

Workforce Strategies

MANAGING TODAY'S STAFFING CRISIS

Rotate Employees to Ease Succession Planning

BY JONATHON SPRAGUE

A water/wastewater utility's success depends on developing competent, flexible employees. The Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District (MSD) Operations Department rotates operations supervisors, engineers, and division managers to effectively prepare them for future promotion opportunities. The result is an internal development program with greater employee retention and effortless succession planning.

A concern in public-sector organizations is the loss of knowledge and skills from employee retirements and turnover. The frequent retirement of aging baby boomers and the turnover of Generation X and millennial employees make succession planning and employee retention a challenge.

A decade ago, more than 50 percent of MSD's employees were eligible for retirement. The utility wanted to retain the knowledge these employees had and attract and develop a diverse workforce that represented its community. MSD rose to the challenge and has improved maintenance output, enhanced customer service, and minimized turnover of new staff.

MSD'S "FLATTENING" STRATEGY

In the early 2000s, MSD was under public pressure to improve efficiency and address privatization concerns. It responded with a reorganization plan that reduced staff and organizational levels, broadened job duties, and cut position titles. This "flattening" strategy laid a foundation that allowed MSD to avert the crisis that could arise from retiring baby boomers and the expertise that would leave with them. The changes also helped attract and retain a diverse workforce.

MSD's strategy played out in three areas: field staff, supervisors and technical staff, and senior management.

Field Staff. MSD's operations department is responsible for wastewater collection and treatment. There are three divisions—collection system, pump stations, and treatment plants. Each has a similar

overall organizational structure, with different skilled trades at the field level.

Collection System Technicians. There are four positions in this division: collection system technicians, team leaders, heavy equipment operators, and bricklayers. The focus here is on collection system technicians. Each technician is a generalist, trained in all areas. This position begins as a three-year internal training program, and every six months, employees progress through trainee levels; all graduate at the same level. All trainees are required to rotate every six to nine months, geographically and within discipline. Generalizing and rotating helps optimize efficiency, and generalizing allows flexibility among crews.

In the collection system, team leaders take the place of traditional foremen. These are working leadership positions, with the additional responsibilities of crew training, safety, and productivity. Because team leaders are expected to have strong technical, leadership, and communications skills, this is a promotable position. The requirements include a college education and specific minimum years of service. MSD prefers supervisors to be promoted from within, and this requirement creates a pool of team leaders with much of the education needed for supervisory positions.

Pump Station Positions. In this division, the positions have been generalized and broadened so only two exist: instrumentation/electrical technicians and pump station technicians.

Instrumentation/electrical technicians are typically hired out of the local

union and require minimal additional training. Pump station technicians are hired into a four-year training program, a combination of on-the-job training and targeted education at a local vocational school. A combination of mechanical and electrical training allows for one technician to handle both trades. Because of these skills and efficiencies, a pump station technician is paid about 10 percent more than the market's stated wage for a typical mechanic. The variety of work and higher pay help attract and retain skilled workers.

Treatment Plant Positions. There are now four field positions in this division as a result of MSD's reorganization: instrumentation/electrical technicians, mechanics, operators, and team leaders. Instrumentation/electrical technicians are hired from the local union and already have the needed skills and training.

Treatment plant mechanics go through a two-year training program, with progressive internal responsibility, and attend training classes at a local vocational school. A treatment plant mechanic can perform any mechanical work needed.

Treatment plant operators are responsible for the plant's 24-7 operation and environmental compliance. MSD partners with a local college that has a water/wastewater operator training program. The utility typically hires operators who graduate from this program and then provides a two-year internal program that helps operator trainees progress to become treatment plant operators. MSD also hires trained operators from the outside, who must complete at least six months of internal training. The broad training and higher pay, with the inclusion of licenses, allow the utility to attract and retain operators.

The team leader position is a promotable position for treatment plant

operators. Team leaders function as shift leaders and technical experts, and they're responsible for training new operators. Again, as for treatment plant operators, the college education requirement ensures there's a pool of applicants who are qualified to move into the supervisory role of team leader.

Supervisors and Technical Staff. As part of MSD's streamlining efforts, most of the engineer positions are generic. The position title is the same across divisions, and advancement from Engineer I, II, or III is automatic. To encourage opportunity and succession planning, voluntary rotation is offered to MSD engineers, usually when vacancies arise. Rotation and advancement also help retain engineers and keep their jobs from getting stale.

About a dozen years ago, MSD faced a mini-crisis. The utility had an opening for a supervisor, but there were no internal candidates who met the educational requirements. Furthermore, the utility's supervisory roles lacked diversity.

To remedy the situation, MSD worked with the local college to create an Applied Management Certificate I and II program. The utility modified the educational requirements of supervisory positions from only an associate degree to an associate degree or the Applied Management Certificate II for its supervisor positions and the Applied Management Certificate I for team leaders and assistant supervisors. This reduced the educational requirement for supervision without lowering the standard. To create a pool of potential future supervisors, the education was required at the team leader level. To equalize opportunity, educational reimbursement was offered to anyone who qualified. Now, after MSD made these changes, all but one supervisor have come from internal promotions.

Senior Management. As a result of MSD's reorganization, the operations department has only two levels of management, with division managers

reporting to the director. This creates uniformity within positions that allows for movement. One of MSD's core beliefs is that managers are promoted for their leadership skills; at the senior management level, technical skills should have been already demonstrated. Because of this, MSD strategically rotates senior management when opportunities arise, allowing a strong manager to learn about and lead different divisions. Rotations create a better pool of candidates for succession planning and less disruption when there are vacancies and retirements.

CRISIS CAN BE AVERTED

In the past 10 years, MSD has gone from an organization with more than 50 percent of its employees eligible for

retirement to an organization in which 55 percent of its employees have less than 10 years of service and only a third are now eligible for retirement.

Flattening the organization through broadening job responsibilities and reducing the number of titles has allowed MSD to manage a wave of retirements. This modified structure allows for rotations, increased job satisfaction, and stronger succession planning. By running its own training programs at the field staff level, the utility continues to attract diverse and qualified candidates. Having fewer positions with broader scopes of work has allowed MSD to be more efficient. This has allowed the utility to pay a competitive salary for these positions, which helps attract and retain talent. 