

Human Capital Improvement Program: Sanford's Vertical Training Plan

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"Succession planning is an area that always seems to need attention, but never really gets properly addressed until it's too late."

- Scott Anaheim, Florida Water and Pollution Control Operators Association president, March 2017

According to "The Smart Grid for Water" by Hill and Symmonds, "Utilities are losing corporate knowledge at an alarming rate. Overall, the utility workforce is aging; nationwide, 22.5 percent of utility workers are at or above the age of 55."

For the water sector, however, the problem is more acute, with 70 percent of states (32 of 46 reporting) indicating that the percentage of water employees at or above the age of 55 is greater than the national utility average. In addition, the overall distribution of utility workers is significantly skewed as compared to the workforce in general, with a larger proportion of the industry moving into retirement age.

This represents a significant challenge for utilities: how to retain and store a generation's worth of knowledge about their systems so that it remains available and easily accessible. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the operation of water systems is a knowledge-based industry that necessitates significant training and experience to be effective. As noted in a recent C.D. Howard report on ensuring public safety:

The first step is to recognize that providing safe drinking water is a knowledge-based activity. This activity cannot be downloaded to the same level of municipal priority as garbage collection and snow removal. Those assigned to provide drinking water must be afforded the training, intellectual support, and compensation that is commensurate with taking responsibility through their actions or inactions for the health of an entire community. Ensuring that operations staff members "know their systems" is a critical facet of the provision of safe drinking water.

The City of Sanford (city) has done an excellent job of maintaining and expanding its water, wastewater, and water reuse infrastructure through a sound capital program. Now, however, it's confronted with the new reality facing many Florida utilities and others nationally—that of a human

kind. The city is gradually losing long-time employees as they reach retirement age and take valuable job skills with them. Moreover, with an improving Florida economy, there is an increasing demand for skilled workers, and often, higher pay is the enticement to leave city employment.

Outside competition for skilled employees resulted in the Sanford Water and Sewer Utilities Dept. (utility) being stunned by the sudden departure of a majority of its billing staff. The utility scrambled and was fortunate to rehire a retired employee and a consultant to temporarily fill this important staffing gap. More recently, a lead wastewater plant operator was critically injured in an automobile accident; he was out for a number of months, which created a knowledge gap at one of the utility's two wastewater treatment plants.

Being a part of city government, the utility has little control over employee wages. The salary scales are set for employees citywide, which has, at times, resulted in utility employees leaving for higher-paying jobs at other utilities or in the private sector. With this limitation in mind, the utility's management decided to develop a training program to help reduce this loss of skilled staff.

The concept of a vertical training plan (plan) was conceived and developed into a formal program for all department staff. This human capital improvement plan (CIP) is intended to be a win-win for the department and employees by training staff to move into higher-level positions when these become available.

The vision is that there will be clearly defined and easily visualized paths for advancement within the department. Existing staff will see how they can advance if they "stay the course" and continue to learn and hone their skills within the utility. The plan will help them because it will provide recommended training needed for advancement—and along with advancement, will come higher pay. The utility wishes to enhance its long-term relationship with its employees by providing the plan.

Interactive Process With Employees: Other Utilities Studied

Utility management wanted an interactive process with employees to develop its plan concept into something formal and workable. The belief was that the plan would be of higher quality if it were developed with direct employee

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input, and later, would have greater and more rapid acceptance among the employees.

Management especially wanted to capture knowledge and input from four very senior management staff members who would be retiring in early 2016. The combined experience of these four was well over 100 years and a consultant was selected who already knew many of the utility employees through previous work. The consultant's scope of work and schedule were developed with the concept of direct employee involvement in mind.

Development of the plan was initiated in early 2016 and completed by the end of September of that year. It consists of three basic elements: career ladder visuals, career ladder narratives, and training requirements. The consultant interviewed a cross section of utility employees during two rounds of interviews. Questions about the type of work they do, the offsite and on-the-job training needed to adequately perform their jobs, and licensing requirements were posed. They were encouraged to provide input about the training they need but is not currently provided, or training that was previously provided but was eliminated during the Great Recession. The consultant reviewed every job description and captured the most essential requirements of them.

The utility was interested in how other Florida utilities approach training and the impending retirement of senior staff. The consultant had prior knowledge of one of these (JEA in Jacksonville), obtained information from the City of Tavares, and reviewed a training plan developed by the City of Tallahassee. From this review, it appears the plan developed for the city is unique, given its broad application for all department employees.

Career Ladder Visuals

After several rounds of employee interviews throughout the utility, reviewing every job

description, and gaining an understanding of the current training situation at the utility, the consultant developed career ladder visuals for review by management and staff. Four of these visuals were prepared, one for each general work area of the utility. The four visuals included:

- ◆ Utility Support Services (Figure 1)
- ◆ Plant Operations (water and wastewater treatment plants)
- ◆ Utility Field Operations (water distribution and wastewater collection)
- ◆ Maintenance (mechanical and electrical maintenance and lift station operations)

These ladders are visuals that clearly show the career paths available to employees who desire to move up within the organization.

For the first time, employees will have visuals to guide them to higher-level positions; they no longer have to study job descriptions and salary schedules and learn from other employees to identify potential next steps for their careers. An unanticipated positive consequence of creating the career path visuals was that it became apparent that these could be used as a tool to attract new employees to the utility. Anyone interested in joining the department could readily see what potentials lay ahead for future promotions and answer the inevitable question from candidates: “How do I move up?”

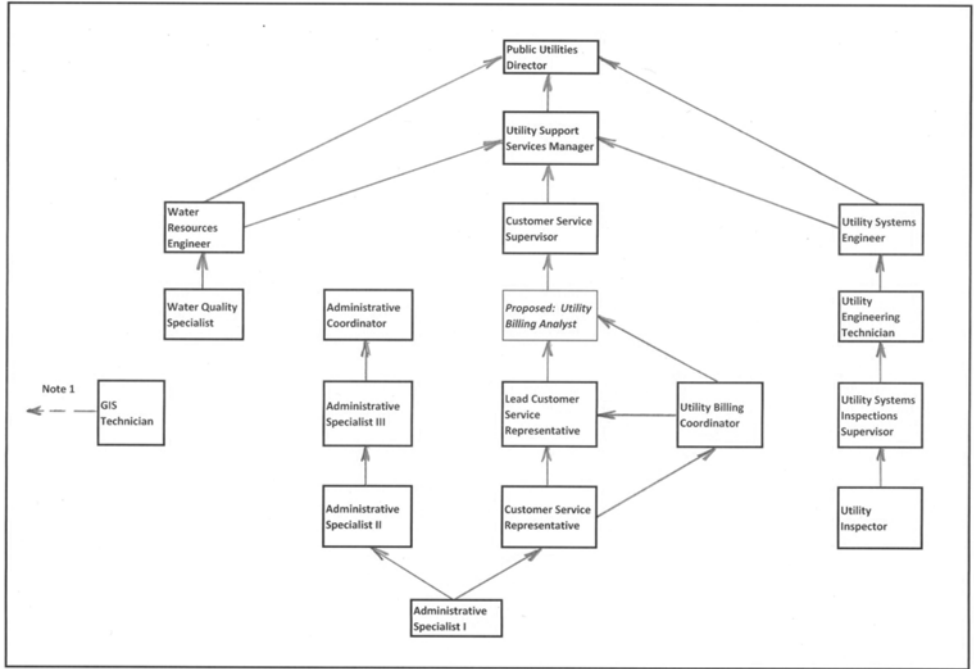
Career Ladder Narratives

In addition to the career ladder visuals, the consultant prepared career ladder narratives that provided additional details. These were based on requirements of the job descriptions of every position. An example for the four administrative positions is shown in Figure 2.

The concept behind the career ladder narratives is to provide a summary of the key requirements contained in the job descriptions so an employee (or outsider) can easily see the requirements to move up to the next position. For example, to move from an administrative specialist II to and administrative specialist III requires additional experience, as well as training in office systems technology and software. The job description for this particular step up also requires Incident Command System training, but in actual practice, this training is required of all new employees within six months of a hire.

The interactive process of developing the plan uncovered a number of discrepancies in the job descriptions. This was viewed as an additional benefit of developing the plan because it resulted in very helpful visuals from both micro and macro perspectives so discrepancies could be seen and eventually corrected.

VERTICAL TRAINING PLAN CAREER LADDERS WITHIN UTILITY SUPPORT SERVICES



Note 1: The GIS Technician has the potential to be included within a future technology support group.

Figure 1. Utility Support Services

Training Courses Identified

The third basic element of the plan is that of training courses. Based on employee interviews, state licensing requirements, job descriptions, valuable input from senior employees, and the more than 40 years of utility management experience of the consultant, courses were researched and recommended for each position and each step within the career ladders. The consultant researched numerous private providers of these courses, but it was ultimately decided to utilize course providers already familiar to the utility, such as Florida Water and Pollution Control Operators Association (FWPCOA), University of Florida/Training, Research, and Education for Environmental Occupations (TREEO), Fred Pryor Seminars, Mitchell Training, etc.

Both online and classroom training were identified because it was felt that, while online training is less expensive, there is value in classroom training because of the networking value to employees. Classroom training was identified within Florida, and in most cases, provided locally (there was, of course, disappointment voiced when no courses were proposed in Las Vegas!).

The consultant proposed a limited number of courses for each position because he realized the limits of both training budget and training time. The courses were reviewed by utility management, and later by a focus group, to assure the most value for the time and money spent.

Spreadsheets were developed that identi-

fied these courses, and they were clearly linked to the career ladder narratives. The combination of the career ladder visuals, career ladder narratives, and career training courses makes it very clear to employees the training that was expected of them to prepare to fill future vacancies. A complete spreadsheet containing both the career ladder narratives and career ladder training is not included here due to its size, but an example is provided as follows:

For an administrative specialist I to prepare to move up to an administrative specialist II calls for the following training:

- ◆ City of Sanford Class: Records Management
- ◆ FWPCOA Class: Utility Customer Relations, Level 1
- ◆ Mitchell Training: Phone Skills and Communications
- ◆ Fred Pryor Seminars: The Outstanding Receptionist: Managing Emotions Under Pressure
- ◆ Asset Management Software Provider: City-Works Training

In a like manner, training courses were identified for every position within the utility. This makes it easy for an employee currently in a particular position to understand the training needed for the next step up on the career ladder. Training is specifically spelled out and closely connected to the career ladder visuals and career ladder narratives. It's emphasized that this training does not substitute for on-the-job training, which was found throughout the utility.

During interviews and later during roll-out of the plan, the need for training was emphasized and will continue.

It's noted that the courses selected were of a traditionally technical nature, such as those required for water and wastewater operator licenses, but also of a nontraditional nature, such as management, customer, and employee relations. Courses such as "Dealing with Difficult Employees" and "The Effective Receptionist" were strategically included. Courses were sought, in many cases, based on the interactive input from employees during the second round of interviews with the employees. An example of this is the fats, oil, and grease (FOG) coordinator who voiced the need for technical drawing training. This was unexpected, but was logical given the fact this employee reviews building plans prior to city permitting to determine the need for and sizing of grease control equipment. A local college (Seminole State College) course in engineering graphics/drawing was located that fulfills that need.

Plan Validation

The plan was developed in a stepwise manner, with employee and utility management

input as the interactive process moved forward. When a draft plan was created, it was presented to a focus group of employees to obtain opinions and feedback. The utility management and consultant presented the draft plan in much the same manner they expected it to be presented to all utility employees. The focus group provided a critique of the presentation method. Overall, the focus group members were very favorable toward the plan and saw the win-win nature of it for employees and the utility.

The group was asked its opinion on how the plan could most effectively be presented to the entire utility staff. Options were discussed and the conclusion was reached that it should be rolled out to small groups, rather than at a meeting of the entire utility staff.

Plan Roll-Out

Following the advice of the focus group, the plan was presented to small groups of employees at their respective work meeting locations. Hard copies of the plan were provided to all employees so they were able to closely follow the presentation, which provided an explanation of the career ladder visuals, career ladder

narratives, and career training courses. Examples of vertical promotions were presented, along with limitations placed on the plan. The career ladder training courses provided only course titles; full descriptions of each course were provided as additional information. Questions and comments were welcomed throughout each presentation.

Limitations of the plan were presented, including training budget limits, the need to perform daily work, continuation of on-the-job training, and no guarantee of job promotion. It was explained that, obviously, the training budget has limits, so priorities will be made. Also obvious is the fact that daily work has to be done, so there will be a limit on the number of employees going to training at any one time. On-the-job training is important, so it was emphasized that this will continue as usual.

Finally, it was pointed out that having completed training related to particular positions does not guarantee promotion, for several reasons, including the fact that more than one employee may have obtained the same training, and there are other factors to be considered in promotions; however, having the training places them in a much better position for promotion than not having it. There was no push-back to these limitations; utility management and the consultant stressed the win-win nature of the plan, and the feedback was positive.

Future of the Plan

The desire for training was monitored during late 2016 and early 2017 in preparation for development of the fiscal-year 2018 budget for training, or as it is becoming known, the "Human CIP." Having the plan in place provides the opportunity for employees to request specific training from their supervisors. This demand can be translated into training budget requests from the utility divisions, and ultimately, a utility budget proposal to city government. Utility management expects that having these specific demands will help convince city government to increase the utility training budget because the requests will be specific to position, course, and cost, rather than simply a figure that's "last year's, plus x percent." An additional selling point will be the fact that management has identified positions expected to be vacated within the next several years, so training existing employees to fill these positions is a logical argument.

Initially it is expected to require some "nudging" from supervisors to their staff members to consider their career plans, and therefore, training for advancement. For those employees who do not actively step up and re-

Position	Position Requirements Summary (see official job descriptions for all requirements)
From outside this work area - Preparing to become Administrative Specialist I	High School diploma or GED. One to two years of experience in general administrative support. Broad exposure and application of current office systems technology and software.
Administrative Specialist I - Preparing to become Administrative Specialist II	High School diploma or GED. Three to four years of experience in general administrative support. Broad exposure and application of current office systems technology and software.
Administrative Specialist II - Preparing to become Administrative Specialist III	High School diploma or GED. Three to four years of experience in general administrative support. Broad exposure and application of current office systems technology and software. Microsoft Office specialist certification preferred. ICS-100 Introduction to Incident Command System within six months; IS-700 National Incident Management System.
Administrative Specialist III - Preparing to become Administrative Coordinator	High School diploma or GED. Five years of experience or training in administrative/secretarial support to include two years within senior clerical/secretarial support capacity.

Figure 2. Administrative Positions

quest training, the supervisors will formally discuss the topic during annual employee performance reviews. The longer-term intention is to have a “living document” by having training an accepted and routine part of the utility culture. Some of this was lost during the budget cutbacks of the Great Recession, but the plan provides an opportunity to regain training as an accepted culture; and of course, it will be modified as new and different courses are needed.

Plan Advantages

Utility management’s initial vision of the plan foresaw certain advantages to defining it, but as the interactive process evolved with the employees, additional advantages were discovered. A summary of the plan’s advantages are as follows:

- ◆ *Available to all Employees.* This is a significant difference from a succession plan because this opens training to all employees, not just those selected by management to fill expected vacancies. It perhaps removes some of the stigma of the “good old boy” method of promotions.
- ◆ *Proactive Employees Given Opportunities.* The plan provides ambitious proactive employees guidance to stepping up and taking courses to create a better future for themselves and their families.
- ◆ *Removes the Guesswork.* Historically, employees had to study job descriptions and talk with more-senior staff to try to understand how they might move up within the organization; however, the plan removes all that study time and guesswork because the career steps are clearly identified and shown in visuals.
- ◆ *Easily Understood.* The plan is very visual in nature, so it’s easily understood by employees. They can “follow the arrows” in the visuals (Figure 1) to see where their careers could go, and the narratives and training courses are easy to comprehend. Full descriptions of courses are available to supervisors and employees.
- ◆ *Customized.* Given the interactive approach to developing the plan, and the fact that many employees (and, in particular, very senior employees) and a senior consultant contributed to identification of the training courses means it is highly customized for relevance to each position. The utility and employees will not be wasting time and money on frivolous courses.
- ◆ *Preparations for Retirement.* Management has identified those positions that are expected to be vacated within the next several years due to retirements. Employees within those work areas will be encouraged to take the prescribed training to be prepared to fill the vacancies.
- ◆ *Management Consistency.* Because courses are clearly defined for each step upward, management can readily compare training among candidates considered for promotion.
- ◆ *Promotes a Training Culture.* Because the plan encourages training and will rely heavily on that as a measure of promotability, training is expected to take root as a culture within the utility. This will promote the concept of the utility enhancing a long-term relationship with its employees.
- ◆ *Budgeting Tool.* Utility management can be very specific in its budget requests for training because it will be based on specific employee requests and training needed to prepare for impending retirements and to shore up areas where there is a weakness in skill sets.
- ◆ *Recruiting Tool.* During interviews when candidates ask “How can I move up?” the visuals clearly shows career paths. This will be a hiring advantage to the utility over competing entities.