

ROUNDTABLE:

HOW THE UTILITY MANAGEMENT TRAINING SUPPORTS YOU TO BECOME A UTILITY OF THE FUTURE

Dr. Katerina Schilling, Communication and Program Manager, IAWD, Austria, moderated this session with focus on the relatively young IAWD Utility Management Training (UMT) program.

The new kid on the block

Mr. Radoslav Russev, UMT program developer, Bulgaria, opened with a presentation on the UMT program, which started its first course in 2021, with 20 participants from 15 utilities from seven countries. The program consists of eight modules on technical and management themes. It provides participants with tools and practices that improve their decision-making capabilities.

As the architect of the Program, Mr. Russev explains that the key challenge lies in deciding whether to go wide or to go deep, with the eight program modules trying to cover all key aspects of utility operations, viewing assets and their management from the technical, the financial, and the regulatory angle. From the start, the UMT has delivered it all, with all participants gaining insights into all dimensions of the water utility business down to the intricacies of customer management in a dedicated CMCS module.

Utility of the Future and UMT – a perfect match

Next, Mr. Camilo Lombana Cordoba, Senior Water and Sanitation Specialist, World Bank, US, presented the “Utility of the Future” program, a global initiative supported by the World Bank with the aim to promote to support service improvement in utilities. Designed to catalyze, materialize and maintain transformational efforts in WSS utilities, this program targets five elements of utility performance: financial management, human resource management, organization and strategy, commercial service and technology. “Utility of the Future” deals with innovative strategies, performance monitoring, identifying and overcoming challenges and performance gaps of the utilities, and gender gap reduction. The focus is on strengthening essential processes and the development of forward-thinking capabilities in changing environments.

Mr. Cordoba notes that the IAWD’s Utility Management Training program aims to equip current and future managers with specific tools and technologies, improving the overall management culture in water utilities, corresponding with the World Bank’s Utility of the Future approach.

Listening to the UMT participants

Ms. Alexandra Garagushkova, Manager of Design Department, Sofia Water; Bulgaria, then related her personal UMT experience, stating the benefits her participation brought for her personally and for the utility where she is working. She appreciates especially the opportunity to meet colleagues from other utilities and other fields and the exchange of experiences in improving and progressing their companies, the valuable data collecting and comparing activities that constitute the course homework, and the self-confidence gained in presentations.

Mr. Aleksandar Smiljanic, Head of Department of Economic Affairs, KP Buducnost ad Laktasi, Bosnia and Herzegovina agrees. Being an economist himself, he says that he has profited vastly from gaining insights into all segments of the utility business, including the technical and customer service departments, and expects that his UMT participation will help him in the daily business of improving the service quality of his utility.

Ms. Frosela Filo, Head of Finance and Account Department, Korca Water Supply and Sanitation JSC, Albania, has a wide view of the theme, with her company participating in both IAWD's UMT and World Bank's Utility of the Future. She recommends implementing both programs: Utility of the Future keeps a stronger future focus and motivates utilities to provide high quality services. UMT equips participants with hands-on methods for continuous improvement based on data gathering, comparing with the other utilities, knowledge sharing and promoting work culture. Combining both programs, Ms. Filo says, is a double step towards improved utility performance.

A long-term investment in performance improvement

Joerg Karlhuber, Managing Director, Energie AG Bohemia, views the UMT from the supporter perspective, with Energie AG acting as a program partner, not the least because there is a shortage of skilled professionals in the Czech Republic, recruiting new employees involves comprehensive training, and really professional training programs are therefore most welcome. Energie AG itself sent three employees participating in the class of 2021. Mr. Karlhuber's message to employers is that yes, such a training is an investment in terms of staff hours and money, but it pays in the long run, because UMT graduates do not only perform better individually, they bring the skills to improve the overall performance of their utility.

In the final statement of the session, Ms. Sanyu Lutalo, Senior Water Supply and Sanitation Specialist, World Bank explained why the World Bank supports participants in the UMT with scholarships. Fully agreeing with the UMT Program's aim to equip current and future managers with the necessary tools and technologies to improve the overall management culture in water utilities, the World Bank has funded up to 80% of the course fees for selected participants of 2021. The decision to grant scholarships was made with special respect to the financial pressures caused by the Covid crisis and reflects the World Bank's appreciation of the quality of the program and the trust in its supporters.