

## Training Lineworkers – Communities to the Rescue

By some estimates, as many as 50,000 new lineworkers will need to be trained by 2016. The Center for Energy Workforce Development (CEWD) estimates that between 40% and 50% of the current pool of aging lineworkers will retire during that period. Coupled with adding 13,500 new positions because of growth, we will need to find and train over 8,000 new lineworkers, every year. So, who is going to do this? You? Probably not.

Many Utilities and Contractors in the United States report either a hiring freeze or drastic cutbacks in the numbers expected to be hired this year. Obviously, the number being trained then, will follow suit. Fewer lineworker candidates being hired means fewer are being trained. Just at a time when that number should be growing.

### **The Squeeze**

The squeeze is coming and in many instances, it's already here. Predictably, the downturn in the economy has encouraged older workers to stay on the job a while longer, easing the inevitable. It's a stop-gap strategy that can back-fire on a Company. And the strategy is at best, temporary.

Training a new lineworker to be as productive as the one retiring can take years, literally. Opinions vary, but the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training, says an apprenticeship period for Powerline Installers and Repairers (SOC code 499051) is 4 years. Some Utilities have apprenticeship programs that last as long as 7 years. And most do agree that this is just the training period. It will take several years longer to truly be productive as a Journeyman level worker.

So, another squeeze. Don't expect to replace that retiring worker overnight. You should have started training his or her replacement 4 years ago, or more.

Why not just hire an experienced worker then? Sure, if you can find one. And, it's like stealing from Peter to pay Paul. Nothing has been added to the lineworker 'pool'. The worker you just enticed to your shop left someone else empty handed. Matter of fact, Peter may just 'steal' him back. Good way to drive up wages with no associated increase in productivity.

### **Better Ideas**

So, if we can't hire right now... and we can't train new workers right now... what can we do? Fortunately, we Americans are innovators and folks are finding some new ways to address old problems.

Several private, for-profit, lineworker training centers have popped up around country with excellent programs. But most recently, it's the non-profit Community Colleges and Technical Schools that are beginning to recognize the need and start new lineworker programs in cooperation with local or regional Utilities and Contractors.

With well over 1,000 Community/Technical Colleges in the U.S. today, this is a made-to-order issue – actually the reason many of them were created at all. Local Industry has a need. Local schools partner with Industry to fill that need. And, during a time of high unemployment, skill training for a new job is smiled upon by every level of government up to and including Congress and the President. Grants and other funds are available for these programs from numerous sources, both government and non-government organization (NGO) based.

### **ISPC's Grant Program**

The Institute for Safety in Powerline Construction (ISPC), a non-profit Industry Association formed in 2004, is one of those organizations providing grants to Community Colleges and Technical Schools for training lineworkers.

Over the past two years, ISPC has provided both technical assistance in developing curricula and direct training material grants to schools that have made a Community commitment to train new lineworkers. So far, 15 Institutions have qualified for assistance from ISPC and additional applications are pending.

For schools contemplating a new program, the task can be daunting: the administrative approval process, the paperwork, the government bureaucracy, the funding, the inevitable red tape and on and on. Add to that list the challenge of creating a lineworker curriculum by educators that typically know nothing about powerline construction and maintenance. A huge stumbling block, when you're not familiar with our Industry.

ISPC makes curriculum development easier by knowing what the Industry needs and by sharing the experiences of helping other similar programs work.

### **Helping Others Help You**

It is likely that there is a Community/Technical School in your area with an interest in helping to train your future lineworkers. This is a way to involve your Company in a solution to a skilled worker problem that, if you don't have the problem now, you will soon. And by partnering with a local school, your investment remains low, as well. Often, the schools will look to their partners for equipment and tools to be loaned or donated and they welcome any assistance, whether that's in just an advisory capacity or in providing adjunct instructors. Maybe some of those same experienced guys considering retirement would help. This is a good way to transfer that hard-earned knowledge to those future employees.

The need to train new lineworkers is growing and fortunately, there are some new options that don't involve breaking the budget or just burying our collective heads in the sand.

Need some help in getting a local program going? Find a school then contact us at ISPC. We'll help too.

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**Pre-apprentice Lineworker Program**

**Calhoun Community College**

**Huntsville, AL**