

Each issue, we ask members of the *On Tap* Editorial Advisory Board to answer a drinking water-related question. We then print as many responses as space permits. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of NESCA.



Q: *When a small water system needs to hire an operator, what are the most important qualities they should consider in a candidate for the job?*

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Examine Candidates' Experience

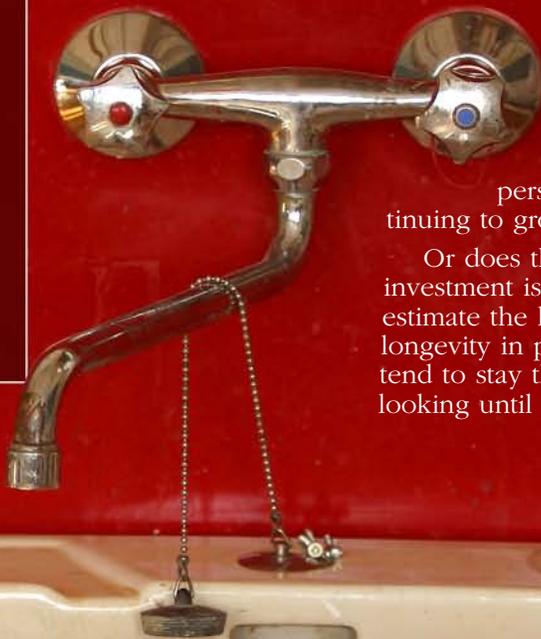
The most important considerations when hiring an operator of a small system are:

1. Similar job experience,
2. Formal education and certification, and
3. History in previous jobs.

The water system must first describe what it is they are looking for and quantify those desires in a job description that is accurate and applicable to the job to be performed. This way you can match up candidate skills with characteristics that are truly needed on the job—and you can recognize a good match for the job when they appear.

A seasoned operator with the valid experience and certification needed to perform the job may be hard to come by so there may be some trade-offs to consider. Look at the applicant's educational background and track record in previous jobs. Does this person show a history of getting the job done while continuing to grow and learn to keep up with changes in the industry?

Or does the employee move from job to job? A considerable investment is involved in keeping an operator trained. Consider or estimate the longevity of the employee by looking at his or her longevity in previous jobs. Some things can be changed but others tend to stay the same. Be honest about your expectations and keep looking until you find someone to meet those expectations.



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A Job with Many Facets

Small water systems should evaluate several criteria before hiring an operator, specifically:

- What are the certification requirements the operator must have to comply with regulations?
- What experience and skills are necessary for the position, and which would be desirable?
- What is the going salary rate (and benefits) in the area for a system of similar complexity, level of certification, and experience?
- Does the budget sufficiently support the position and provide the necessary resources for the operator to maintain the system?
- What is the response time for emergencies, after hours, or holidays as it may impact how far outside the area an operator can live?

According to Kevin Odegard, water foreman at Peninsula Light Company in Peninsula, Washington, because small system operators tend to work alone, they have to be self-motivated. When focusing solely on the skills of an operator, remember these individuals may be the first in line in terms of communicating with regulators and customers. Therefore, they should have the ability to communicate professionally and effectively, and know who to ask for important information and resources. Key qualities should also include good record-keeping skills and ability to trouble shoot operational problems.



Understand all the Aspects

A water system needs to consider whether their system needs a full-time operator, or if they can make do with a part-time operator. A simple system, such as a well and chlorinator, may be able to use a contract operator that comes by periodically to check on the operation of the system and to take compliance samples. This kind of arrangement can keep operational costs down, but may require the assistance of the water users in helping to monitor, maintain, and provide occasional oversight of the system.

Depending on the complexity of the water system, a very small water system might consider the option of having one of the water users become certified and take over the operation of the system. This option assures the availability of the operator should problems occur. This does, however, depend on the cooperation of the users to provide assistance to the operator should operational problems occur.

Next, the water system needs to look at the reason for not having an operator. This, of course, would not apply to a new water system but for an existing system. The reason for the vacancy in the operator position needs to be determined. Was the pay too low? Was there a lack of benefits? Was the management providing the support needed to properly run a water system? Whatever the reason, the system needs to resolve these issues so that they can find, and keep, a new operator. Certification requirements are making the job market very attractive for operators. There are just not enough good operators out there for all the available jobs.

To provide adequate pay and benefits, as well as the financial support necessary to keep a system in good operating order, the system may have to take a hard look at their available financing. It may be necessary to adjust the rate structure to bring in additional revenue before the system is able to hire, and keep, an operator.

Finally, the system's management needs to become aware of the level of certification required, including the job duties, the hours of operations, and the skills necessary to properly operate and maintain the system. The more that management knows about the actual operations of the system, the better it is able to understand the financial requirements necessary to keep the system properly operated and maintained, as well as in compliance.