

WEBINAR

TAPPING TALENT: HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN A QUALIFIED WORKFORCE IN THE WATER SERVICE SECTOR OF THE DANUBE REGION

“Tapping Talent - how to attract and retain a qualified workforce in the water service sector of the Danube region” was the title of the 11 October edition of the Danube Water Program’s KnowKnow webinar series on up-to-date topics that impact the sector in the region.

Indeed, the impact of human resources shortfalls is a growing headache for utility managers everywhere in the region. Many water utilities are facing significant challenges to attract and retain experienced staff. Many leave to take higher paid jobs in other sectors, and many will reach retirement age over the next five to ten years, taking skills and knowledge with them without suitably qualified replacements. Simultaneously, the level of expertise required for operation and maintenance keeps increasing as water technologies become more complex and the industry turns to more automated processes.

The secret sauce

The webinar organizers did their very best to explore the problem from all angles. Sarah Keener, Senior Social Development Specialist at the World Bank, took the helm as moderator. Her main message is inclusion and gender equality, and not just because fair is fair: “All data show clearly that more gender equality improves performance on every level.” Indeed, Ms Keener calls gender equity and a focus on young professionals a “secret sauce” to attract and retain a qualified workforce, a recipe that is desperately needed in many parts of the region: New technologies like AI and innovations in the fields of circular economy, water and climate will demand a younger

workforce, and the competition for young people will be fierce, especially in the light of sometimes dramatic population declines: a negative net migration and sinking birth rates will cause the West Balkans to lose an estimated one million young people over the next decade.

Equal Aqua

Promoting the “secret sauce” is the mission of Equal Aqua, a global gender equality initiative of the World Bank. Equal Aqua operates on three pillars, a knowledge exchange network of now 22 official partners, a HR benchmark database comprising data from 240+ utilities, and technical assistance in currently 60 World Bank projects. Noting that the Danube region is still underrepresented in the Equal Aqua database and that the few available data show ample room for improvement, Ms. Keener turned to the practical side of gender equality and the obstacles and opportunities that women face in their career cycles and the main stations attraction, recruitment, retention, and advancement.

Starting with the attraction theme, Ms. Keener asked the audience how many kids dream of working in the water sector, challenging the industry to think outside the box, to send out messages on the importance of water, to reach out to schools, to advertise, to engage in networks, and to offer attractive career pathways:

“We will need to shift perceptions and inspire, because the competition for young, female talent is keen.

Success story from Gjakova

If the desperately needed change has a face, it is that of Fiolla Lasku-Hoti, head manager of the wastewater treatment plant Gjakova in Kosovo, where the share of women in the workforce is by far the lowest in the region. With a background in chemical engineering and a master’s in environmental protection engineering, Ms. Lasku-Hoti gathered her first experiences in the water sector during a Master scholarship in the Netherlands and was fascinated. She joined one of the first wastewater treatment plants in Kosovo as a process engineer, and her background and performance earned her the head manager position.

Even with full support from above, earning the trust of a team and building up the necessary leadership skills was challenging:

“I struggled a lot. In a mostly male technical department, I often was the only woman in the room, and I remember some really awkward and stressful situations.”

What kept her going? “Support and motivation, not only from the senior management, but from family, friends and colleagues – that helps a lot. What also works for me and what I recommend to all Young Water Professionals is picking role models and following their example. The President of Kosovo is a woman. If she can make it, I can as well.”

Mapping the career

Support and motivation is the core business of the next speaker, Louise McSorley. She is the Strategic Resourcing and Skills Manager at Scottish Water. Looking back on 26 years in the water industry, she confessed that she shared the experience of being the only woman in a room full of

men. “But at Scottish Water things have changed a lot. Let me show you some things we have done.”

Scottish Water covers the whole career journey with exemplary initiatives, starting from web-based career maps as a medium to attract young people and offering every thinkable support in developing skills, qualifications and individual career paths, including, but not stopping at, graduate apprenticeships, future technical specialist programs, “Take the Lead” programs for aspiring leaders, BELONG diversity and inclusion groups, and an “I Love Data” initiative for digital skills. The company has even tweaked its advertising with relatable people stories and attractive imagery. “It’s what we do”, says Ms McSorley: “Looking into skills and resources we need in the future and developing those.”

Rebrand the water sector

Florian Kretschmer works at the source, researching and teaching as a Senior Scientist at the Austrian University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences. Adding the academic perspective, he notes that “water is somehow under the ground”: “My students are in bioresource management, environmental science, civil engineering, and they are highly motivated. They think about water in the contexts of climate change, droughts, floods – but they rarely think about sanitary engineering and water supply. The necessary infrastructure is out of sight, and out of mind. Yes, they all want green cities, and when we discuss the related issues, I must remind them that if they want the Green, then they need the Blue.”

When it comes to making the water sector attractive and exciting for young talent, Mr. Kretschmer invites everybody to think outside the box: “Water is not only about grey infrastructure, and when we deal with wastewater, it’s not waste, it’s a resource with so many aspects – reuseable for irrigation and cleaning, a potential source of thermal energy, phosphorus, carbon... - it is even a data source for epidemiology! That said, we need a paradigm change. Stop talking of wastewater treatment. Call it water resource recovery instead. And let’s reach out across sectors – agriculture, energy, public health. The connections are there, let’s use them to attract students from other fields!”

Much like the other panelists, Mr. Kretschmer strongly advocates an outreach to very young target groups: “Talking about the third mission of universities, bringing scientific knowledge to a wider public: We have kids’ university in summer, inviting in elementary school age children. My own daughter is just eight, and she loves this. Then we build on these experiences and take high school students on excursions to raise their awareness. We work a lot with utilities that provide us with up-to-date research questions for master theses etc. We work their demands into our teaching and bring practitioners in to teach. It motivates students to see closely what they are studying for.”

Brain Drain and Competition

With this, the panel turned to questions from the online audience, many concerned with the question how to stop the brain drain and compete against other sectors with more attractive salaries. Here, Louise McSorley mentions the attractiveness of long-term stability. Scottish Water enjoys excellent retention rates: “We have people that have been with us for ten years, and they are still perceived as newcomers, because others have been with us for 40 years. Which is helpful in industry that builds long-term assets and provides its communities with long-term services.”

To tackle the considerable compensation differences to, e.g., the energy sector, Scottish Water emphasizes other parts of the package, like pensions, annual leave and flexible work arrangements. “We also point to our values and culture, because this is often what attracts people in, and this also retains them.” Furthermore, Ms. McSorley stresses the importance of leadership culture:

“So many people leave organizations because of the people who manage them. Therefore, we make sure we got great managers - supportive, caring, but also challenging.”

The discussion then turned to the question who should be responsible for attracting young professionals into the water sector, with Florian Kretschmer advocating participatory approaches: “Everyone in the sector can take the initiative to inform and raise awareness. We all should work together to show the benefits of the sector. There is no sole responsibility.”

Job Stability as a value

In the competition for talent, Mr. Kretschmer also names stability as a main attractor: “You won’t get rich in the water sector, but you enjoy quite a job guarantee, because to handle a plant or network, you need to know the system and its bottlenecks, and you do not learn that overnight. Means you have your job, and you have it for a lifetime.”

Returning to the brain drain by retirement, Loise McSorley mentioned the proactive work that Scottish Water has carried out during the past ten years: “We have been investing strongly in the youth pipeline, and we also have programs where retired people get their pensions but stay with us, working reduced hours alongside someone who will eventually take over. We do need to think creatively, also about the job profiles of the future: What will be the impact of AI and automation on our sector? Replacing people is not like for like, it’s planning for what a future water industry is going to look like.”

To which Florian Kretschmer replied that digitalization will be an important part of attracting the smartphone generation to the sector:

“When we talk about drone inspection and similar tech stuff, the students get big eyes.”

On this optimistic note, Ms. Keener concluded the KnowKnow webinar.

Further information, including the presentations and recording of the webinar, can be found on our [website!](#)