

Talent on Tap:

A way forward for the water industry skill shortage





From bad weather to bad press, a complicated set of circumstances has created a “perfect storm” for the UK water industry. With supply deficits looming, water companies are now facing a shortage of the skilled, accredited staff (known as Clean Water Operatives) needed to react to pressing water shortage challenges. This short paper dives into the reasons behind both the supply and staffing problems and charts our progress towards a long-term solution for the industry’s predictable and reactive recruitment needs.

Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink

In early 2018, water was on everyone’s lips – and not in a positive way. Rainfall fell below seasonal norms, different regions faced hosepipe bans and other restrictions, and news outlets all repeated gloomy research showing that the UK will face significant, nationwide water supply deficits within three decades unless serious action is taken.

This wasn’t a crisis the water companies could afford to ignore. Even though every regional supplier was already working to combat leakage across their assets,

they all issued fresh statements acknowledging the problem, establishing timelines for putting it right, and publishing drought plans through public consultation. In the background, a massive recruitment drive began¹, looking for a new generation of properly-accredited Clean Water Operatives (CWOs) who would work inside and outside their already-planned major works to diagnose and repair leaks quickly enough to avert disaster. The trouble was, and continues to be, that CWOs are in extremely short supply.

From water worries to talent troubles

In the wake of such water shortages, the water industry is currently experiencing an unprecedented skills shortage. The water industry is struggling to fill more than 35% of its skilled roles (compared to a national average of 23%), and more than a fifth of its current skilled workforce is expected to retire within a decade¹. Current estimations are that the UK water industry will need to fill a staggering 221,000 roles in the next nine years¹.

Take all of this account, and the problem of leakage seems both more understandable – water companies have a lot of ground to cover, and a limited pool of people to cover it. However, the unescapable fact remains that the Environment Agency sees a “future without enough water for people, businesses, farmers, wildlife and the environment” as a real possibility² unless large-scale changes are made.

With shortages so well publicised, most water suppliers have now committed to holding retail prices steady until 2020³. This promise will be backed up by investments of around £5 billion year for a five-year period, all put up by private companies to improve public outcomes³. Some of this money will fund new leak detection technologies like remote drones and sniffer dogs, however the main prong of attack against leakage and other issues in water infrastructure will still be investment in a skilled, certified, workforce.

How do water companies plug the gap?

Clean Water Operatives are the only workers who are certified to maintain, repair, or replace pipework, making an army of them essential for any serious remedial action. To become a Clean Water Operative, a technician needs to undergo a short training period and be issued with a Water Hygiene Card. So, at a glance, it seems to make sense for water companies to



simply have all their appropriate staff undergo CWO accreditation, but this ignores two issues: the ebb and flow of staffing levels, and the limited availability of training on the open market.

Like other utilities and infrastructure sectors, water structures its major works under an Asset Management Program (AMP) framework – now on its sixth cycle. Designed for predictable, multi-year bodies of work that can be planned well in advance, the AMP approach allows water companies to scale their

staffing levels up and down according to demand. As a result, staff are often lost as one AMP winds down and before another begins, making investment in blanket CWO training something of a false economy. While leakage will be addressed on a large scale by major AMP work, numerous localised repairs often need to be conducted on a more responsive timescale.

Today, water companies work with established partners for their AMP recruitment needs and then, on an ad-hoc basis, turn to smaller specialist recruitment consultancies who can offer limited numbers of contingent, CWO-accredited staff, and who charge a premium for their specialist services. This reactive

strategy can hit water firms hard both in terms of cost and availability of staff, putting them at the mercy of multiple recruitment agencies and increasing risk of non-compliance as well as reputation damage caused by project delays or poorly vetted workers. Combine this with the varying rates of pay and fees charged by multiple agencies, and there is a confusing and costly situation over which the water companies have very little control and visibility.



From skill shortage to talent on tap

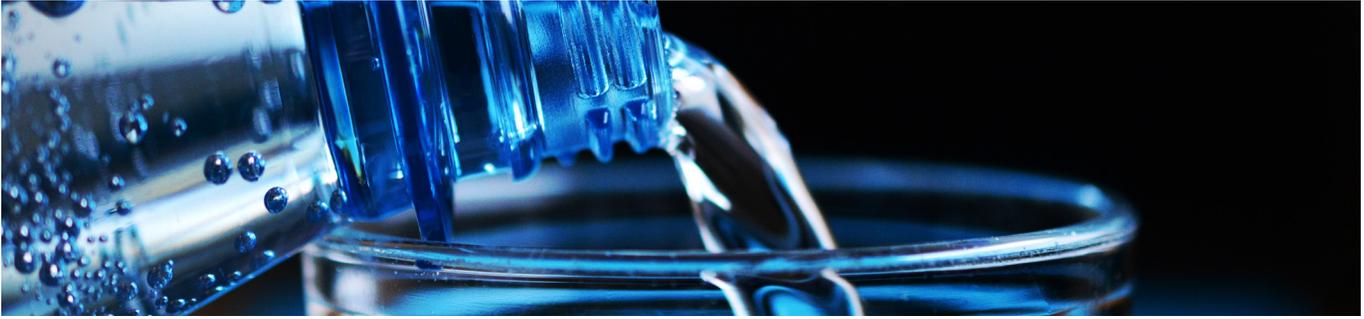
As demand for digital and engineering skills accelerates, it's vital that water companies find a reliable way to sidestep competition for talent from other technical industries and rising prices⁴ and secure the talent to fulfil the planned AMP objectives. As leakage is discovered, companies need the ability to assign certified CWOs in the right volume to address the problem quickly.

We believe that water companies need to be able to rely on their recruitment partner for a flow of the right talent when and where they need it, whether under the predictability of the AMP framework or as an urgent response to an unexpected need.

At Rullion, we have developed a comprehensive talent solution designed to address this problem and alleviate pressure for our utilities clients. Our integrated sourcing strategy is built to enable:

- Immediate response to live recruitment needs
- Build of a relevant talent pool of CWO candidates that meet forecasted and expected needs across each role category
- Engagement of wider talent networks and communities to future proof our clients' sourcing strategies





Here are three ways we're closing the skills gap for the water industry:

We're talent pooling whilst demand is low

We recognise that on occasion, constraints such as qualifications or geographic location cannot be changed, therefore we take a longer and more proactive approach to our sourcing strategy by pooling a capsule database of qualified, screened and referenced CWOs on behalf of our clients. The foundation of this approach is built on providing a source of potential candidates who are engaged and 'ready to work' should the need arise. We then use enhanced referral schemes on behalf of our water clients to take advantage of candidates' personal networks, increasing our reach and further boosting our talent pool. Combining this large candidate database with latest recruitment technology, we proactively look to identify potential future "gaps" (such as key attrition periods by role/location) using predictive analytics to strategically pipeline candidates and inform our clients.

We're tapping into new talent pools

In such a candidate-led market, simply looking in the same places repeatedly and expecting to connect with large numbers of new candidates is futile. We strive to understand the people we place, so we can find and connect with them where they spend their time. Using this premise, we have conducted detailed research into key in-demand candidate groups within the water industry, building

profiles and 'target personas' to better understand where to find new talent. To date, we have used innovative digital advertising campaigns to target and engage with over 50,000 relevant candidates on online communities such as Facebook and Twitter, generating a new pool of unique, passive candidates for our clients.

We're not afraid to build partnerships

As managed service provider to our major water clients, we fill on average 99% of vacancies, but we also recognise that sometimes the support of multiple agencies is vital for project success. Working with a supply network of specialist, boutique agencies should not be considered a last resort in such a skill-short talent landscape, but we believe our clients shouldn't have to shoulder the burden of dealing with multiple agencies. With varying levels of service, delivery and quality control between agencies – not to mention the increased volume of paperwork – we take on the responsibility for sourcing, screening and vetting a wide second tier supply network so our clients don't have to. These partnerships ensure that we can immediately deliver 100% fulfilment on large-scale urgent requirements.



Case Study - Large water client

In February 2018, a major clean water and sanitation client undertook a large recruitment drive. The focus was for 25 Leakage Engineers to be placed as soon as possible, with the aim of helping alleviate the volume of water being leaked by 40% by 2025. Key criteria needed to be met for these roles, including up-to-date qualifications and training, technical knowledge in order to operate advanced equipment, clear leadership skills and dedication to the clients' company values.

In response to this requirement, the client engaged with Rullion and three other agencies. We began by mapping out key organisations within the sector to establish where we could source the required personnel. Once this task was completed, we were able to deploy a comprehensive attraction and sourcing campaign, to identify and engage the best available talent. We made use of our far-reaching candidate database, job boards, network supply of partners and a targeted Facebook advertising and marketing campaign utilising our own award-winning website.

Our Facebook advert alone was able to reach over 45,000 people, with it being clicked on 1,339 times, which is almost 10 times higher than the industry average of 0.3%. Our consultants maintained consistent contact with successful candidates right up until their start date, in order to maintain engagement for the on-boarding process. We successfully completed the recruitment drive on time and under budget, being named 'top performing agency' and enabling the client to effectively protect and conserve vital water supplies.



Conclusion

As a key recruitment partner to utilities companies and principal contractors across the UK clean water network, we have fulfilled the complex recruitment needs of multiple AMP cycles and are active in AMP 6. We source CWOs and leakage technicians for several high-profile water companies, so we're working proactively and establishing partnerships that will allow us to offer a steady supply of new operatives - anywhere, at any scale.

More than just testing the water, Rullion is committed to solving the industry's skill shortage. Get in touch to find out more.

References

1. [Energy and utilities companies collaborate on sector initiative to tackle skills shortage \(April 2018\)](#)
2. [The state of the environment: water resources \(May 2018\)](#)
3. [Water.org.uk Marketplace for ideas](#)
4. [The industry skills shortage 2018](#)



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