

By Elisabeth Lisican



Putting the 'Success' in Succession Planning

With at least 70 million baby boomers expected to retire before 2030, according to the Social Security Administration, a significant portion of the water and wastewater workforce will exit the field in the next decade, depleting the pool of experienced professionals. According to the latest W&WD State of the Industry report, the average age of W&WD subscribers is 55.

Advanced technologies and more complex regulatory environments demand a more skilled workforce. The retirement of experienced mentors who can train new personnel further complicates the problem.

The idea of succession planning will be discussed at this year's American Water Works Assn.'s Annual Conference and Exposition (ACE16) June 19 to 22, with a track devoted to Transformational Water Utility Leadership. According to the conference program, effective leadership is absolutely critical to overcoming utility and workforce management obstacles. The session explores a range of issues facing water utility general managers and presents innovative solutions for benchmarking and performance management. It offers the latest techniques and tools utilities are using to recruit and retain quality employees, improve diversity and protect their organizational knowledge continuum.

ACE16 also provides other opportunities for young professionals to optimize their trade show experience. For example, the association offers mentors to young professionals, as well as special events like a scavenger hunt.

In years past, we have cited a lack of awareness of the industry in general as a major reason behind succession planning challenges, but I feel that is changing—the Flint crisis alone brought an unprecedented level of attention to the water industry, and those who connected with passion may decide to become a part of the “cause.” In numerous conference sessions I have attended recently, I have heard about how Millennials desire to be a part of a cause. This is good news for our industry, as clean water for all is very top of mind right now.

Another reason I think the water industry is in good hands for the future is the overwhelming response we received to our call for young professionals nominations to feature in this issue. You submitted so many bright young stars, and while I wish we had the room to feature every single one of them, we profile a selection of them starting on page 34.

The water industry may have its work cut out for it in terms of succession planning, but based on the talent I've seen, it will be a success.

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