

Retention

Recognize, Reward, and Retain Operators

Small systems face high operator turnover, causing utilities to invest vast resources in rehiring and training operators. But, with careful planning, the cycle can be broken. **BY STACEY ISAAC BERAHZER**

MUCH HAS BEEN written about high turnover among water operators. The University of North Carolina Environmental Finance Center decided to go directly to the source, asking more than 300 water operators at small systems in North Carolina about what would make them more satisfied with their current jobs.

OPERATOR SURVEY

The project was part of an EFC grant, awarded by the Southeastern Regional Small Public Water Systems Technical Assistance Center through the US Environmental Protection Agency, to prepare a special training module for governing boards of small drinking water systems to address operator turnover and clarify the relationship between governing boards and operators. The North Carolina Rural Water Association provided outreach services.

The survey consisted of questions about current job satisfaction and how operator recognition could be improved. The survey wasn't distributed randomly, and it involved operators from only one state. However, the results offer insight concerning water operator turnover

and ways to improve job satisfaction. The survey's response rate was about 40 percent.

Aging Workforce. The survey showed a wide distribution for longevity at a particular utility, with 4 percent of operators working at their current utility for less than one year. However, more than 20 percent of respondents had served for 20 yr or more at their current plant.

A significant percentage of operators have been at the same utility for more than 25 yr, which indicates these operators are probably at least 45 yr old. The 13 percent of operators with 25 yr or more of experience represent a concern for employers, because these individuals have the most experience and knowledge, and their retirement could cause important information to be lost. Therefore, questions about knowledge transfer and transition become crucial.

Voluntary Turnover. Organizations with high voluntary turnover rates face additional challenges, making the need for an effective retention program even more important. Most operators leave a job in search of higher pay, more opportunities for advancement, and better benefits.

Job Satisfaction. Respondents were also asked about their level of job satisfaction.

Although responses varied, 84 percent indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs. Only 3 percent said that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Considering the high level of turnover within this profession, these levels of job satisfaction are surprising. However, the discrepancy could be attributable to sample bias, because people happy with their jobs may have been more likely to respond to the survey. Although satisfaction was high overall, 13 percent of those surveyed claimed they were indifferent or simply didn't respond to this particular question.

ORGANIZATIONAL INCENTIVES

The survey also explored ways to help operators gain knowledge and feel appreciated.

Orientation. The first chance to transfer knowledge and establish organizational loyalty among new employees is during orientation. Most operators (60 percent) indicated they had been provided enough background information during employee orientation. This is a positive factor in any profession but particularly important when turnover is high. The results imply that new hires are benefiting



Allowing operators to attend conferences and workshops is one of many ways to help staff gain knowledge and feel appreciated. Here ACE09 attendees watch the pipe-tapping team from Spotsylvania County (Va.) Utilities.

from the experience and knowledge of their predecessors.

Incentives. It's important to understand what, if any, motivation or incentive programs are currently in place. Survey results are encouraging, with more than half of the utilities rewarding their operators financially for achieving new certifications. These financial rewards are usually in the form of a general increase in salary or a one-time bonus. A "consistent and reasonable workload" was the most common incentive identified by operators.

Recognition. In addition to incentive practices, operators were also asked if they thought different groups—management, governing boards, and customers—adequately recognize the value operators provide. For the most part, operators thought management recognized operator value, but governing boards and customers weren't as likely to value operators' work.

Operators indicated there were several nonmonetary ways their contributions could be recognized, including

- flexible work schedules.
- verbal comments about operators' work.

- letters, plaques, certificates of appreciation, and service awards.
- appreciation banquets, cookouts, etc.
- vacation or compensatory time off.
- a pat on the back.
- recognition by the board and mayor.
- vehicles.
- being allowed to attend conferences or workshops.
- local news coverage of operator certifications.

When asked how utilities could better recognize and retain operators, survey respondents mentioned

- higher pay, pay increases with each certification level, and cost-of-living and merit-based increases.
- better benefits.
- approval to attend seminars, workshops, and certification classes, paid for by the utility.
- public acknowledgment.
- training for board members.
- better communication between board and employees.
- hiring more staff sooner.
- a pat on the back.

- becoming more involved in daily operations.

NONOPERATOR SURVEY

In addition to the actual operator survey, EFC also conducted less-formal phone interviews with people experienced in water operator certification and incentive programs.

Water Operators as Professionals. Many of those contacted said water treatment operations should be regarded as a profession with a career path, not simply a job. Suggestions for creating this professional image include providing e-mail accounts for operators, allowing them to exchange information with each other. The city of Raleigh (N.C.) Public Utilities allows operators to make overnight trips to visit other facilities and manufacturers, allowing operators to interact with other utility operators.

Some utilities also provide cell phones to operators. Because operators don't sit at desks for most of their shifts and are often on call, cell phones may be an appropriate "perk" that's related to operator duties. Being seen as a professional also

CASE STUDY—FAYETTEVILLE, N.C.

APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM ENHANCES TRAINING, REDUCES TURNOVER

In 1998, the city of Fayetteville (N.C.) Public Works Commission created an Operator Apprenticeship Program to replace a program that awarded operators with a one-time payment of \$100 for each successfully completed certification level for water treatment and water reclamation.

The utility partnered with the North Carolina Department of Labor and Fayetteville Technical Community College to initiate the 5-yr training program. During the next year, the utility worked with the college to customize math, microbiology, and other content for relevancy to water operations treatment.

Operators were required to earn a grade of C or higher in relevant college-level courses and complete a requisite number of on-the-job-training hours. When operators met these requirements, they were awarded an average \$0.50/hr increase every six mo throughout the 5-yr program. At the end of the program, they were awarded a Journeyman's Certificate from the North Carolina Department of Labor in their respective fields.

Because participating operators were so well-trained and earning wages at the top of their pay scales by the end of the program, the utility changed position title designations from operator I, II, or III to water treatment facility operator.

Before the Apprenticeship Program was established, one operator quit working for the utility about every nine months. During the program's existence between 1998 and 2006, only two operators left the utility. Because the utility can now retain such a highly trained staff, the program is temporarily on hold, with plans to reinstitute it with revised policies based on lessons learned from this experience.

OTHER PROGRAMS

In addition, Fayetteville PWC has initiated other training and retention programs.

Water Quality Teams. Water quality teams consist of four or five dedicated operators who have topped out in their respective pay grades. Although these operators receive no extra compensation, they serve as shift team leaders and have more responsibility in preparing reports. The utility foots the bill for sending water quality team members to training classes. These operators meet monthly to discuss treatment alternatives. The water quality team concept enhances operators' sense of professionalism and organizational commitment.

Job Shadowing Program. To introduce more students to the possibility of a career as a water operator, the utility participates in the Cumberland County school system's job shadowing program. School teachers of students less likely to attend college visit the utility to observe the skills needed by water operators. The teachers can then advise their students about classes they can take to prepare for this career.

Operator Recognition. All utility employees receive recognition for years of service at an annual awards ceremony, as well as extra vacation time and a small savings bond. The utility also recognizes employee achievements in its newsletter.

When a sample of the utility's water was named the state's best-tasting water at the North Carolina AWWA conference, the utility published a group photo of all the operators in the local newspaper. Operators received a copy of the picture, and the plaque for the winning entry is displayed at the water treatment plant.

involves public perception. Some utilities allow their operators to visit career fairs at local schools, which introduces water operations to students as a career option and allows operators to showcase their skills and service to the public.

Award Programs. The Georgia Association of Water Professionals offers the Operator's Meritorious Service and Top Ops awards. In addition, the National Rural Water Association recognizes operators with the Dell Cornell Award, which is presented to individuals who, under difficult personal circumstances, continue to contribute to the association's goals.

Awards can also be presented at the utility level. For example, the town of

Hillsborough, N.C., has an Employee Recognition Award that a supervisor can award to an employee who has shown exceptional effort. The employee receives a \$25 gift certificate to a local store and a certificate of recognition. In Holly Springs, N.C., operators who obtain new licenses are recognized in an internal newsletter.

Merit Pay Incentives. Some utilities reward water operators for high performance with individual pay raises based on an operator's performance evaluation. Based on annual appraisals, this pay-for-performance strategy is used by the city of Rocky Mount, N.C.

It may be difficult for some utilities to find extra money for pay raises.

However, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Utilities has a gain-sharing program that allows operators to receive a portion of saved funds if they can operate the plant for less than was originally budgeted. With this method, money for pay raises is directly offset by money saved in the budget.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Utilities are finding ways to stem the tide of high operator turnover and to combat the effects of massive retirement among Baby Boomers. Operator recognition and incentive programs can pay big dividends in a stable workforce. Perhaps Aristotle foresaw the situation when he said, "Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work." 