

Speed to Competency for New Workers is Critical for Energy Utility

The Current State

An energy utility that provides electrical power and natural gas in the U.S. Pacific Northwest has an aging workforce and struggles to hire qualified entry-level employees for field work and substation operations.

Only 45% of applicants meet basic pre-requisites and only 13% of applicants have enough qualifications to be hired. Half of field employees have less than six years of experience, so there is a critical need to find qualified people, train them and get field workers to a mastery level far faster than has been the norm.

The utility is a competency-driven organization. Job descriptions are competency-based, selection criteria are competency-based and the operational training unit uses competencies to advance employees from entry level to:

- Able to work on their own
- Competency in working on their own
- Teaching others to reach competency levels

Over the past few years, in an effort to improve time to competency, the organization quickly evolved from formal training to a contextualized learning approach that includes:

- Engaging learners through storytelling and change management
- Structured on-the-job training
- Simple technology solutions for delivery and on-the-job support
- Real-world simulation solutions for situational awareness

Complexities

In addition to a shallow qualified candidate pool, the utility lacks experienced people with the depth of knowledge to move into leadership positions.

There are also socioeconomic challenges. Despite starting wages ranging from \$24 to \$28 per hour that increase every six months, the high cost of living in much of the utility's service region creates major recruiting challenges.

The utility's operational training manager describes the situation as “near-crisis.” But the organization is poised for success because of an impressive, proactive operational training program that has:

- Strong executive sponsorship
- Strategic alignment with business goals
- A framework targeted at closing the entry-level competency gap and the internal talent maturity gap
- A strong partnership with community and technical colleges to improve the quality of the entry-level talent pool

Consequences

If the utility had not strategically and urgently addressed the talent gaps, within the decade it would lack operations staff competent enough to meet the energy needs of the region.

Progress is being made and help is likely on the way in the form of a \$22 million training facility that leverages virtual and augmented reality to provide sophisticated scenario training that simulate storms and other crisis situations. The goal is to train workers to think more critically — and faster — in urgent situations, which is the heart of the utility's mandate. The organization believes this and other planned improvements will enable speed to competency to shrink to two years for journeyworkers and under five years for management-level employees.

Critical Questions

Training leaders have already asked and answered — or are in the process of answering — many of the most critical questions:

- What are the critical competencies needed at each level of the workforce?
- How do we improve the readiness of the potential entry-level workforce?
- How do we align with the business and get the support we need to bridge these critical talent gaps?
- How can we partner with local and regional educational institutions to bridge the knowledge gap among people entering the workforce?
- How can we change our learning strategy so our approach resonates with the Gen Z and Millennial workforce we need to recruit, train and retain?
- What are the new technologies we need to leverage to speed the path to competency for employees at all levels?

Brandon Hall Group POV

This utility has been aggressive and proactive in addressing its talent shortages, as noted earlier. However, the most critical step was attacking the heart of the problem: improving the lack of requisite skills in the emerging workforce.

The first step was establishing a strong competency model using a skill-panel approach. Training leaders interviewed seasoned employees, manager-level leaders and top leaders to understand the most critical needs at all levels of the workforce. The competencies were rated by complexity and frequency of use and annotated with nuances so the competencies and training needs were as specific as possible.

This allowed the training organization to communicate the scope of the problem to all stakeholders — senior leaders, regulators, legislators and, most importantly, the community colleges and technical schools that the utility believed were the most critical players.

Utility training leaders took the insights from their skill panel and formed a series of higher-education partnerships that led to courses and curricula that improved those critical skills on which job candidates are assessed. The operations training leader for the utility became the chair of the advisory board on energy sector jobs for the community and technical colleges in the region.

The utility found that female applicants were failing assessments used to screen candidates at a far higher rate than males. The utility was committed to a diverse workforce, so it worked with the colleges to develop targeted programs for women. The utility also partners with national associations to learn from other efforts and apply those insights to their local programs.

The programs are working. Assessment scores from the college's applicants — including women — are significantly better than other applicants.

The speed to competency initiative is a work in progress, but the utility has taken all the right steps, including attacking the core of the skills problem.

-Claude Werder, Vice President and Principal HCM Analyst, Brandon Hall Group

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