



# Success and Succession: Taking to the Tides

**R**obert Collier once wrote that “success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day in and day out.” In the water works industry, “success” assumes many visages, and exactly what that resembles can change by the day – often even throughout the day. Some days it means making it to clock out without anything breaking or breaking down; other days it means struggling through turning dozens of old, obstinate main valves in the frigid cold at 4 a.m. just to slow down that tank-draining bleeder enough to give your pumps a fighting chance and your clamp the space to slide into place.

It isn't glamorous, and more often than not, it's a thankless position to provide safe, clean drinking water to the customers. Still, it is as vital as breath and as much of an adventure as one can hope for in our modern age, rife with struggles of will, man-vs-nature, man-vs-machine, and, indeed, man-vs-time. More on that last point later. Speaking to man-vs-nature in the spirit of adventure, however, few sayings come to mind as readily or as poignantly as “smooth seas don't make skillful sailors.” This line, often referenced as an old African proverb, cuts to the heart of what it means to be

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a skilled professional, as it's not what we overcome with ease that makes us pros or even masters of a craft – it's what we endure and struggle to overcome.

## The vital importance of water and wastewater operators

As an aside, more than a decade ago, I worked for a local school district with the hopes of helping to bring as many students as possible into a higher tier of learning. After three years of that effort, an opportunity for summertime work fell at my feet, and since I was eager to get back into working with my hands, I took the offer. That decision landed me in what I have been grateful to call my career in the water treatment and distribution industry. Still, it certainly wasn't without its struggles and learning curves. As many of the readers of *The Kansas Lifeline* have no doubt experienced, I realized how little I knew about water and wastewater infrastructure and maintenance almost immediately. Like most residents in any given municipal or rural system, I hadn't always given much thought to water or wastewater so long as my tap fed water when I cracked it open, and it went away when I flushed it down. Every day felt like an “ah-ha” moment for those first few weeks, and the following months and years offered no shortage of such moments. It was gritty and grueling at times but ultimately gratifying in unparalleled ways. Years would roll by before I realized how much I had learned and could now begin passing on to incoming coworkers, though I could hardly fathom how much I had left to learn then – and how much I would still have left to learn now.

Getting back to man-vs-nature, one could hardly overstate how fierce an adversary like mother nature can be and how crucial having the right equipment, planning and PPE can be to surviving the elements. As mentioned before, turning valves and working leaks in sub-freezing temperatures and frigid winds isn't the average person's idea of fun. Yet, it does provide some perspective and appreciation for those times when it could always be worse. Undoubtedly, weather (and working outside in general) is a more significant contributing factor to the decline in willing participants in the industry, stretching back several decades. It's a problem we've all faced and one which seems more challenging to overcome year after year. The Covid-19 shutdowns illustrated perhaps more than ever before how monumentally vital this industry is, and yet, it also opened up work-from-home prospects like never before. Couple that with recent inflation and the fact that at-home jobs facilitate the modern propensity for reclusive and sedentary lifestyles, and it spells even more incredible difficulty in finding reliable, eager, hard-working help. Many people, much like my younger self, are simply unaware of the industry or its function as a whole.

The storm seems fierce and foreboding at times, but all strong sailors are born of it. Success might look like simply surviving the tempest and finding still waters in the end, or it might mean patching holes, bailing water, and fortifying the ship against future storms. This, of course, brings us back to man-vs-machine. To some, that might invoke imagery of Skynet or some similarly self-aware, rogue

artificial intelligence or other robotic artifices we might dream up in our lifetime (looking at you, Boston Dynamics). For our purposes, however, it means something simpler – something that will sound a lot like a four-letter word to some and a lot like gospel to others: Maintenance.

The last thing you want to find in the middle of a storm is that your vessel has succumbed to rot and rust. As most folks in this line of work can attest, carrying out scheduled, regular maintenance on machines, motors, pumps, vehicles, tools, and other equipment can mean all the difference when it counts. And in this industry, it always counts. Don't wait until the storm hits to try sealing the deck or greasing the pulleys. The job is an adventure, to be sure, but every adventurer needs their gear to function, come time to use it. You've heard all the speeches and safety training videos/presentations before. So I won't presume to lecture here, but to say that a little bit of maintenance-mindedness can easily save time, money, labor, reputation, and indeed, your life is no overstatement. That looks an awful lot like success in most books.

The mention of maintenance might call back to man-vs-time, but in this context, time is a bit more mischievous than that. It's no secret that the care and handling of most water provision and wastewater collection systems currently rest in the hands of an aging demographic. In many places, the willingness, know-how, and drive to step up to the helm when the current captains step down simply isn't there. As many of you will know, KRWA continues to participate in the training

## Water and Wastewater Operators are Essential Workers!

The average person in today's society takes for granted the availability of clean drinking water. Simply turn the spigot and water magically appears. Few people are aware of all that is required to ensure that clean water is available on demand.

Water treatment plant operators and distribution crews are critical in delivering safe drinking water. They are responsible for operating and maintaining all aspects of water production and distribution. Their duties include storage tanks, water mains, pumps, meters, and fire hydrants. Distribution workers install water lines, locate and repair water lines, install service connections, perform flow tests, monitor chlorine and other chemical levels, and handle customer service issues.

Obtaining certification as a water operator is critical to ensure the protection of the public and to maintain safe and reliable water treatment and distribution facilities. As a water system employee, becoming a licensed operator can lead to promotion, higher salaries, and increased job security.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) administers the water and wastewater operator certification program. Exams are also given by the agency. KDHE operates under the EPA guidelines established by amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1996. The standards and knowledge required for certification is generally consistent throughout the United States.

Salaries vary greatly depending on the region of the country. Starting salaries are typically in the \$12 to \$15 per hour range for a Class I operator. Salaries for Class IV operators can go as high as \$30 per hour.

A career with a public drinking water utility is one of the most stable and secure jobs in the country. In a booming economy, in a recession, or even a depression, there will always be a need for water and wastewater utility operators.



Photo credit: Dennis Schwartz

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and education of prospective and experienced operators in Kansas. KRWA's apprenticeship program is, of course, no exception. That being said, one way to make known the need for operators and all the possibilities for growth, mastery, and meaningful purpose to be found within is simply informing the youth in and around your locale. Many of today's youth are force-fed the notion that college and corporate or political endeavors are the only routes to making a meaningful impact in the world or making a living in a career that matters at the end of the day. I disagree with that prescription.

That's not to say that some college education isn't valuable – and of course, many trade schools still do fine

work in preparing competent trade professionals – but these aren't the only options outside of online "influencing." Very few young men and women graduating from high school have been made aware of as much. I found my way into this career path by chance. It quite literally came down to being in the exact right place at the exact right time. I cannot help but consider that fact alongside how much meaning and value I have derived from my career (to mention nothing of the adventures and struggles I've managed to enjoy and overcome), providing clean, safe drinking water to thousands of people and helping to ensure many other public services were carried out with pride. The gratitude I

feel for all the years of unpleasant weather and working conditions, midnight main breaks, and occasional disgruntled customers that led me to this moment is palpable. I am not the same man I was the first time I picked up a water meter. I'm far better off for the toils, the hard work, and the grittiness of it all, for my struggles against nature, machinery and time.

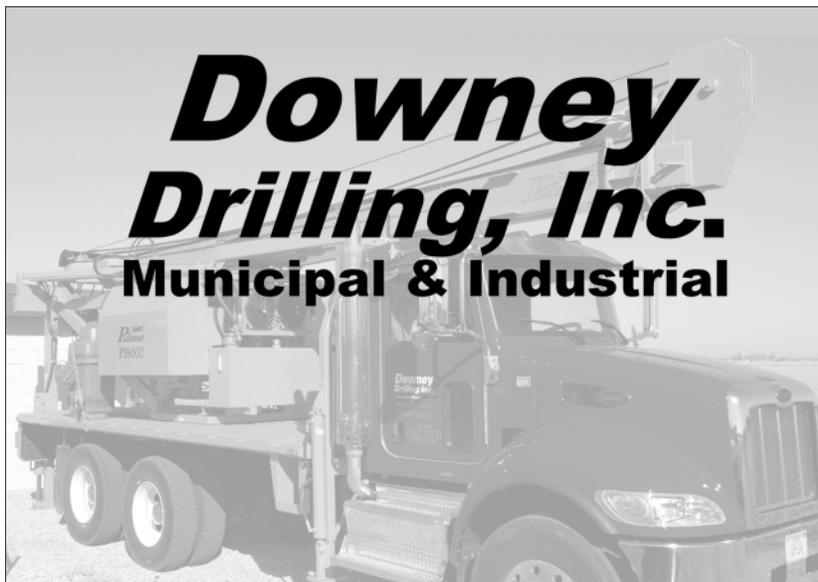
I hope to see more young men and women sign up and find as much value in this line of work as I have, and I hope they continue to shape themselves into skilled sailors for all our sakes and all the storms ahead. Most of all, I'm glad to be a part of a team of skilled professionals at KRWA devoted to learning and to helping as many of them succeed as possible.

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*Javon Baker began employment with KRWA in August 2022. He holds a Class IV water operator certification and has worked in the public water supply sector for ten years - most recently with the city of Valley*



*Center, and previously for the cities of Goddard and Haysville.*



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