



Bye-bye, baby boomers. Will the last experienced person in the water and wastewater industry please turn out the lights when leaving? From a human capital standpoint, the state of the water and wastewater industry is not good. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly one-fifth (19.2%) of workers are within five to seven years of retirement. In addition to the high price of doing business, the water and waste industry is facing another kind of crisis—much of its workforce is nearing retirement age.

By Dana Borowka

Overcoming the “Brain Drain”

Strategies for finding and retaining new talent as experienced water/wastewater professionals reach retirement age

Unfortunately, over the years, little effort has been made to attract young, fresh talent to replace the aging workforce. This is more than a decrease in head count; it is a loss of know-how. The industry is at risk of losing crucial intellectual capital.

By the Numbers

Ten years ago, McKinsey & Co. declared that better employee talent is worth fighting for, and the news quickly spread from the boardroom bunkers to the cubicle trenches. The reasons for the coming talent wars were demographics and the retirement of the baby boom generation. The battle cry was not only to improve hiring practices, but to work harder to retain the best employees.

While the U.S. workforce grew by 54% from 1980 to 2000, it is only expected to grow by 3% between 2000 and 2020. On top of that, the percentage of the U.S. workforce with college degrees rose by 43% during the 1980s and 1990s; over the next 20 years, this group will grow only 7%. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 60% of the jobs in the 21st century will require skills possessed by only 20% of the talent pool.

Winning the Talent War

Here are some recommendations to help tackle the brain drain issue.

First, during the past decades, companies have proven that you cannot win the talent wars just by spending more money. When it comes to finding and keeping employees, pay is secondary for top talent. But if a company builds up an outstanding reputation, people will line up to work for that organization. For the water and wastewater industry, this will involve a degree of investment in branding efforts and workplace changes that will appeal to the younger Generation Y.

One of the most important issues for reputation will be to promote a cause. The 2008 Adecco USA Workplace Insight survey found that 69% of Generation Y members wanted the company they worked for to be more environmentally conscious. That demographic was even willing to sacrifice, on average, 6.2% of their salary to work for an environmentally friendly company—more than double the amount any other generation of workers would be willing to give up. This is clearly an issue that would motivate top young talent eager to work for an industry that could make a significant environmental contribution.

An equally significant issue is the transfer of knowledge from the seasoned industry professionals to new employees. It is crucial that the mentoring relationships be managed properly so that both sides will feel comfortable and work together effectively. The big question is, “How do we get individuals who know technical operations, equipment and field needs to share the ‘tribal knowledge’ that they have acquired over decades of being on the job?”

One way is to help them understand how to mentor and coach the new hires. For example, companies can offer incentives that can supplement their retirement incomes in exchange for coaching the newbies. A train-the-trainer program is an essential first step so industry veterans can properly transfer some of that valuable information in their heads. Because effective mentoring and cooperation is so crucial to the impending transfer of knowledge, personality assessments will be vital in matching the right workers to the right tasks and team members.

In my book *Cracking the Personality Code*, I discuss how using an in-depth work style and personality assessment during the hiring process and for current staff allows the employer to manage more effectively. This data can reduce the learning curve for the influx of new hires necessary in the water and wastewater industry.

In addition, personality assessments are vital in building mentoring partnerships and teams that will be productive and run smoothly. By understanding how different members of the team work, managers can help guide them to appreciate each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Because so much of the industry-specific knowledge for the water and wastewater industry is in the minds of the impending retirees, organizations must act quickly to effectively capture it.

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Industry Solutions

Overall, managers need to realize that attracting talent, retention and training of employees are interconnected issues that must be considered in tandem with each other. To alleviate this industry problem, action must be taken by the industry as a whole to change the way the issues are perceived. An advisory board on hiring and retention would help the water and wastewater industry share strategies and information to stave off this personnel crisis.

What is not working is the poaching of talent. Ultimately, somebody is going to lose. We need to be creative in working on the supply side of the issue, not the demand side. There is a need for a summit around this issue. The water and wastewater industry is trying to attract the best and the brightest while other industries attempt to do the same. This means working within the industry, local schools, community colleges and universities. There is a need for water and wastewater organizations to convene and discuss local, regional and national strategies.

The water and wastewater industry must stop grumbling over the dismal statistics and take decisive action. Collaboration—led by a national advisory committee on how to attract, hire and retain top talent in the 21st century—will help ensure that action is taken quickly and efficiently.

Time is of the essence and cooperation is the key to a thriving future for the industry. Now is the time to begin discussions on who should be on such a panel, which organizations should sponsor the effort and how soon the discussions can begin. [WWD](#)

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