

HR Innovations

By *Iain "Skip" Paterson*

THROUGHOUT OUR INDUSTRY, companies are dealing with the issue of a workforce in transition. Alliant Energy has identified that a significant group of employees will soon be retirement-eligible, raising concerns about the potential loss of institutional knowledge.

Until recently, our company addressed staffing issues separately by business group. When the industry began raising the topic of an aging workforce, Alliant Energy's board of directors asked our human resources group to look into the issue at a corporate level. Once we pulled together all the data from across the organization, we discovered that within five years, 40 percent of our workforce will be 55 years of age or older and eligible for early-retirement benefits.

The risk to our company should these employees choose to retire when eligible is the obvious loss of knowledge accumulated over 20, 30, or even 40 years of employment. We quickly recognized that we had not created sufficiently robust knowledge transfer or succession plans.

In May, we created a new position in our HR department to address the concerns. We've been busy since then identifying and prioritizing the areas of risk. The issue that quickly floated to the top of the list – not unlike at other utilities – is the potential shortage in our physical labor market.

One obvious place to look for the replacement workers is within our own organization. Since a majority of these physical positions are union, we work within the structure of our labor agreements to find, train and promote employees. Job shadowing has been a successful tool in this effort.

Clearly, we must go outside the organization to fill the gap that we see approaching. In that search, we have discovered that the traditional educational system is not structured to provide a pool of qualified employee candidates to fill these physical positions.

This summer, we met with the labor leadership teams across our service territory, explained the issues and risk to the organization, and emphasized the critical nature of the jobs they do. Together, we brainstormed ideas to solve the problem. The sessions were very productive and helped us structure a three-pronged approach to address the aging workforce gap. This approach includes promoting the career opportunity to targeted high school students, assisting the educational system in creating educational programs that appropriately prepare students for these careers and supporting students as they choose this career path.

The first step in our approach is to focus on getting information to targeted students while they are making educational choices. Traditionally, the educational system has focused on getting top-tier students into college. We are focusing our efforts more on the next tier of students – the 17–24 year olds who already reside in our service territory, have significant skills but traditionally reject college and enjoy close ties to their communities. We are creating tools – including a video, brochure and

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Web site – to educate students and their high school guidance counselors about this alternative career path. And we make sure that the messages resonate with the students – promoting quality of life and involvement in their communities, while educating them on the industry, career opportunities, and income potential.

The second piece of the puzzle is working with the education system to create instructional programs. Very few of the technical colleges in our service territory offer the comprehensive curriculum these students need to be prepared for a career in our industry. We are working with these vocational/technical schools to develop the two-year curriculum that will lead to the apprenticeship or journeyman positions. And, we are working jointly with the schools and the accreditation boards to ensure that the programs receive the necessary approvals.

Finally, we will be offering financial support to students who choose this path. We are partnering with our Alliant Energy Foundation and the unions to create scholarships that will help students financially while they attend the vocational and technical colleges in preparation for a career in the energy industry.

While we are still in the early stages of implementing this three-pronged approach, we have high hopes that it will help us bridge the aging workforce gap. Then, a long-term planning process will allow us to address issues of development and retention. We expect the end result will be employees who experience high job satisfaction, help tie Alliant Energy to the communities we are privileged to serve, and allow our organization to deliver on our commitment to our customers.



Iain "Skip" Paterson is Alliant Energy chief human resources officer.

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CLEAN COAL BOOST

The U.S. Department of Energy has awarded \$1 billion in tax incentives to nine companies to spur development of zero-emissions coal power plant technology.

Recipients included Duke Energy, Tampa Electric, Mississippi Power and Louisville Gas and Electric. Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman said, "There is more energy available in U.S. coal than in nearly all of the oil in the world, and these tax credits will help us find ways to use coal in an environmentally sensitive way."

