

HIDDEN FIGURES: ATTRACT AND RETAIN A DIVERSE AND ENGAGED WORKFORCE

After the lunch break, IAWD Association Development Manager Elisabeta Poci and Young Water Professional Elsa Belba, Engineer at AKUM in Albania, led a session on what one speaker called “the crisis behind the crisis” – the growing workforce gap in the water sector.

The first speaker of the session feels the pulse of the job market like few others: Independent Consultant Josh Newton is the founder of Josh’s Water Jobs, a web platform that advertises jobs, consultancies, internships and scholarships in the worldwide water sector. Over the last seven years, Josh’s Water Jobs has posted over 60.000 jobs. The founder remarks that “nothing feels better than being approached at a conference saying, hey, I got my job through your website. It reinforces all the work that went into it.”

Mr. Newton notes that the workforce gap grows globally, both in the southern and northern hemispheres, but for different reasons. In the global north, the baby boomers are about to retire in the next five to ten years, while in the global south there are just not enough trained professionals to achieve SDG6 even if the 110 necessary billion a year mentioned in Gustavo Saltiel’s keynote speech were at hand.

Hard pressed to catch up

“We don’t even know how big the problem really is”, remarked Mr. Newton:

“We have very few national studies that assess where the workforce gap is, what the workforce needs are. Things are changing so rapidly with technology that neither the educations systems nor politics nor companies are adapting fast enough.”

Based on the few available studies, Mr. Newton gives a back-of-the-envelope estimate of at least 10 million additional trained professionals worldwide in water and sanitation are needed over the next ten years.

“So, the question is how do we attract, educate and train, protect and retain water workforce professionals and especially women? Note that only 18 percent of the workforce worldwide is female. How do we tap that untapped resource and talent that’s out there?” During last March’s

UN Water Conference, Josh's Water Jobs joined up with 18 other organizations to launch the World Water and Sanitation Workforce Initiative to work on these issues.

That said, Josh Newton turned to the job profile landscape and its trends, noting that "it's not necessarily with the people in this room where the gap is. It's more the vocational, technical level, those with two-year degrees and certificates rather than PhDs or master level students, but we will need people at all these levels."

In terms of worldwide trends, engineers will always be in high demand, with less and less people are going into the field of civil engineering. Data, digitalization and AI are rapidly changing the water sector and more and more jobs will be focused on that. The growing importance of wastewater treatment meets a lack of trained professionals in this field.

"I often get the question 'Which skills should I pick up to be more attractive in terms of a hire', says Mr. Newton. "There is no silver bullet skill that will reliably get you a job, but technical skills are always important. I am also a big proponent of soft skills: writing, negotiating skills, leadership skills are so important in every job. Water is very much a people job. You must deal with different stakeholders in these positions. Program management is hugely in demand. Economics and finance is big, especially when we deal with the water risks. Skills in finance and economics are always very useful. Learning more languages opens more doors. And then think of the issue of languages of different disciplines – how does a policy person understand what a hydraulic engineer speaks? Understand and translate between the different disciplines and domains is attractive in terms of hiring." That said, Josh Newton turned to the younger face in the audience, calling on their motivation and engagement: "Young Water Professionals, we need you. The world needs you. So, stick with it!"

“Gender is not about gender. It’s about performance!”

The female workforce figured large in the next presentation: Ms. Sarah Keener, Senior Social Development Specialist and Global Thematic Lead Social Inclusion in Water at the World Bank, joined the session online, presenting Equal Aqua – A Framework for Creating and Sustaining Diverse Water Institutions in the Danube Region.

Equal Aqua is a global partnership platform for inclusive water institutions, providing a consistent framework to help to get to more diverse water institutions. "Equal Aqua is above all a partner organization, and shout out to IAWD, which is one of our more active partners, and doing some really exciting work with us", remarks Ms. Keener. Equal Aqua operates on three pillars, the Partnership platform with currently 19 partners, which pools knowledge and supports sharing lessons on what works and what does not work to achieve more gender-diverse utilities, evidence building and benchmarking to monitor progress on the macro and micro levels, and operational support for clients in 58 projects to advance specific initiatives.

The equal Aqua framework views the four stages of a career cycle, attraction, recruitment, retention and advancement in a standardized diagnostic framework, with diagnostics carried out on the utility level in order to understand what drives the situation and track progress across countries and also across institutions. On the individual organization level, Equal Aqua works with confidential HR surveys and self-diagnostics to identify the specific gaps and create pressure for change. Aggregating these data, Equal Aqua has now the world's largest database on the topic, representing 240+ utilities, which in turn helps participating utilities to compare their performance with others. "The more data we gather, the more valuable and helpful it becomes", says Ms. Keener. "Data gathering is not only important for individual utilities, it also allows us to

look at correlations between gender balance and performance in the objective matrix”, she says, pointing to correlations between the share of female employees and performance improvement in core management practices and other key indicators: “Mind that Gender not only is about gender, it is about performance!”

She notes that up to now only seven utilities in the region participate in Equal Aqua, too few for consistent gender benchmarking. Ms. Keener nonetheless offers her insights into the situation in the region: “I want to highlight particularly for the Danube region issues with attraction and recruitment.” Noting that some of the region’s countries have exceptionally small female labor forces and very small rates of women with engineering backgrounds, she sees utilities competing with other employers for an exceptionally small pool – and attraction issues exacerbate the situation: “In the seven utilities we monitor, there are large gaps in things like sexual harassment policies, mentorship programs, and flexible working arrangements. So how do you want to attract a younger more gender diverse workforce to the sector?”

Stating that diversity goes beyond gender, Ms. Keener then turns to youth diversity: “This is going to be really critical in the Danube region. The specific context in the region is challenging, you have massive emigration from some countries, a dramatic brain-drain and huge declines in population. The challenges are definitely there.” Ms. Keener closes her presentation pointing to the numerous activities already present in the region, inviting the protagonists to team up, use the Equal Aqua framework to track their efforts, run benchmarking at the regional and utility level, and to look closely at issues of youth age and gender: “Listen to youth organizations and learn what is going to attract and keep young people. Scale up mentorships and look at early attracting. Go to universities and schools. We should be doing that on an intensive scale.”

Tirana on the EDGE

Next, Deputy director of Tirana Water and Wastewater Utility (UKT), Ms. Evis Gjebrea treated the practical side of recognizing and addressing workforce issues in water utilities.

The general strategic orientation of UKT is focused on service continuity and non-revenue water reduction, increasing coverage, improving the collecting rate and financial performance, digitalization an asset management concepts, and last, but certainly not least, the development of human capital. Realizing in the course of an EDGE assessment that the effectiveness of current policies and practices is subpar in every single EDGE analysis area, the company followed the proposals of the assessment and took action, adding objectives for the gender composition on the management level and specific gender policy development to the Business Plan 2020-2024, entering discussions with a private University on conducting yearly gender pay gap assessment by regression analysis, dedicating separate budgets for advanced studies sponsorship programs for men and women, and installing male/female teams to interview candidates for management positions from junior to top level.

To gain an edge in the growing competition for young talent, UKT has signed 4 internship programs with the Albanian Association for Water and Wastewater (SHUKALB), the Faculty of Civil Engineering, the Polytechnic University, and the Ministry of Education and Sports.

Next steps include the implementation of cooperation agreements with higher education institutions and SHUKALB for internships and mutual research for attracting youth, basic gender training to remove internal gender biases and discrimination, further improvement of gender

segregated data, and entering an exchange of experiences at among water utilities on developing the gender agenda.

Finally, the perspective of the next generation was brought on the stage by Ms. Diellza Muriqi, Communications Officer of the Kosovo Chapter of the Young Water Professionals network, who introduced her organization and its objectives.

Young. Professional. And organized.

YWP Kosovo achieved official status as a national chapter in 2023, counts 49 members, and aims to empower, mobilize and develop the professional determination of young professionals in the water sector. Activities include grant applications, professional development trainings and workshops, field trips to facilities and attendance at main events like the Danube Water Forum and the Danube Water Conference.

YWP Kosovo collaborates with the IWRM-K program, IAWD, Budapest Water Works, SHUKOS, SHUKALB, University of Prishtina and University of Gjakova, among others. The group has landed a €30,000 grant from SKAT consulting's IWRM-K program for a web application project for monitoring and managing water resources that will be used primarily by regional water companies, the River Basin District Authority, the Ministry of Environment, Spatial and Infrastructure Planning, and municipalities.

From the point of view of these ambitious young people, the general attractiveness of water sector jobs suffers from limited career advancement opportunities, inadequate compensation and benefit levels, insufficient public awareness, gaps in skills and educational opportunities and a lack of transparency in the hiring process. They recommend a number of measures to make the sector more attractive for young professionals, including public awareness campaigns to educate communities about the importance of water management and conservation, and engaging the young generation in community outreach programs to create a sense of purpose and connection with the sector. Providing development opportunities, offering clear career paths, ensuring transparency in the hiring process, creating an inclusive work culture and generally fostering a supportive environment within the sector are also prerequisites, as are networking events, conferences, and platforms that bring together young professionals, industry experts, and key stakeholders.

Ms. Muriqi closed her presentation by stating the obvious, that youth engagement is vital for the sustainable future of the water sector, and that collaborative efforts are needed to attract and empower young professionals, and by inviting the audience:

“Let us work together to create an inclusive, innovative, and attractive water sector!”

“Hard to quantify, but extremely important!”

Elisabeta Poci started the session's Q&A with a quick audience poll, showing that nine out of ten respondents rate gender diversity in their current workplaces between very and somewhat diverse, that two thirds see gender bias or lack of family friendly company policies as the main barriers preventing gender equality, again two thirds see women significantly underrepresented in the leadership of their utility, and 58% are not aware of any gender diversity initiatives in their own utility.

Noteworthy takeaways from the Q&A were (1) Sarah Keener’s recommendation to take the pulse of the company’s work environment by occasional rapid anonymous surveys “to get a grip on things that are hard to quantify, but extremely important”, (2) Elisabeta Poci’s comment on the lack of separate budgets for human capacity development and empowerment in the majority of utility business plans: “Without a dedicated budget there is no commitment.” and last not least (3) Josh Newton’s promise to introduce national level platforms in the Josh’s Water Jobs web, “to give more depth and width and capture more of the different levels of jobs, and more the diversity of jobs that are available.”