

What is an Operator Worth?

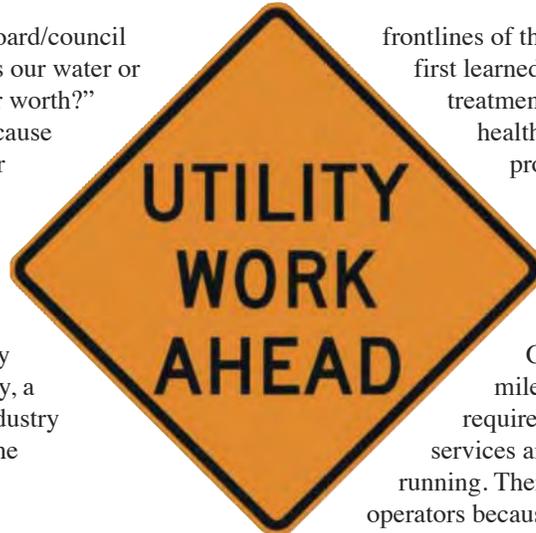
Here is a question that every board/council member should ask: “What is our water or wastewater system’s operator worth?”

However, it is a difficult question because nearly every operator and every other worker would like to be paid higher wages. Most people in the utility business have accepted the reality that they are not going to get rich from the work. But is it too much to expect a living wage? Has your utility lost an operator, or maybe more likely, a potential operator to another local industry because of a combination of any of the following issues:

1. Not enough pay?
2. Not enough days off (sick leave and vacation time)?
3. Too much stress/responsibility/book learning?

I am sure there are many reasons why it is difficult to keep good help, but the three issues mentioned above are legitimate concerns if your city or rural water district is consistently losing talented employees to other industries.

Water and wastewater utility industries need to pay competitive wages if anyone expects to attract high-quality employees. Safe, high-quality drinking water is going to be needed! Proper wastewater treatment has been on the



frontlines of the battle against disease since humans first learned what diseases were; wastewater treatment continues to be crucial to public health. The utilities are going to need to provide essential services.

This beautiful state of Kansas is spread over 82,000 square miles, from the rolling, glacial hills of the northeast to the semi-arid, shortgrass and sage-covered Cimarron National Grassland 400 miles southwest. An area this large requires a wide assortment of industries, services and personalities to keep things running. There is not one “fair” wage to be paid to operators because of differences in the cost of living.

The cost of living is a difficult thing to compare from place to place. Numerous websites will compare housing, healthcare, utility and grocery costs. While those can provide some comparison, those costs are a small slice of everyday life. A home in Overland Park indeed costs more than a home in Potwin or Russell Springs, but in the dot-com-world we now live in, prices for most consumable goods are pretty much fixed no matter where we live. The best way to determine whether a utility is paying the operator enough is to determine if the wage is **COMPETITIVE** in the local job market.

Paying a competitive wage

The competition needs to be assessed to be competitive in any situation. That means that cities and rural water districts need to look at the wages and benefits being offered by other industries or occupations in the area. That means that water and wastewater utilities are competing against manufacturing, construction, agricultural and medical sectors. A young man or woman looking for a CAREER – and not just a job – will likely investigate one of those areas for employment. To get an idea about what these competing industries offer for wages, I looked at the Kansas Workforce Center’s Kansasworks.com website for job postings. The website offers job seekers a glance at the starting wages and a brief overview of many openings’ available benefits. Many employers offer a substantial benefit package in addition to salary to entice prospective employees. Many municipalities offer an excellent benefit

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package that includes some form of discounted insurance, paid time-off, retirement and overtime pay. At first glance, an hourly wage that does not appear competitive may be a fair wage when considering the value of those benefits.

What skills does the profession require? An effective operator must have some basic ability to be a plumber, electrician, heavy equipment operator, carpenter and mechanic. An operator must be able to identify and find solutions to a broad range of problems, generally be self-motivated, and pay attention to detail. The job requirements include being on-call, working nights, weekends and holidays, a valid driver's license, a high school diploma, and professional certification that requires operators to pass an exam. Operators must also earn continuing education credits to maintain their professional certification. Some of these requirements are why many operators truly enjoy their work. A different job; a different challenge every day. An operator must also be

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customer-service oriented and be able to converse with the general public, the members of the local governing body and multiple levels of state and federal regulators. Of course, we need to include a basic understanding of mathematics and chemistry. Quite a wide range of necessary skills are needed.

What level of wage is competitive for an entry level worker in today's market? A look at Kansasworks.com job board shows many entry-level positions open in

Job Title	Location	Start Date	End Date	Time
City of Atchison, KS seeking applicants for Public Works Director	Atchison, KS	January 01, 2021	04:30:00 pm	By Invitation
City of Derby, Kansas seeking applicants for Utility Director	Derby, KS	January 05, 2021	03:15:00 pm	By Invitation
City of Canton, Kansas seeking applicants for Water Plant Operator	Canton, KS	December 02, 2020	08:45:00 am	By Invitation
City of Olathe, Kansas seeking applicants for Water/Wastewater Operator/Project	Olathe, KS	December 17, 2020	03:15:00 am	By Invitation
City of Pittsburg, Kansas Public Works Operator - Intermediate/Lead	Pittsburg, KS	December 15, 2020	06:15:00 am	By Invitation
City of Paola, Kansas Water & Wastewater Operator	Paola, KS	December 24, 2020	11:24:00 am	By Invitation
City of Lawrence, Kansas seeking applicants for Public Works Maintenance Worker	Lawrence, KS	December 01, 2020	02:15:00 pm	By Invitation
City of Newton, Kansas seeking applicants for Public Works Maintenance Worker	Newton, KS	November 18, 2020	02:00:00 pm	By Invitation
City of Lawrence, Kansas seeking applicants for Public Works Maintenance Worker	Lawrence, KS	November 09, 2020	09:00:00 am	By Invitation
City of Garden Grove, Kansas seeking applicants for Maintenance Worker - Lead	Garden Grove, KS	November 02, 2020	08:28:45 am	By Invitation
City of Manhattan, Kansas seeking applicants for Lead Plant Operator	Manhattan, KS	October 26, 2020	09:00:00 am	By Invitation
City of Lawrence, Kansas seeking applicants for Water Plant and Wastewater Operator	Lawrence, KS	October 22, 2020	03:00:00 pm	By Invitation
City of Topeka, Kansas seeking applicants for Water Plant and Wastewater Operator	Topeka, KS	October 02, 2020	08:30:00 am	By Invitation
City of Pittsburg, Kansas seeking applicants for Kansas positions	Pittsburg, KS	October 13, 2020	05:00:00 pm	By Invitation

KRWA's website at www.krwa.net provides one way that cities and rural water districts in Kansas can post employment opportunities. There is no charge by KRWA for the posts. The site is under "Online Resources" – and then "Wateringhole".

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Job Title	Starting Hourly Wage	Location
Office Complex Maintenance Tech	\$14.00 - \$17.00	Southwest Kansas
Road Construction Equipment Operator	\$14.00 - \$18.00	South-Central Kansas
Retail Freight Handler	\$17.60 - \$20.05	Northeast Kansas
Police Officer	\$19.91	North-Central Kansas
Construction Laborer	\$11.50 - \$12.00	Northwest Kansas
County Corrections Officer	\$13.00	Southeast Kansas
Farm Hand	\$15.00 w/ room and board	North-Central Kansas
Traffic Control Technician	\$15.00 - \$17.00	Statewide
Right-of-Way Maintenance Laborer	\$13.31	Statewide

A sampling of open positions in various water and wastewater operations in the state show similar wages.

Job Title	Starting Hourly Wage	Location
Surface Water Plant Operator	\$18.13	South-Central Kansas
Utility Maintenance Worker	\$16.20	Northeast Kansas
Wastewater Operator Apprentice	\$14.00	Southeast Kansas
Wastewater Operator-in-Training	\$15.48	South-Central Kansas
Utility Maintenance Worker	\$13.30	South-Central Kansas
Utility Maintenance Worker	\$15.06	South-Central Kansas
Utility Worker I	\$16.82	North-Central Kansas
Surface Water Plant Operator	\$13.62	Southeast Kansas

today's market. The above table is a sampling of entry-level job listings. There are many more options to choose from, but the jobs in this sample require many of the same skills as an operator, although an operator needs a wide array of skills to be proficient.

This table only shows jobs with salary posted, mainly located in south-central Kansas. The starting hourly wages appear consistent with those of competing industries. I intentionally included a wide range of entry-level salaries in

both tables. The wide range is caused by the many different skill sets, utility or business sizes and job locations. A recent survey completed during several training sessions by KRWA found the average wage of operators with less than five years of experience was \$14.55 per hour; the average overall wage was \$18.85 per hour. These studies are far from scientific, but they appear to show that entry level wages are comparable to the average. The KRWA survey also showed that the average experience of the operators was eight years. This survey was completed at KRWA training events, so the averages might skew towards newer employees, however a full 25 percent of respondents had more than 20 years of experience.

I know of several anecdotal stories of an employer paying next to poverty-level wages. I also know quite a few of those stories are true. I did not find examples of this while perusing the job openings, but I assume that most very small towns with openings do not post on the website. Many times, the job announcements are not widely publicized, so this information is far from comprehensive.

It is an unfortunate reality in today's world that higher wages are generally found in larger cities, and so that's where a lot of premium talent heads. Small towns and RWDs cannot compete, right? I disagree. Water supplies should be run like a business, and business owners know that to maintain a high level of service requires a high level of employee. Many water systems' rates are not high enough to enable paying their operator a competitive wage.

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Many governing board's singular top priority is to facilitate the transmission of potable water into the customer's home and the efficient removal of waste from the home. Without an operator, that function will not be accomplished.

Decision-makers should really take a look at the wage package offered to potential employees and honestly assess its competitiveness. Is the compensation adequate for the work accomplished and the amount of responsibility? The operator's product is literally piped in and out of each home on demand. Water operators are responsible for having water that is compliant to 88 standards set by EPA, and having it available at the tap any time a customer wants it. After the customer is finished using the product, the operator is responsible for its safe transport away from the home, ensure it is treated to the demands of KDHE and EPA, and return it to the environment for its eventual reuse downstream. This is a great industry to be in and there are lots of talented people in it. Prospective employees should be attracted to the idea of a CAREER as an operator rather than just "a city or RWD job". I believe water and wastewater operators have a level of responsibility and danger comparable to an electrical lineman, but the average pay is half as much! Surely no one with any sense would agree that an electrical utility was more necessary than a water or wastewater utility. Why are the men and women who maintain those utilities compensated so differently?

Utilities should really look at the rates they charge and decide if they need to be adjusted in order to "afford" to pay a competitive wage. If any system is having difficulties competing with the local employment market, a rate



adjustment may be necessary in order to increase operator wages and/or benefits. KRWA can assist your utility with a rate review. More information can be found at <https://www.krwa.net/TECHNICAL-ASSISTANCE/Rate-Reviews> or by calling the office at 785-336-3760.

KDHE requires a certified operator be in charge of every public water supply and wastewater treatment system. Without an operator, no water will come from the tap nor leave the toilet. If your system is looking for an above-average operator, it takes an above-average wage. I will bet that significantly more complaints will come in for a dry tap or flooded basement than for a rate adjustment that allows the utility to pay a great operator.

Daryn Martin began work with KRWA in August 2019. He previously was a Water Program Inspector and Environmental Program Administrator at KDHE's Wichita office. Prior to joining KDHE, he worked as an operator in the El Dorado Water Treatment Plant. He holds a Class IV water operator certification.



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