

# WATER AND WASTEWATER OPERATOR STAFFING IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

## INFRAMARK, LLC, TAKES A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO IDENTIFYING STRATEGIES TO HIRE AND RETAIN WATER AND WASTEWATER OPERATORS

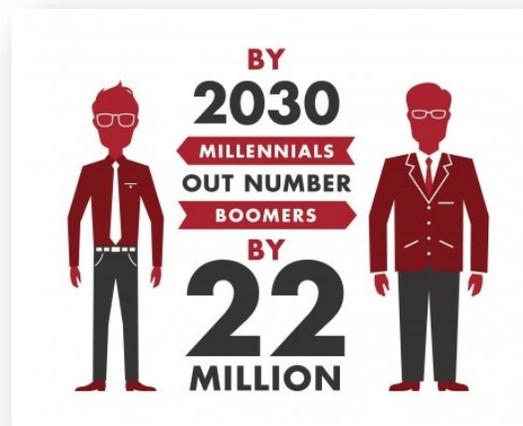
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Imagine managing a water or wastewater plant and having no qualified employees to operate your plant or anyone who wants to learn how to operate your plant. The possibility of this is becoming a reality. Gone are the days when you could easily find a cadre of qualified candidates who were willing to accept the job and exercise enough hard work and patience to become certified and climb the career ladder. The job market is rapidly evolving around us. In late 2018, the U.S. job market experienced a significant tipping point with more available job openings than job seekers. In addition, candidate demographics and career expectations, as well as the introduction of new technologies in job searches, has forced us all to rethink our strategies.

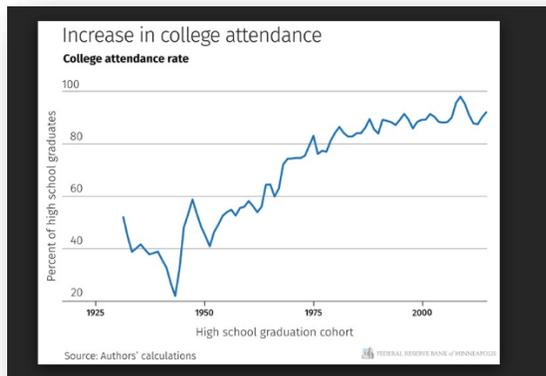
With challenges ranging from retiring Baby Boomers to unpredictable future generations, the job market is difficult to understand and predict for any period of time. Recent research tells us 10,000 people per day in the United States turn 65 years old and this trend will continue for 19 more years. In 2005, 45% of the U.S. workforce was comprised of Baby Boomers. By 2020, only 25% of the U.S. workforce will be Baby Boomers and over 60% will be Millennials and future generations. Needless to say, most companies are not ready for this seismic shift.



Education changes are playing a key role in the labor market in multiple ways. The U.S. labor market is more educated than ever, which has both pros and cons associated with it. With 70% of all high school graduates in the U.S. attending post-secondary institutions, few new graduates are left to seek careers in the trades. With career competition from plumbing, HVAC, electrical and other trades, water and wastewater is left with few candidates coming from high school directly to the trade.



Furthermore, many employers are now requiring college degrees for roles that traditionally have not required a college degree. Since the labor market on the whole is now more educated, employers are simply utilizing the resources available in the market. This concept, known as “degree-inflation” is a strategy some employers utilize to help fill their trade-related talent voids. The jury is still out on this practice as there is little proof it effectively creates long-term career paths in the trades. More likely, it is leaving college graduates less than satisfied in multiple ways.



With the challenge of few candidates seeking a career in water and wastewater, we need to look at potential solutions such as partnering with post-secondary associate degree institutions, as well as establishing grassroots efforts in high schools and vocational high schools, to show students that a career in wastewater can be interesting and lucrative as well as environmentally impactful.

Inframark has experienced success by casting a wide net and ensuring we cultivate as many solutions as possible. In addition to traditional methods of advertising openings and screening candidates, we have adopted a number of effective solutions:

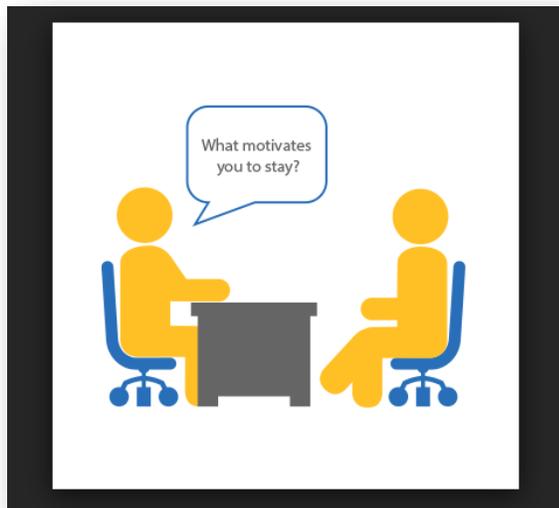
- **Exiting Military Personnel** – Inframark has recently partnered with various state and federal departments to establish a veterans’ apprenticeship programs in multiple states. These programs result in exiting military personnel hired into formalized, paid apprenticeship programs that lead to water

and wastewater operator certification.

- **Recruitment Advertising** – Inframark recently installed various mobile-friendly applications to ensure both job advertisements, as well as applications, are very mobile friendly. Not everyone has a PC, which can create access barriers, but more and more people have access to smart phones. By utilizing vendors who are more mobile friendly, Inframark has seen an increase in the number of qualified job applicants. Inframark has not moved away from the traditional methods of sourcing candidates as every company vehicle and facility displays help wanted signs.
- **Employee Referrals** – Inframark has a long history of having a strong employee referral program with high usage. In 2018, the company doubled the payment amount for all employees who refer candidates who are hired and retained.
- **Social Media Networking** – In addition to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, the Inframark Talent team monitors industry specific social media to contact possible candidates. The company has recently begun production of a series of video job descriptions shot as employee testimonials. These provide potential candidates with a very realistic view of the job and employee thoughts on working for Inframark.
- **Non Profit Job Developers** – There are many regional and local youth talent pipeline organizations in the United States. Many are focused on developing careers for high school graduates not attending post-secondary education. Inframark is beginning to partner with such firms to help develop grassroots efforts for the industry.
- **Post-secondary Associate Degree Institutions** – Inframark is partnering with post-secondary associate degree institutions to secure students into internships after year

one of their curriculum. The challenge is finding enough schools that offer a water or wastewater curriculum. There are only a handful of such nationwide and most have a small number of graduates annually.

- **High Schools and Vocational High Schools** – A local approach Inframark has instituted is to arm their project and plant managers with the job fair kits and specific information necessary to work with local high schools and vocational schools to communicate the benefits of a career in water and wastewater, and educate future generations on the secure career path and the environmental importance of our industry.



Once on board, retention of new hires is crucial. Far too many organizations miss the critical step of onboarding new employees for success. Onboarding should start even before an employee's first day. The positive connection with the direct supervisor needs to be established long before the new employee's first day. A disconnect with management is one of the chief causes of premature turnover for new hires. Having the direct supervisor own the onboarding process is critical. The onboarding process should occur over months, not weeks, and include all necessary information for employees to successfully perform their jobs as well as create a roadmap for success

within the company. Continuous learning is a key component to long-term success of any employee. Inframark has recently installed a state-of-the-art Learning Management System and Performance and Talent Management process to ensure a learning and development-related culture is thriving in the organization. Without these critical components in place, retention of future generation workers may suffer.

Imagine managing a water or wastewater plant and hiring candidates who are excited to work in the industry and utilize enhanced technology to operate the plant and learn and develop themselves. This is a possible reality if you ensure you take all the correct steps to recruit, onboard and develop your employees.