

COVID Hiring Challenges: How Utilities Can Weather the Storm

A recession that's still a candidate's market

In their recent analysis of our COVID-19-impacted job market, the *Harvard Business Review* commented that it is “unlike anything anyone has observed since the birth of modern capitalism.” Although we are in a recession, jobs are rebounding, and the risks associated with the pandemic are influencing where workers want to work. That means that even during an economic downturn, attracting talent is challenging. The utilities industry is no exception to this post-pandemic reality.

That's why employers in utilities need to be resourceful when it comes to securing new talent. And make no mistake: that talent still needs to be top-tier. After all, without a strong utilities sector, critical infrastructure ceases to function. With the stakes being as high as they are, I'd like to share my best practices for navigating the unprecedented job market of 2021.

The hiring challenges we're seeing in 2021

Challenge 1: Intensified Competition

Before COVID-19, the utilities job market was competitive. In 2021, that competition has only intensified. Utilities professionals like project managers, procurement specialists, estimators and schedulers at the top of their game tend to already hold secure positions and want to hold on to them. Finding fresh talent in the past typically happened through networking, but nowadays networking looks vastly different.

Solutions:

- Harness your online network, soliciting referrals and leveraging social media to connect with new people.
- Use recruiters with strong online networks; large followings on LinkedIn.
- Consider hiring from other regions. At Maven for instance, we've been looking at Ontario and Alberta for new personnel since the job market in BC is more competitive.

Challenge 2: Loss of In-Person Interaction

The loss of in-person meetings creates definite barriers during hiring. Communication, after all, is non-verbal as well as verbal. It's difficult to assess for fit on the employer's side, and it's difficult to learn about a potential work environment on the candidate's side. Virtual interviews take

away from a utility's ability to see how job candidates fits into the company culture, how they interact with colleagues, and how they interact in more casual circumstances.

Solutions:

- Include at least one video chat during the interview process, understanding that this option still has limitations.
- Interact with the candidate through unscheduled calls or text messages, rather than only through formal interviews.
- Follow best practices around multi-interviews: conduct at least 2 interviews where Google's research has shown 4 interviews are optimal. Each meeting should be with a different interviewer and they should separately assess how the candidate might fit into your workplace culture.

The hiring opportunities we're seeing in 2021

Despite the undeniable challenges utilities employers are grappling with in 2021, there are still opportunities we shouldn't miss.

Site-Based Roles

When it comes to competition, an exception to the rule right now is site-based or hand-on trades roles in utilities, such as construction inspectors and powerline technicians. This is likely due to the economic pressure construction companies faced during the pandemic from forced closures, travel limitations, and delayed projects. As such, there is greater availability of job seekers where employers can afford to be more selective. But it's important to act quickly as construction activities are predicted to increase in 2021 and the labour market will become competitive once again.

Marketing Capabilities

Leveraging digital marketing to secure the talent you need is, in 2021, a baseline capability. With the right targeted content, you can attract exceptional candidates. To this end, it's important to:

- Cultivate an active and intentional social media presence.
- Invest into a fully modernized website that highlights project history, customer base, awards, and certificates, and maintains a career page that outlines the perks of working for you.

Online hiring platforms

Make the best use of online hiring platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed. Some tips include:

- Write specific, concise job descriptions that include information about who you are and what makes your company attractive.
- Be extremely clear about who you're looking for by describing skills, personality traits and relevant experience.
- Ensure your listings are well-branded, attractive, and aligned with the rest of your marketing efforts.

Remote work

If your company is transitioning to remote work, you have the opportunity to build exceptional processes and structures. If your company already works remotely, now is the time to make improvements. Doing so will enable you to engage excellent talent from further afield and help you streamline the onboarding process for those who are starting with your company remotely.

Times have changed, but talent remains essential

Without quality talent, the utilities industry will falter, which is why the hiring challenges of 2021 must be tackled with great resourcefulness. Recognizing these real challenges will equip you to find great people despite a candidate's market that's taken a hard shift towards virtual-only engagement. Equally, understanding where the opportunities lie—from marketing to remote work—will enable you to continue connecting with the best in the industry.