

# For Those Who Follow

A SUCCESSION PLAN IN BLACKSBURG, VA., AIMS TO PRESERVE INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PREPARE REPLACEMENTS FOR KEY PEOPLE LEAVING THROUGH RETIREMENT

By Ann Stawski

Developing employees takes time and effort, and Matt Stolte finds homegrown candidates are the most likely to be successful.

As assistant director of management in the Blacksburg (Va.) Department of Public Works, Stolte and the leadership team are focused on capturing and passing on the knowledge, experience and talents of employees soon to retire, including those in the water and wastewater areas.

Many organizations struggle with succession planning beyond making a static list of names slotted for a few top spots. When Stolte stepped into his role a year ago, he saw an opportunity to do something much more effective. He saw that without a succession plan, Blacksburg would be left with a significant knowledge gap that might never be filled.

With support from Kelly Mattingly, director of Public Works, Stolte set out to lay the groundwork for a succession plan. “Kelly understood the need to have career development opportunities within the department and organization,” says Stolte. “He’s the one who encouraged me to pursue avenues to develop the succession plan.”

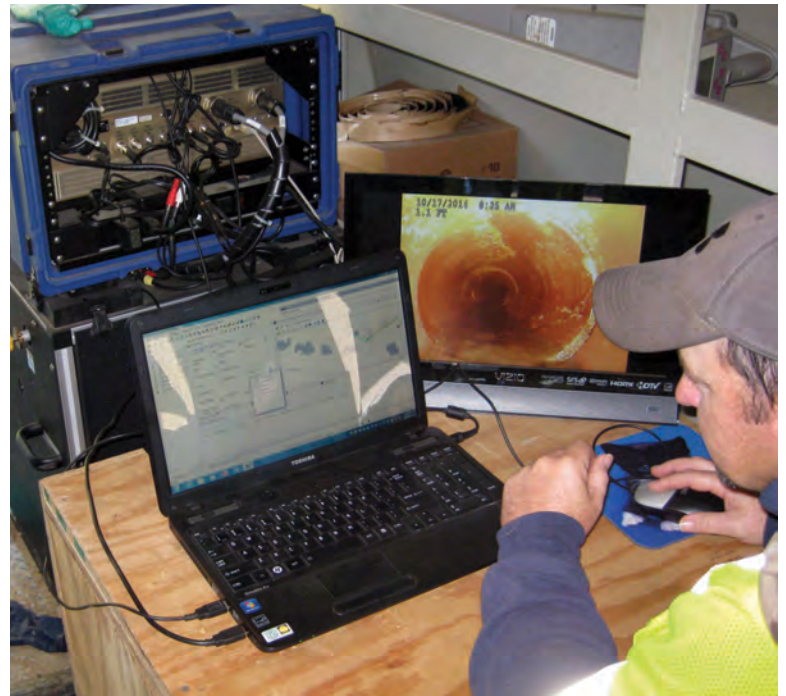
## CREATING A ROAD MAP

In developing the concept, Stolte used his background in capital asset management to transition knowledge to the human element. The Human Resources Department helped him outline the succession plan. “Creating a succession plan with human resources specialists is key because they know how to hire and how to maintain the program,” says Stolte. “They could also help sell the idea across the departments so the municipality could create a robust program.”

A main component is a road map, providing a framework and advice on how to align talent management with the organization’s vision. The road map ensures that employees have opportunities to hone their skills and it guarantees that the organization has an employee development plan in place for the future.

## SETTING PRIORITIES

Through the process, Stolte found opportunities to develop all levels of employees, not just those in the top spots. He notes that employees accumulate massive institutional knowledge and problem-solving know-how. “Succession planning isn’t just about acknowledging the time commitment or



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: A condition assessment crew works in the field to provide up-to-date data on collections system performance; a construction manager communicates to the department and design team on progress of new facility improvements; pump station mechanics use data-logging systems to monitor performance, a task that requires technical development of employees.

“Succession planning isn’t just about acknowledging the time commitment or tenure employees give to an organization, although that should be valued and evaluated. It’s the information we want to pass through to others in the organization.”

**MATT STOLTE**

tenure employees give to an organization, although that should be valued and evaluated,” he says. “It’s the information we want to pass through to others in the organization.”

The next step in succession planning was to assign priorities to the positions held by people slated for retirement and to see whether dual roles could be created for those positions. “First we focused on the important positions with a lot of institutional knowledge that needed to be shared,” says Stolte. “Next we had to figure out the skill sets we needed and whether a successor might need additional training or coursework.”

Blacksburg uses nearby Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech) for education and training. In addition, employees attend water and utility

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conferences. “Asset management revolves around performance and sustainability, and we need to take care of our employees,” Stolte says. “That comes through training and development.”

## TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE

Blacksburg’s succession plan is not just about filling holes — it’s about career development. “The challenge isn’t in finding the employees or their willingness to step up and develop their skill sets,” says Stolte. “The challenge is how to reduce the knowledge gap. Since this program is just developing, we don’t have a lot of time.”

In developing the framework, Stolte and human resources identified three criteria employees would need to meet to begin career succession:

- Willingness to be part of the organization
- Willingness to expand technical skills
- Willingness to enhance skills in personal interactions

Once he identified the criteria, he held expanded conversations with human resources for guidance. “We talked about what the criteria meant in respect to coursework an employee will need to take,” he says. “We also asked: How many hours will an employee need to commit to training? And is additional compensation required to encourage someone to step up over a three-year period to work toward an end goal?”

Stolte found it important to estimate the amount of mentoring and apprenticeship an employee would need to fill a higher role. For example, among highly skilled electricians and pump operators who retire, “There is significant institutional knowledge that we need to capture and pass along to those who will transition into those positions,” says Stolte.

His proposed plan includes a mentoring/apprenticeship program in which upcoming retirees “hand off” information while on the job. “Apprenticeships

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allow more credence for what we’re trying to do,” he says. “Also, the experienced employee is able to share knowledge and information before retirement in hands-on situations.”

## THE NEXT PHASE

As the process rolls into its second year, Stolte acknowledges there is plenty of ground to cover before Blacksburg’s succession planning is ready to launch. He is positive about the foundation work already done and excited for the future.

“If we can demonstrate a mechanism that’s flexible and taps into the right people who have the level of service and will commit, we’ll be able to move forward,” he says. “It’s been important to get these conversations started and begin developing our employees.

“The only way to reduce the effect of lost knowledge is through a strong succession-planning program that identifies and fosters the next generation of employees through mentoring, training and apprenticeships. Our people will be ready and knowledgeable to take the helm when the time comes.” **tpo**



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