with local recruiters and school counselors
- c** We have an active role in a variety of community activities and have relationships with local schools and businesses to support a robust talent pipeline — plus, we allow shadowing and have interns

How does your utility share news about staff or recognize employee achievements?

- a** We send emails and have a bulletin board
- b** We acknowledge major milestones and changes in all staff meetings and events
- c** All of the above and we give employees a gift or bonus appropriate for the occasion

How is diversity recognized within your utility?

- a** Our town isn't very diverse, so neither is our staff
- b** We are working to make our employees more reflective of the communities we serve
- c** We recognize and celebrate a variety of occasions that promote different cultures, our employees have formed affinity groups and we invite training and other opportunities for all staff to learn diverse perspectives

What kind of flexibility do employees have in setting their schedules or where they can work?

- a** Everyone reports to the office or field site during regular business hours or is on call for emergencies
- b** Some employees can telework or set an alternative schedule depending on their role; individuals usually work it out with their supervisor and use is limited
- c** Employees take advantage of a defined telework policy and process for requesting alternate schedules; employees don't feel penalized for using these opportunities

How open to change is your utility? Do you try out new technologies and ideas?

- a** We update processes and procedures to stay in compliance
- b** We follow industry trends with interest and have tried out some new programs when it seems like there is customer interest or the opportunity arises
- c** We regularly look at customer and employee feedback and discuss ideas for improvement; we have piloted or deployed technologies such as predictive analytics and drones

QUIZ: HOW ATTRACTIVE IS YOUR UTILITY?

How do employees know about your commitment to safety?

- a** We share our annual statistics and have posters up about safety
- b** We share a safety tip in daily stand-up meetings and in emails
- c** We encourage employees to raise potential concerns or minor issues as a way to discuss and prevent incidents

What community partners do employees work with as part of their jobs?

- a** Only senior management interacts with other municipal departments and some other organizations
- b** In addition to building relationships with key accounts, some employees work a booth at community fairs or provide demonstrations to schools
- c** Employees participate in relevant cross-industry projects and research with other city departments, local colleges, or economic development teams

How does your utility give back to its community, and how are employees involved in these activities?

- a** We provide payments to the city and provide free or reduced cost services
- b** We have an annual day of service and employees participate in a holiday parade
- c** Employees are involved in selecting which community organizations to support, we regularly volunteer as a group, and we host events or activities for customers

Scoring:

Give yourself 1 point for each **a** selected; 2 points for each **b**, and 3 for each **c**.

● SCORE: 9 – 13

You've got some work to do

You might be content with the employees you have; but they likely don't know it and your utility doesn't show it. While some things, such as raising compensation or giving bonuses, might be out of your direct control, you might consider implementing some low-cost practices to show your appreciation and share what your utility cares about most.

● SCORE: 14 – 21

You've got a light hold on employees

You are likely putting in some work to make your utility a good place to work — bravo! You know that having a good employee isn't just about recruiting well, but also putting in the effort to make sure your workplace stays positive. Even if your employees know your utility is a good place to work — do others know it? Look at how you talk about working at the utility and share your strengths — whether it's how you care for staff or the array of cool projects you do.

● SCORE: 22-27

Have any openings?

You put active effort into making your employees feel valued and showcasing your company values. Your employees are community ambassadors for your utility and their passion shines. But don't just let them speak for you — make sure you tout all the ways your utility is a great place to work, even when you aren't hiring.

FROM THE FRONTLINE TO THE FRONT DESK:

KEEPING UTILITY WORKERS SAFE
DURING THE PANDEMIC

BY JIM PATERSON, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Whether performing critical field repairs, keeping a generating plant running, or interacting with customers, public power utility workers didn't miss a beat in getting their jobs done amid the pandemic. Still, utility workers faced challenges in adjusting work routines to a "new normal" and in keeping up with the latest safety precautions. Utilities tapped into existing emergency plans, relied on government and industry information, and quickly formed teams to put together procedures for this array of challenges.



HEALTH AS PART OF SAFETY

Individual public power utilities often had to deal with new and wide-ranging issues related to the coronavirus on the fly, but they built solutions off a foundation of making employee health a priority.

“We’ve had such a strong culture of employee safety for a long time, so our employees responded very well to the changes due to the pandemic,” said Dave Koster, general manager at Holland Board of Public Works, which serves a community of about 75,000 people along the fast-growing southwest coast of Lake Michigan.

“Workers know to wear safety glasses or a hard hat, and now a mask and other requirements to mitigate these risks are included,” he said.

“That made it easier, but there were nonetheless a lot of considerations to make certain everyone stayed healthy,” added Koster.

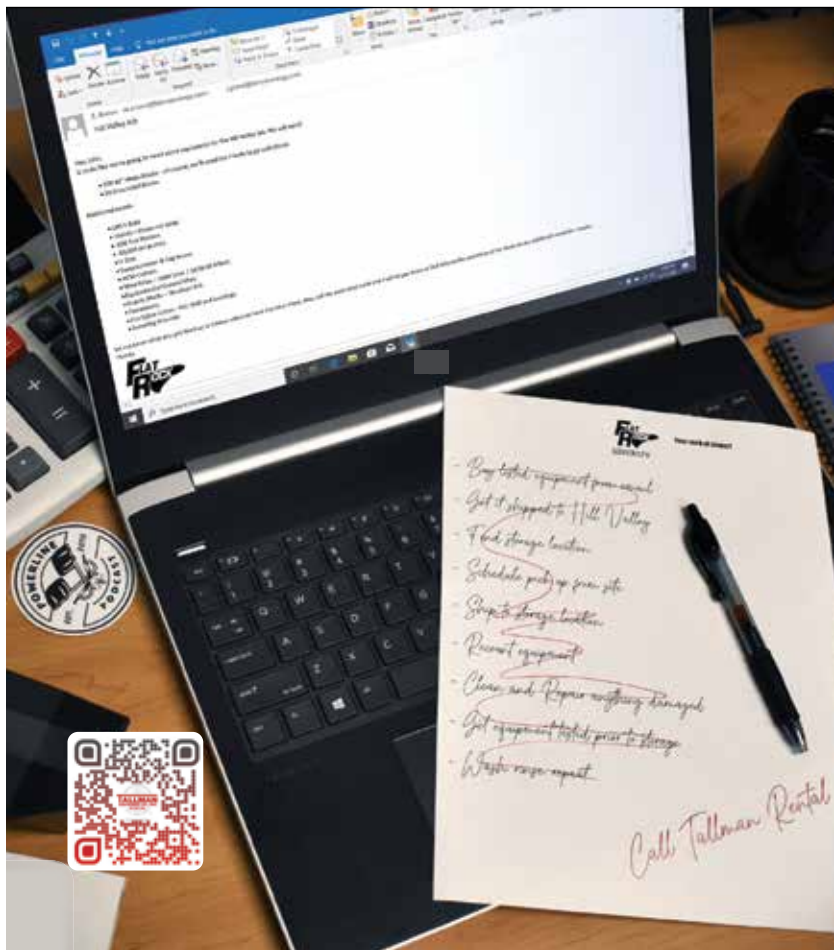
Along with messages about safety, HBPW benefited from a thorough continuity of operations plan and, by chance, an organizational structure change that late last year had given Business Services Director Becky Lehman new responsibility for human resources, facilities, technology and regulatory issues.

Koster said that also made handling the diverse issues that arose during the pandemic more efficient.

“Nothing could completely prepare you for this. We were thinking our continuity of operations plan would be responsive to a fire or tornado, but the planning and structural things we did in advance of the pandemic paid off for our organization,” Koster said.

The Fayetteville Public Works Commission in North Carolina also found that proactive measures helped, particularly a staff health professional with key links to state and county health officials.

“This provided us with a direct pipeline to those who were in the know so we could have the most up-to-date information for planning,” said David W. Trego, CEO and general manager.



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“Right off the bat, we realized we needed to give employees good, accurate information”

DAVE KOSTER

GENERAL MANAGER

HOLLAND BOARD OF PUBLIC WORKS

ADDED PROTECTION

As concern about the pandemic rose in the community and nationwide, and it became more challenging to find personal protective equipment for workers, Koster relied on support from the American Public Power Association and others for sufficient resources.

Trego said the FPWC acted quickly when concern about the pandemic rose — including buying personal protective equipment right away, before there was a rush to acquire it. The utility also took measures to ensure worker safety, including installing barriers in high-traffic areas, such as FPWC’s warehouse.

Fayetteville PWC officials also staggered shifts, purchased and installed hands-free temperature-check equipment, implemented a mandatory mask policy, and required workers to complete a health questionnaire from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention each day on the job. FPWC also sequestered key employees at water, wastewater and power plant operations.

“We rented recreational vehicles for them to basically live in when they were not working and arranged for meal service and other amenities,” Trego said. “We also made sure that employees who were reporting to normal work

locations had all of the protective equipment they needed.”

The HBPW had essential workers work in shifts and configured work in the field as much as possible to create pods of workers and to avoid unnecessary contact. Most other employees moved to working at home, including customer service personnel, who were set up with remote access to the phone system. The utility planned for sequestration of some employees at its power plant and other key locations, though it didn’t become necessary to implement that plan.

A guide from the Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council — a group comprised of leadership from utilities and other organizations key to the industry, including APPA — noted that sequestration is a decision that requires careful study and “is the most resource- and cost-intensive option to implement.”

“Our workforce is the foundation for everything we do,” the *Assessing and Mitigating the Novel Coronavirus* guide from the ESCC notes. “The health and safety of our employees, contractors, and customers is a paramount consideration, shaping every decision we make.”

The guide offers a set of circumstances or “triggers” to determine if and when sequestration is the best option, noting that “sequestration presents additional challenges to employees and their families at a time when stress and uncertainty already are running high.”

For utilities, safety measures for workers needed to extend beyond utility facilities.

“We had to be concerned about safety on both sides,” Lehman said. “While we knew our workers were being safe, we had to allow for other environments and other people’s susceptibility.”

HBPW developed procedures for essential service calls, including the use of familiar safety measures such as 6-foot distancing, masks, hand sanitizing and temperature checks of workers, as well as health screening for the customer premises that workers were entering.

INFORMATION FLOW

The ESCC guide asserts that “maintaining frequent and transparent communications with employees and contractors is imperative throughout a pandemic.”

Both utilities found employees were extremely cooperative in the new work environment, and Koster said a key was providing them with reliable information. He sent out a weekly newsletter with updates, and the utility continually updated its website.

“Right off the bat, we realized we needed to give employees good, accurate information,” he said, noting that a variety of sources were used.

In addition to the comprehensive guide from the ESCC, which offers detailed instructions about everything from safe procedures for visiting customers, how to manage a control center, and considerations for mutual aid, utilities turned to trusted resources for information to share.

The ESCC guide pointed to three coronavirus-related resources from the CDC:

- “Interim Guidance for Business and Employers”

- “Cleaning and Disinfection Recommendations”
- “Implementing Safety Practices for Critical Infrastructure Workers Who May Have Had Exposure to a Person with Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19”

Lehman said she relied on the CDC for consistent national data and general COVID-19 information, coordinated with other Michigan public power providers through weekly calls and tapped into resources from the utility’s labor attorney to help interpret shifting regulations. Michigan’s governor issued more than 180 executive orders that required diligence, she said.

Koster noted that the state Occupational Safety and Health Administration also provided helpful guidelines to plug into the utility’s protocols.

Trego similarly relied on state regulations.

“In North Carolina, the governor implemented a multiphase transition. While FPWC, like other APPA members, did not have to follow these guidelines because we are an essential service, we used the phases as guidance for our own transition,” he said. “We realized that as our customers transitioned, their needs would change, and we would need to react to provide the proper level of customer service.”

Trade organizations such as APPA were also helpful with guidance and locating personal protective equipment, and a regional economic organization excelled at coordinating supplies of materials in the Holland region, Koster said. That group even worked with breweries that were transitioning to making sanitizing supplies and helped businesses find paycheck protection support or loans under the CARES Act, the federal pandemic response legislation.

Both utilities’ existing structures for mutual aid were beneficial, providing guidance on ways to provide or seek help if the pandemic threatened operations. But they also had to consider how to outfit crews if another emergency struck and they were needed in a region where virus cases were peaking.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As the pandemic wore on and additional information about risks and ways to stay safe became available, both utilities began to change strategies.

The potential for infection or quarantine measures internally is one of Koster’s concerns. He noted that, on average, for each infected person, 10 others might have to be monitored or quarantined.

“If you had several cases, that would quickly make it very difficult for an organization to function,” he said. “So we, along with other utilities in Michigan, pushed to get our workers prioritized for testing. Multiple days of isolation for employees who may or may not have been infected would be very difficult.”

The two utilities are still providing information to employees and monitoring their health. HBPW has a detailed eight-level classification system in place that categorizes employees based on their contact with others who might be infected, along with symptoms and test results. The FPWC medical staff and county officials have developed a contact tracing system, which helps

them also determine if other workers might be at risk.

At the height of the concern for FPWC in its region, 75% of its workforce was reporting from or working from home, but by mid-September, only about one-third was working remotely. A mandatory mask order was still in place, as were staggered shifts. Walk-in customer service was not open.

“We’ve transitioned many employees to reporting to their normal workplace, but it’s based upon the needs of our business and our customers,” Trego said.

As of mid-September, FPWC reported only a few cases out of its 600-person workforce, and Koster indicated that only one of HBPW’s 180 workers had a confirmed case. Both found that those employees did not contract the virus on the job.

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Retooling employee engagement? Start with the basics

BY AMY RIGNEY-GAY, VICE PRESIDENT, HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATION, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Employee engagement has been at the forefront these past few months while organizations navigate how to keep lines of communication strong and connections thriving with remote employees and socially distanced crews.

Although our current situation is unique, the foundation for how leaders can encourage high employee engagement remains the same. So, let's revisit some of the basic principles of engagement and how those might look in our new normal.

VALUE

First and foremost, you want to make sure your employees feel valued for their contributions to the organization. I'm going beyond compensation here — that's important, too, but it's not what I want to focus on. From the very start, help new hires feel excited to be with your organization and prepared to further the mission.

Now might be a



RETOOLING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

good time to look at how to make your onboarding process more robust and to give new hires the opportunity to meet colleagues in various departments to understand the broader workings of the organization.

OPPORTUNITY

Especially as people's roles have shifted, this might be a good time to examine whether employees at all levels have opportunities to become involved in projects or initiatives. Working cross-functionally provides opportunities for collaboration and diversity in ideas and perspectives. It also gives employees exposure to other colleagues or teams they might not otherwise work with during the normal course of their job. These opportunities provide a chance for employees to expand their skill set, which could lead to additional responsibilities or promotion within the organization.

PURPOSE

Highly engaged employees are often deeply connected to the mission of the organization. They believe in the higher purpose behind why the organization exists and the services it provides. One way to foster this kind of connection is through establishing organization-wide goals. At the American Public Power Association, we establish association-wide goals every year, which feed into each employee's annual performance review. Since every employee is connected to those broader goals, regardless of position or title, all of us are aligned with APPA's broader purpose.

RECOGNITION

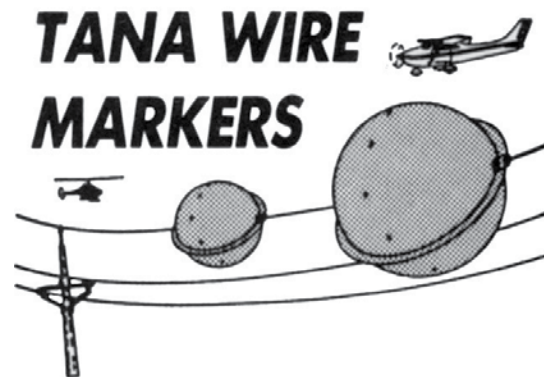
Before you jump to setting up a large, complicated recognition program that costs money, take a step back to focus on the basics. Recognition simply means acknowledging a job well done. Saying a heartfelt "thank you" or "I appreciate you" to an employee can be a powerful way to boost morale and increase engagement. Sending an all-staff email to give kudos to a team that successfully pulled off a major project or reached an important milestone is an easy, no-cost thing to do. Having an employee recognized in a public forum by one of the organization's leaders can be even more impactful. But don't stop there — recognition can come from anyone internally, or it can come externally from customers or vendors. These small steps can develop a sense of pride and belonging at your organization.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

In the workplace, connecting with our colleagues on a personal level is another important piece of employee engagement. In pre-pandemic times, this was easily done through an all-staff lunch, a happy hour, the annual holiday party, or spending time with colleagues at a conference. It's tough for us to get together these days, so we have to get creative about how to encourage human connection. While nothing replaces gathering in person, events such as virtual happy hours are an easy way to "see" and catch up with each other, and you can make them fun with quizzes, games, and prizes. You can also use the tools you have, such as Teams

or Slack, to pose fun questions for employees or to share ideas or photos. These small gestures let employees show a bit of their personal side and remind them that we're thinking about them. I've learned more about my colleagues these past few months than I otherwise would have through those fun posts and games, and we have enjoyed seeing each other's kids pop into the screen on a Zoom happy hour gathering.

Your human resources team is not the sole source for employee engagement. Leaders must keep employee engagement top of mind and play an active role in it, because increased employee engagement is good for both your people and your business. Benefits include increased productivity, employee retention, and customer satisfaction. You can start today by showing your appreciation for your team.



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A **SMART** Approach to Continuous Improvement

BY **SUSAN PARTAIN**, SENIOR MANAGER, CONTENT STRATEGY, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Bristol Tennessee Essential Services in northeast Tennessee has little worry in how to retain institutional knowledge about completing everyday work.

That's because BTES has a comprehensive online program that tracks all the public power utility's operating procedures and process improvements, called System Management and Resource Training, or SMART. All employees access the system to review specific processes related to their job — and some processes that aren't as directly related to their job — on a quarterly basis.

Nearly 250 processes are detailed in the system — everything from how to answer the main telephone line to how to set a power pole. Each employee is expected to log into SMART on each quarter, run through a step-by-step presentation of a process and then take a 20-question test on each process assigned to them. Employees must get a perfect score to pass the assessment, and they retake the test until they do.

Leslie Blevins, public relations and communications manager at BTES, said that the public power utility developed the system to quickly and effectively train new employees and keep existing employees updated on process changes. Before having a system to track all these processes, which BTES first developed more than 10 years ago, Blevins said the utility relied on employees and supervisors to pass along information to new

hires or other colleagues. Training employees on how to perform tasks, such as handling the cash register, would take months. Now, said Blevins, training on such a system might take only one day.

"Enabling employees to do their jobs at a very high level and to engage in productive work respects the time and talent of our workforce," said Mike Browder, chief executive officer at BTES. "Employees see it as an opportunity to improve, and an opportunity to make sure we are doing things to the best of our ability."

The system is employee-managed, noted Browder, in that employees write the processes, which are then reviewed by the entire department to ensure robust input. Employees can also look at every process to see if there are improvements that can be made and to suggest alternatives or efficiencies. Browder said changes range from small efficiencies or adjustments to how emails should be handled to a complete revision of a process when new technology or software is implemented.

"As an employee, you have buy-in on how future employees are trained," noted Blevins. "You want them to know how to do their job right and do it effective and quickly."

Having an online-based system proved beneficial as BTES employees transitioned to remote work. At the end of September, Blevins said that about half of the utility's employees were still working remotely. BTES worked with a vendor to ensure that employees could access the system from mobile devices and other

attempts it takes for employees to pass the tests to how effective employees are at the process after the tests.

The SMART system also plays a key role in the utility's continuous improvement process. Each week, BTES looks at all the ways and reasons that customers contacted the utility — whether in person, over the phone, or via one of its digital platforms — and turns that into a discussion about the top five opportunities for improvement.

"We took their program for teaching their employees how to make hamburgers and French fries and implemented it to teach our employees how to answer customer questions and provide reliable services."

MIKE BROWDER

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
BTES

non-networked devices. Blevins also pointed to how the SMART system allows for cross-training, which has helped employees jump in as needed to help with tasks outside of their regular jobs and balance the workload.

The system isn't just for training and documentation — it is also a source of key business intelligence. Senior leaders and supervisors can evaluate the effectiveness of the learning and development system, including how long it takes for employees to complete the tests to how many

Blevins gave an example of if customers contacted the utility because they didn't know the balance of their bill, then the utility explores why the customers had to reach out to receive that information, and where there might be gaps in how customers learn about specific programs or ways to access utility information.

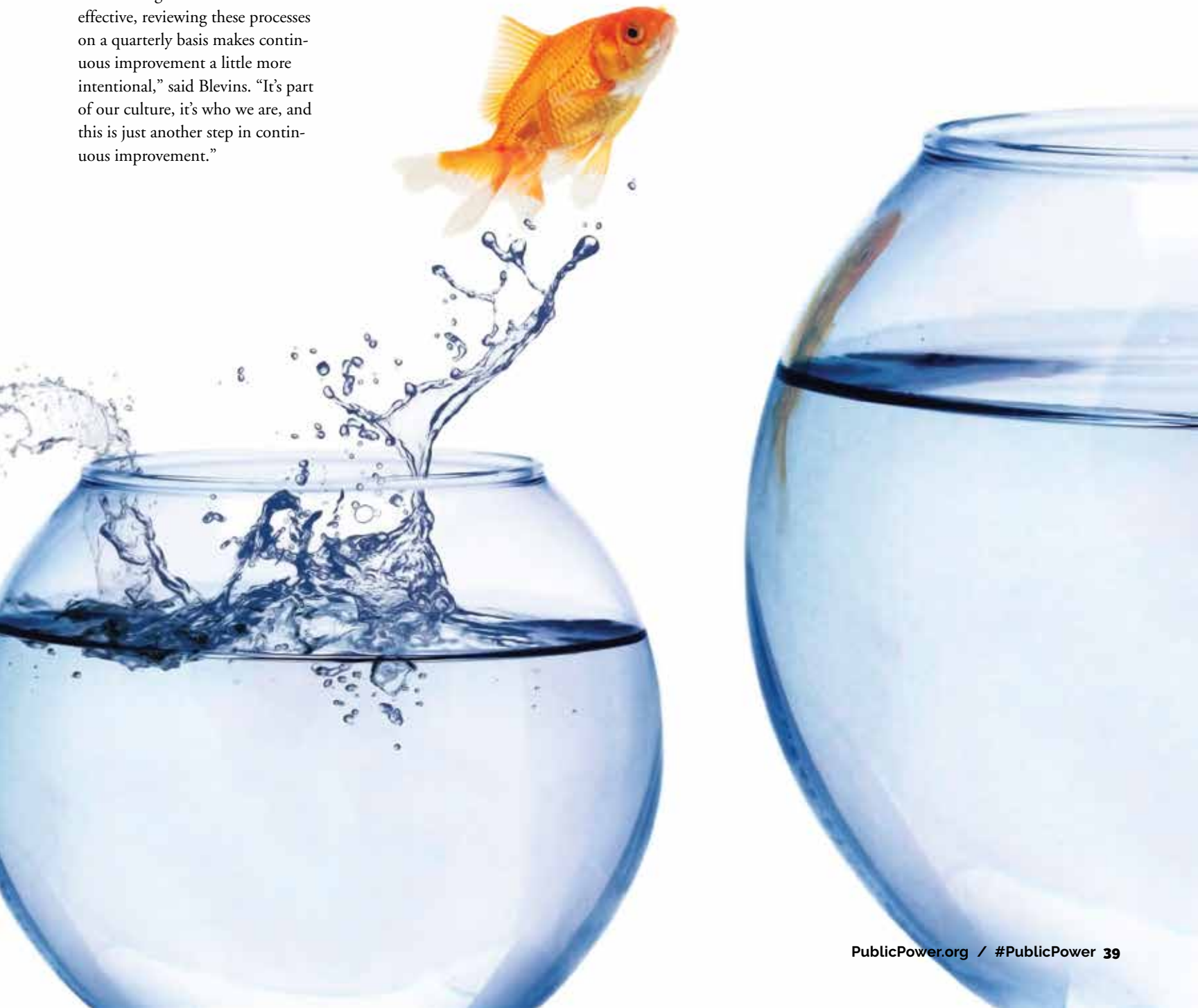
"It is our opportunity to look at the reasons our customers called, and then make process changes based on that feedback ... and those process changes go directly into SMART," said Blevins.

A SMART APPROACH TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Blevins credited the SMART system as a key reason BTES earned the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for performance excellence in 2017. BTES has been engaged in the Baldrige program since 1993, and Blevins said that the approach informs every aspect of how BTES operates.

“And while some of that happens naturally, in doing our jobs and wanting to be better and more effective, reviewing these processes on a quarterly basis makes continuous improvement a little more intentional,” said Blevins. “It’s part of our culture, it’s who we are, and this is just another step in continuous improvement.”

BTES worked closely with a previous Baldrige winner, a local fast food restaurant called Pal’s Sudden Service, to develop this program. “We took their program for teaching their employees how to make hamburgers and French fries and implemented it to teach our employees how to answer customer questions and provide reliable services,” remarked Browder.



What do public power workers earn?

According to responses in our 2020 Public Power Salary Survey...

18 of 27

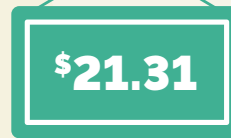
management positions



have median salaries of

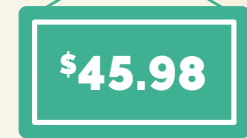
**\$100,000
or more**

The median hourly wage for
24 non-management positions
ranged from



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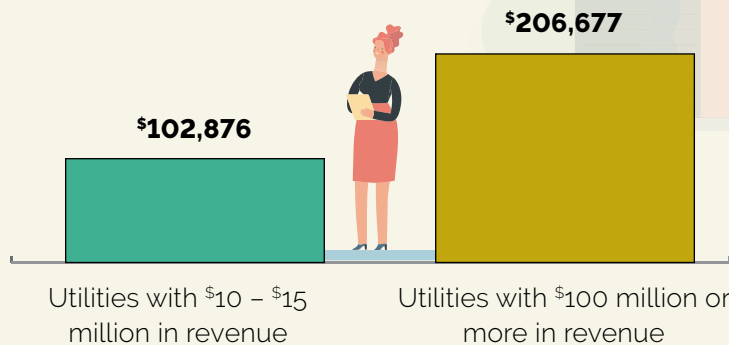
to



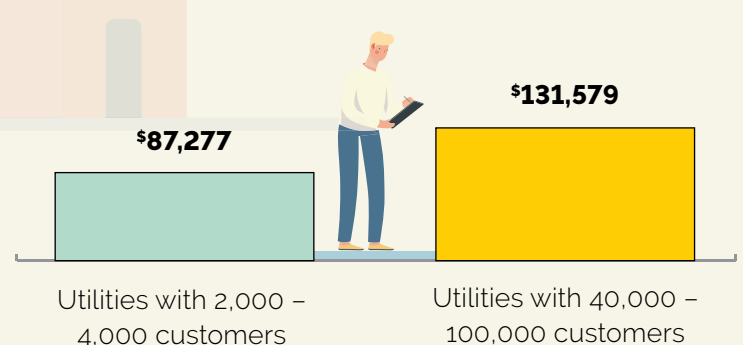
PLANT SHIFT
SUPERVISOR

Public power employees working at utilities with higher revenue and that serve more customers make more, on average, than workers at smaller utilities.

Median Pay,
Chief Financial Officer



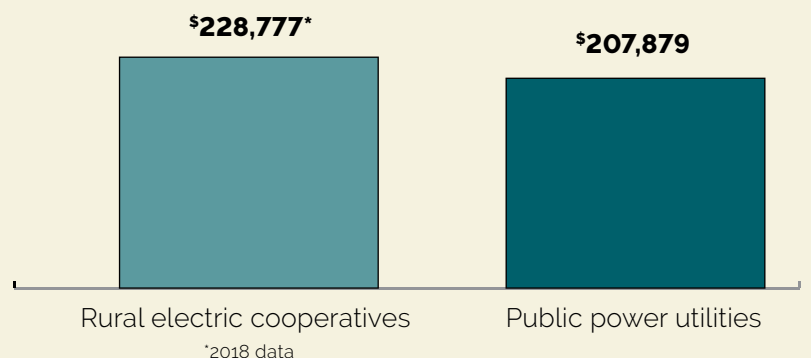
Median Pay,
Line/Line Division Superintendent



Although the public power workforce has a variety of good paying jobs, public power employees still make less, on average, than their counterparts in utilities with different ownership models.



Median annual compensation, top-level executive,
utility serving 20,000-40,000 customers



*2018 data

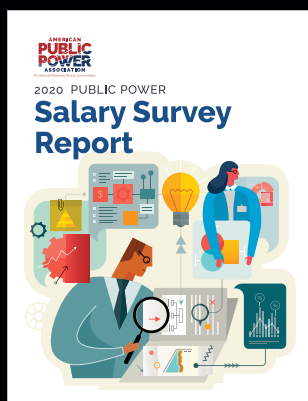


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