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of Rural Telco
Management

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Chief Executive Officer

20

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Superhero Skills for Next-Generation CEOs

By Anna Henry

Just as Jay Leno left "The Tonight Show," a wave of senior executives is retiring from rural telcos. NBC faced many of the same issues telco boards must address as they seek to fill those vacancies. Chief among the considerations is determining what skills are desirable in the next generation of leaders in order to build on the success of predecessors and tackle a new business era with different skill sets.

COVER: DANIEL HERTZBERG

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NTCA represents nearly 900 small, rural, locally owned and operated telephone cooperatives and commercial companies in the United States and abroad, as well as state and regional telephone associations and companies that are the suppliers of products and services to the small and rural telephone industry. Our readers are the managers, directors, attorneys and key employees of these telephone companies as well as consultants, government officials and telecommunications experts.



20 Navigating the Gray Areas of Human Resources

By Rachel Brown

Before the days of GPS or Siri, driving around lost was a not uncommon experience. Human resources managers of the world likely took those situations in stride. Not only must they navigate the employment rules and regulations of federal agencies, they must deal with situations where there are no clear rules.

26 Testing, Testing, 1, 2: Pre-Employment Assessments

By Tennille Shields

How can you be sure that your new hire is the same person who wowed you with a killer resume and stellar interview? Some companies are using pre-employment assessments to determine not only if a candidate is truly the right fit, but also if their existing employees are in the right seat.

30 Rural and Ready: How to Recruit Veterans

By Whitney Pipkin

This year the Army could release 80,000 or more soldiers, while the National Guard is scheduled to cut as many as 35,000 troops. Many small employers in rural areas don't know how to reach out to military audiences with job postings or aren't aware of what candidates with military backgrounds might bring to the table. Here's what they need to know.

Special Telecom Business Pullout Section

Our 2014 supplement highlights products and services from nine companies: ANPI, Calix, Finley Engineering Co., IMSWorkX, Iowa Network Services, Inc., National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC), National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative (NRTC), NetAmerica Alliance, LLC and Sasktel International.

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The Internet of Yesterday and Today

I recently stumbled upon a New York Times article from 1994 that made me laugh. The article—on the emergence of the newly hip Internet—cited a survey finding that estimates of the number of people actively using the Internet (about 20 million at the time) may have been grossly exaggerated and the usefulness of the Internet overhyped. The reason: pesky “fire-walls” that reportedly prevented throngs of desktop computer users from gaining access to workplace Internet ports.



Reading the report today, almost exactly 20 years later, I wonder how different our lives would be if its findings had been correct. A 1996 story in Rural Telecom fared a bit better, predicting that Americans’ reliance on the Internet would forever change the way we work, learn and communicate. Today, the Internet has nearly 3 billion users globally or around 40% of the world population, and a Pew poll found that 87% of American adults use the Internet today, up from 14% in 1995.

At NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association, we are always searching for ways to employ Internet technologies to improve our members’ experience, and in the coming year we will be making some big leaps toward that goal with a new online member services tool and a complete redesign of our association and Rural Telecom websites. The process to bring these tools to you has been challenging but exciting as we discover how these new systems will increase the value of your membership, help us communicate with you in new and different ways, and make life a little easier for all of us.

We may not have known it in 1994, but it’s clear today that the Internet is a hugely powerful tool. We’re using that power to make your relationship with NTCA more fun, more rewarding and, most of all, more valuable.

Laura Withers
Director of Communications
lwithers@ntca.org

Career Changes and the Lure of Rural America

Anyone who lives in metropolitan America but vacations in rural America—or vice versa—knows how hectic the pace of metro life can be. To a harried professional in a metropolitan setting, the lure of rural life can be strong—all the more so these days, when robust broadband connections allow people to stay in contact with friends and co-workers via Skype and Face-time, not to mention by email or telephone.



Rural communities have long promoted themselves as great places for retirees to settle and experience a more leisurely life. That’s exactly why Bob, a retiree I met during my summer vacation, chose rural Virginia over the Washington, D.C., metro area to enjoy his retirement. His story—a possible microcosm of workforce trends—made me think of this issue’s focus on human resources and leadership.

Bob still has a home in Silver Spring, Md., just outside the D.C. Beltway, but he now stays there only the weekends. Monday through Friday, he’s in the mountains of Virginia, organizing bus tours to Rapidan Camp,

the retreat of President Herbert Hoover and his wife from 1929 to 1933. Born in Iowa, Hoover understood the restorative power of spending time away from the city, so he sought a retreat site no more than 100 miles from Washington, high in elevation and with streams and rivers populated by trout. He found just the place in the Blue Ridge Mountains near the Rapidan River, just off today’s Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park.

Bob found the same sort of refreshment in the mountains of Virginia and decided a change was in order. He had always wanted to be a park ranger, and after a career as a government bureaucrat, he’s now doing just that. Those bus tours to Rapidan Camp are a big part of his job, and a reminder of what workers like Bob or leaders like President Hoover already know—that rural America is a great place to live, work and play.

Christian Hamaker
Editor, Rural Telecom
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COMPANY ROMANCE DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN COMPANY DRAMA

Lovebirds can make a mess of a job. However, with a plan in place, business owners can dodge the pitfalls of lovers and keep their companies productive. The most important step is to talk to the couple when the relationship begins.

Threats and anger are not the right approach, said Arlene Vernon, founder of HRx Inc., a human resources consulting company. Handle the situation with respect and a focus on business.

The couple should agree to continue working as they did before dating. It is also a good idea for both of them to acknowledge the relationship is consensual. If the relationship sours, talk to each person separately and remind him or her to keep personal conflict out of the workplace.

Business owners can also try to prevent relationships from starting by encouraging employees to leave work on time so they can have a social life after the business day. "By doing so, they may be less tempted to ask out the only other person they happen to know," said Roberta Matuson, president of Matuson Consulting.

Five Trends to Pay Attention to in Social Media

Here are a few points in social media that deserve your attention now:

1 **Diversify:** Businesses can't depend on one platform for social media. If the rules change or the site crashes you lose that audience.

2 **Google+ matters:** Changes and limitations in search engine optimization (SEO) are putting more focus on Google+ than experts once thought. Now is the time to build a strong presence on the platform.

3 **Social media, SEO and content marketing:** It is important to consider how all three things work together when building your marketing strategy.

4 **Visual content is a must:** Not only photos but infographics, video and microvideo, like Vine and Instagram. Take time to find the visual angle to your business' story.

5 **Social media as a brand builder:** Keep your social media presence, both visuals and text, consistent to build and focus your brand.

► **Source:** entrepreneur.com

The Four People Your Content Marketing Team Needs to Succeed

Having only a static website for your company won't do the job anymore. People want regularly updated content related to your business. Content marketing is the latest strategy that informs customers, attempts to engage them, and changes their views and behavior regarding your company. If you decide to handle content marketing in-house, make sure these four people are on your team.

1. THE STRATEGIST This person knows how to bridge content marketing with your larger marketing efforts and with your organization's business goals.

2. THE CUSTOMER EXPERT This person knows your customers—how they think, what they want and how they use your company. Consider the different perspective sales and customer service personnel have.

3. THE WRITER This person will be most involved for the length of the project. Find someone with the right balance of speed of output, familiarity with your topic and any revisions required. Sometimes a better understanding of the subject can be more valuable than a prolific writer.

4. SEO EXPERT This search engine optimization (SEO) expert knows how to make your content show up in searches and brings views to what you produce. The SEO for your content marketing should be more complex than the SEO used on the standard company website.

► **Source:** searchenginewatch.com

Companies Lose Money on Unhappy Customers

When customers are unsatisfied with your business and treated with the wrong approach, their opinions can have costly effects for your company's bottom line.

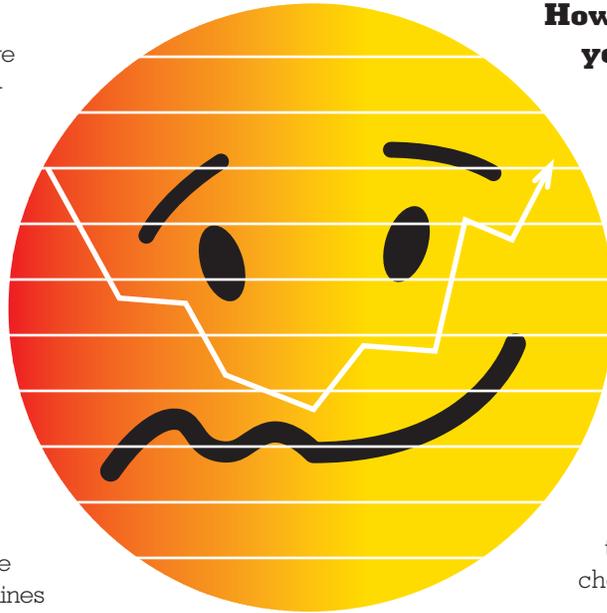
3X Customers are 3 times more likely to tell their friends about a negative experience.

10-12 It takes 10 to 12 positive reviews to offset a negative review online.

14X "Totally satisfied" customers contribute 14 times more revenue than "somewhat dissatisfied" customers.

6-7X It costs 6 to 7 times more to acquire a new customer than to retain an existing one.

14,000,000+ The Internet allows customers to share their experiences more than ever before. After United Airlines broke David Caroll's guitar and would not pay for repairs, the musician created a video that got over 14 million views on YouTube.



How to make your customers HAPPY

First, **FOCUS** on customer experience across all company departments. Deliver to your customers' specific preferences.

Second, **ENGAGE** regularly with your customers through two-way dialogue. Involve customers in various stages of your business.

Third, **PROVIDE** consistently excellent service and support through your customers' preferred channels.

►Source: visioncritical.com

Apprenticeships Give You the Employees You Want



For some companies that need technically skilled, hard-working employees, recruitment has become a serious concern. Apprenticeships are a great way for companies to create employees with the skill sets that they need. However, fewer and fewer companies are willing to take risks on apprentices.

Many businesses see apprenticeships as paying to train employees for other companies. But companies that do make use of apprenticeships find that those, and other critiques, generally do not hold true. Employees have a greater sense of loyalty when they see the effort put into training them.

Apprenticeships are not just for blue-collar jobs. They can be used for jobs throughout an organization. A few states are even taking steps to encourage businesses to expand apprenticeships with tax credits and programs.

►Source: wsj.com

NEW LIFE FOR OLD PAY PHONES

Pay phones may be outdated, but New York City is looking to resurrect them as public broadband hotspots. The city is proposing turning unused pay phone kiosks into combination cellphone charging stations, Wi-Fi hotspots and touch screen kiosks for local information when New York renegotiates its contract with telecom companies that currently manage pay phones.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio is not the first to try to resurrect pay phones. A similar repurposing was attempted by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, but it never materialized. If the plan is successful, the city is projecting \$17.5 million in revenue by June 2026.

►Source: theweek.com



NYC Wi-Fi kiosk design concept.

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@boblatta, Rep. Bob Latta
 Joined @NTCAconnect to discuss the need to resolve rural call completion problems in areas, like #OH5.



@RepRickCrawford, Rep. Rick Crawford

Good to have Lang Zimmerman w/ Yelcot Comm. & @NTCAconnect in DC today talking about #rural #broadband.



@GVTC_Com, GVTC Communications
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Great campaign highlighting the important work of our rural telcos.



@NRECANews, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association
 Thanks to

@NTCAconnect CEO Shirley Bloomfield for the update for our board of directors! Always great to hear from the Rural Broadband Assoc.



@CHRSolutions, CHR Solutions, Inc.
 A look into NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association's Smart Rural Community Initiative. @NTCAconnect



@SenatorBegich, Sen. Mark Begich
 Spoke w/ @NTCAconnect (and folks in Kenai peninsula) on challenges/potential of broadband development in rural #AK



@ZCorum, ZCorum
 Cool entry for @NTCAconnect Smart Rural Community provided by Pioneer Telephone Coop.



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What Makes A Community Smart?

I recently had the opportunity to view a video produced by West Central Telephone Association in Sebeka, Minn., that really blew me away. The video chronicles a visit by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) to a local elementary school where she saw the fruits of the tremendous work West Central has done to connect their community's schools as students used iPads to compose music and perfect their batting stances, all using broadband technology. It reminded me just how important the work that NTCA members are doing is to their communities and taught me that being "smart"—both technologically and strategically—extends far beyond a telco's walls and deep into the community it serves.

So, what does it mean to be smart? The word is defined as showing intelligence and good judgment. But being smart also means having the ability to adapt and change. And when applying that definition, NTCA's members have shown time and time again that they are not only the brains behind the networks they deploy, but also proven solutions providers with a track record for adapting to and embracing change.

That is why NTCA launched the Smart Rural Community initiative in 2012. It's a program designed to foster the development of smart communities across rural America by recognizing innovators and providing resources to assist broadband providers and connected industries. The idea was to focus on communities and communications providers to show how NTCA members are improving the lives of their customers and community members through service to anchor institutions like schools, libraries, hospitals and public safety providers.

While it is abundantly clear that you are doing an amazing job of making the communities where you live and work better, we were wowed by the applications we received outlining the innovative work you're doing. Seven communities, including Sebeka, were honored last year. And each brought a unique story of how their services are making a difference for their communities. While West Central has worked extensively with schools, Blue Valley Tele-Communications of Home, Kan., has focused on connecting health care facilities that are spread out across 10,000 square miles, and ITS Telecom of Indiantown, Fla., built a data center that connects to local businesses along an underground fiber network in an area of south Florida prone to hurricanes and tropical storms. The list goes on.



As we prepare to honor the next round of Smart Rural Communities at the Fall Conference this month, I am so excited to see what new gems will be unveiled. Thanks to the continued support of our vendor community, we will also soon roll out the next phase of this initiative: a new pilot program that will award grants of up to \$10,000 to deserving communities over the next five years. I see this pilot program as just one more way we can work together to create even more smart rural communities.

Of course, creating broadband connections is just the first step in building smarter communities. These connections open doors and enrich lives in ways that some of your rural areas only imagined until you provided services to make these dreams a reality. But broadband is just the beginning; the real work begins once the connections are made. In reading the latest round of Smart Rural Community applications, I continue to be amazed by your forward-thinking mindset, and I am sure Sen. Klobuchar left Sebeka feeling the exact same way. Small telecom providers are leading the "smart" charge, and I can't wait to see what you are able to accomplish next. ■

Shirley Bloomfield is chief executive officer of NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association. She can be reached at sbloomfield@ntca.org. You can also follow her blog at ntca.org/ceoblog.

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A Different Outlook on the Performance Review Process

In early 2013, we were in the midst of a change in our leadership. We welcomed our new chief executive officer (CEO), Bob Johnson, to Dickey Rural Telephone Cooperative (DRN; Ellendale, N.D.) in April of that year. As he worked to get to know us and our culture, a discussion regarding annual performance reviews arose.

After listening to the details of our process, Bob introduced a concept new to me called “the preview,” derived from an article in the Wall Street Journal by Samuel A. Culbert titled, “Get Rid of the Performance Review!” Bob adopted the concept at his previous company with success. With his encouragement, I set out to research the concept and planned to meet afterward to discuss it further.

Fast forward to the end of 2013. We had implemented our version of the preview, and it received rave reviews from our employees!

Here’s the who, what, when, where and why behind our decision to give this alternative solution a try. If you’re interested in an alternate approach to performance reviews at your telco, you might want to consider the preview.

Who

The preview involves the CEO, human resources (in DRN’s case, that would be me), the manager/supervisor and the employee. Initially, I worked with our CEO to establish our process. We decided it would consist of a feedback form given to the employee in advance of the official preview. The form gives employees an opportunity to prepare for the upcoming preview discussion. It gives them a chance to step back from the daily duties and responsibilities and take a look at where they’ve been, where they are today and where they would like to go in the future. Managers and supervisors are given access to an employee’s feedback form after completion to help them better understand the employee’s perspective.

What

The preview process requires managers and supervisors to meet with each of their employees. It’s a time for them to sit across the table in a neutral location and partake in a candid two-way discussion. The

discussion is built around a series of questions involving key contributions; future contributions; job-shadowing desires; five-year career objectives; training objectives to reach goals; training, equipment, test gear, or software needs; things DRN can do better; miscellaneous items; and follow-up plans.

The preview focus is definitely more of a look-ahead approach. In contrast, a traditional performance review is oftentimes a look-back approach and can seem one-sided and subjective. The preview promotes trust and discussions about how the manager/supervisor and employee are going to work together more effectively and efficiently. At the same time, a dialogue begins to take shape on future development that benefits the company and employee.

When

The preview is not just an annual year-end event. It’s ongoing. The door is always open for feedback and communication year round, with a follow-up plan from the preview to support it.

Where

We suggest our leadership team hold the preview in a neutral location either on-site or off-site.

Why

The door was wide open for a performance review change with our new CEO, and it made sense. We evaluated our culture and believed this concept could be easily adapted and would enhance our culture. As our environment becomes increasingly more competitive with many unknowns, we wanted to build on a culture of constant communication, transparency and two-way conversations to help us forge ahead into the future with a “together we are strong” motto. The preview helped us accomplish that goal.



Sonja Bommersbach, SPHR, is HR manager at DRN. Contact her at sbommersbach@drtel.com.

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SUPERHERO SKILLS

for Next-Generation CEOs



Chief Executive Officer

BY ANNA HENRY



S

ome rural telcos are going the way of Hollywood. Like Jay Leno leaving “The Tonight Show,” a wave of senior executives is retiring from rural telcos. NBC faced many of the same issues telco boards must address as they seek to fill those vacancies. Chief among the considerations is determining what skills are desirable in the next-generation of leaders in order to build on the success of predecessors and tackle a new business era.

For example, during his 22-year tenure, Leno successfully tapped into the Baby Boomer market. Leno’s replacement, Jimmy Fallon, is almost 25 years younger than Leno, and is tasked with building on Leno’s success while reaching a new type of viewer: millennials. That technology-savvy group watches TV by using technology that didn’t exist for the majority of Leno’s late-night reign. Consequently, the need to reach the younger market led NBC to want someone more skilled in social media and YouTube-friendly show segments.

In their own way, telco boards are looking for Fallon-esque-type leaders, too. They want new executives who, like Fallon, have a different skill set because these incoming executives will face a much different operating environment than managers have historically faced. Boards view new skills as necessary for ensuring telco operations will thrive even as new regulations, revenue streams, network technology and user demands evolve. Those in-demand skills? Regulatory relationships, financial finesse, marketing mojo, being technically tuned in and understanding tech-savvy millennials. ▶

cer



“Today there’s plenty of places consumers can go to get service. ... We have to be more proactive in promoting and educating consumers about our products and services.”

RANDY TEPATTI
Ligonier Telephone Co.

Regulatory Relationships

NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association has provided manager search services for about 15 years, and over that time Barbara Ritter, vice president of human resources, has seen a shift in skill priorities needed for telco executives. In the past, managerial candidates were more likely to have outside plant knowledge and to have started at the ground level installing phones before working their way up to executive positions. Today’s boards want someone with specialized knowledge in areas like finance and regulatory issues.

“Historically, 60% to 80% or more of a typical rural telecom’s revenues have come from cost-based sources,” stated Dan Caldwell, president of Consortia Consulting (Omaha, Neb.), which specializes in assisting rural telcos in the areas of finance, operation and policy. “Access revenues and [the] Universal Service Fund [USF] were both calculated on the actual costs of the business. While some of the recovery from those sources lives on, it is declining rapidly. And, while we may not like the changes, or agree with them, it currently appears to be a reality that managers must deal with in the future.”

This emerging regulatory environment is a key driver behind the need for managerial regulatory experience. That experience could be gained by actively working with local government agencies; holding a prior position as a company’s regulatory issues liaison; participating on a regulatory committee; or some similar industry-based involvement. For the foreseeable future, the expanding impact of regulations and regulatory changes at both the state and federal levels makes having a firm grasp on regulation a valuable skill.

New leaders must be able to evaluate the financial implications of regulatory changes in USF funding and adjust business plans to mitigate the potential impact to the telco’s bottom line.

Financial Finesse

Randy Tepatti has been working in the rural telco industry for over 20 years, has a financial background and is



“You have to be every bit as fast and as good as your competition. It’s like we need to have one foot in the past for regulatory reasons and one foot in the future to satisfy customers.”

PAUL HAUER
Consolidated Business Services, LLC

the newly appointed assistant manager for Ligonier Telephone Co. (Ligonier, Ind.). He explained, “Generally speaking, in the past if some-

one called in and requested service, you just went out and did it. Nobody really considered the cost because there was always a regulatory fund to compensate for the expense. Now you have to do some budget analysis to justify the value of providing new services. There are a number of ways to provide services, and there’s a cost to each of them that you have to weigh.” These assessments also help mitigate risks affiliated with infrastructure projects, which require increasingly higher capital expenditures that are harder to justify given USF reforms.

Caldwell believes that fundamental changes in telco management will be necessary. Instead of managing expenditures to provide a network and customer service focused on providing superior quality, managers of the future will need to build an organization that’s focused on getting the maximum possible done with a limited amount of available resources. “CEOs of the future must be creative in terms of sharing resources, finding cost-effective ways to accomplish the delivery of network resources, and raising their expectations of staff skills and production,” he said.

“At times it feels like we’re more regulated being deregulated just because of the sheer number of regulatory agencies asking for the same information in different formats. It causes you to ask, ‘Do you want to be a CLEC and get into those regulations? Why don’t I just offer a broadband service and get away from that? If I can provide services without all the hassles, why wouldn’t I?’” Tepatti said.

Marketing Mojo

Telcos that once didn’t need to market themselves are now facing new competition. And, as boards seek to increase market share along with profits, marketing skills will get higher priority on the list of hiring criteria.

“Today there’s plenty of places consumers can go to get service. Small telcos are now competing against cable and cellphone companies, as well as other communication providers. We have to be more proactive in promoting and educating consumers about our products and services,” Tepatti said.

Caldwell said a successful CEO has to be engaged in the “I want it now” marketplace. “The consumers of tomorrow are not willing to wait for the hometown company to catch up with the times,” he said. Positioning the rural telco as a gateway to the world and

Consortium Contracts and Alternative Organizational Models

Paul Hauer, president of Consolidated Business Services, LLC (CBS; Mt. Angel, Ore.), recently became the president and officer under contract for three companies: Canby Telcom (Canby, Ore.), Beaver Creek Cooperative Telephone (Oregon City, Ore.) and Mt. Angel Telephone Co. (Mt. Angel, Ore.).

The three companies that make up the consortium of CBS are Canby Telcom, Beaver Creek Cooperative Telephone Co. and Stayton Cooperative Telephone Co. (Stayton, Ore.). Hauer explained that the consortium contract arrangement extends beyond his position. The trio of telcos use centralized human resource and accounting services, also provided by Consolidated Business Services.

"The telcos keep their local community presence, but we've changed the back office business service model, which provides an economy of scale beneficial to each of them," he stated. "Each telco has remained independent and governed by FCC rules, but we've converted them all to a single software program and have a uniform chart of accounts to help them deal with state and FCC changes more efficiently."

This alternative organizational model also has footholds in other regions in the United States and may grow increasingly popular as the new generation of leaders look to maximize resources and minimize costs.

freeing up the consumer to have access to all that the Internet offers is essential to future success. The future CEO must 'sync up' with his consumers and be one step ahead of their needs."

The latter may be easier said than done. The FCC and public utility commissions are trying to balance the impact of regulatory changes with the business environment, but they aren't able to move as quickly as technology, Hauer said. At the same time, customer demands and rapid technological changes make it important to not fall behind.

"You have to be every bit as fast and as good as your competition," Hauer said. "It's like we need to have one foot in the past for regulatory reasons and one foot in the future to satisfy customers."

Technically Tuned In

With landline service declining and broadband and its capabilities booming, future leaders need to have technical knowledge and understand emerging capabilities.

"The days of managing a network designed for basic voice service are over," Caldwell said. "Technology has moved from singular use networks to multiuse, multiple-priority networks. Despite shrinking traditional revenue streams, the networks of tomorrow will have to deliver more: more services, more bandwidth and more quality. Doing so will be a tall order given the scramble to find new revenue sources at the same time.

"Network technology requires the executives of tomorrow to not only be personally familiar with seemingly endless change, but to surround themselves with staff that actively embraces technology," Caldwell continued. "New services are being developed and delivered over a

variety of platforms. To remain relevant, rural telcos have to keep pace with those developments," he concluded.

Technology changes aren't limited to telco networks and the devices being used by consumers. Tepatti foresees growth in new businesses like data centers, and those accounts are likely to place more technical demands on telcos and be staffed by employees with a level of technical expertise far different from the baby boomer era.

Millennial Management

Just as Fallon is modifying "The Tonight Show" to be more attractive to millennials, this technology-savvy future workforce is likely to force CEOs to rethink operations and what it takes for an organization to thrive. Caldwell believes that trying to force next-generation workers into traditional telco organizational structures will limit an organization's growth potential. "With the exodus of the baby boomer generation from the rural industry, creativity in hiring practices and work environments is going to be essential to future success," he stated.

Future rural telecommunications executives face a much different operating environment than historical managers. Market forces have changed the required executive skill set for success. As future telco leaders skilled in regulatory issues, finance, marketing and new management structures take the helm, they will have to work to create the happily-ever-after Hollywood ending telco board members and customers will be expecting. ■

Anna Henry is a freelance writer. She can be reached at headlineink@aol.com.

Navigating

The

IMMIGRATION

COUNSELING

GRAY
OVERTIME
MEDICAL
FAMILY
AREAS
CONFIDENTIALITY

of
Human
Resources

BY RACHEL BROWN

Before the days of GPS or Siri, driving around lost was a not uncommon experience. The map usually was no help; even though it was veined with hundreds of roads and routes, it usually didn't include the most recent half dozen streets and intersections.

As daunting as this was for most of us, the human resources managers of the world likely took these situations in stride. In their line of work, they must navigate the employment rules and regulations (and paperwork requirements) of a veritable alphabet soup of federal agencies. But perhaps more daunting than that is when they must deal with situations where there is no clear rule. For many, it's those gray areas—when there's nothing on the map—that are the most challenging.

Immigration Issues

Doug Hass, a labor and employment attorney with the law firm of Franczek Radelet, said a fairly common issue he's been seeing lately revolves around illegal immigration. "Maybe someone's been working for you for a couple of years; and then one day, this person says: 'I have a new Social Security number. The one I gave you before wasn't valid, but this one is,'" he said.





“The HR person wonders: ‘Should I pretend like nothing’s happened? Should I fire this person? Should I discipline this person for falsifying documents? Do I need to contact federal authorities?’”

DOUG HASS
FRANCZEK RADELET

For most HR managers, this scenario is troubling, Hass said, pointing out that many in this position don’t know what to do. “The HR person wonders: ‘Should I pretend like nothing’s happened? Should I fire this person? Should I discipline this person for falsifying documents? Do I need to contact federal authorities?’” he said.

Hass said this is a tricky situation because there is the risk of discrimination charges being brought against the company by the employee depending on how the HR manager handles this. In this case, Hass said the first thing to do is to confirm that the new Social Security number is valid and then update the records and issue new W2 tax forms with the correct number. “Maybe you put a note in this person’s file and you move on,” Hass said, adding that it’s not necessary to make this a federal issue. “You’re not the immigration police. Federal law doesn’t require you to take action.”

Overtime Pay

Another area of contention and controversy that Hass said he sees on a regular basis is the issue of overtime pay. “It comes down to who is exempt versus nonexempt for overtime pay,” he explained, noting that this problem is fairly common in telcos because they typically have a mix of white collar and blue collar workers.

To sidestep this issue before it even begins, the written job description should precisely spell out work requirements and responsibilities and should clearly say “exempt” or “non-exempt” in terms of overtime pay, Hass said. “That’s half the battle right there,” he said, adding that these job descriptions should be reviewed on an annual basis. “Technical jobs change over time, and those descriptions can grow stale.”

To further lessen the risk of running afoul of the overtime pay rules of the Fair Labor Standard Act (FLSA), Hass said it wouldn’t

hurt to have an employment lawyer or an HR consultant look over the job descriptions. “Under FLSA, a company can incur larger fines and extra damages for what are deemed ‘willful violations,’” he explained. “But if you had a lawyer look over your descriptions and he says they’re fine, a court may still disagree, but at least you won’t be hit with the extra damages.”

Medical Conditions

Hass said medical issues also have been a hot-potato HR issue since 2008, when Congress changed the definition

of “disability” within the Americans With Disability Act. “Anything short of the common cold or a sprained ankle is a disability now,” he said. “Just assume everything is a disability and realize that HR will be forced to offer individual accommodation.”

Hass said he’s been surprised by the enlarged definition of “disability,” adding that this makes more work for HR managers. “If someone had cancer but is now in remission, that’s a disability,” he said. “If someone has an alcohol abuse problem to the point that it’s affecting performance, that’s considered a medical problem.”

Susan Case, human resources manager for Rural Telephone Co. (Glenns Ferry, Idaho), said medical issues are often delicate to handle. “Under HIPAA, health issues are really protected,” she explained. “You have to be on the lookout if, in a staff meeting, someone says, ‘So-and-so has a neurological disorder so we have to be understanding,’” she said. “Employees often don’t mean any harm. They want to be thoughtful; they want to be kind, but they can’t mention health issues in staff meetings.”

Even supervisors sometimes have to be reminded about the privacy rules surrounding health issues, Case said. “Most HR people are up on HIPAA laws, but it comes down to us educating everyone else that it’s unlawful to disclose this type of information,” she said.

‘Please Do Nothing’

Throughout her 13 years in human resources, Case said it’s been very, very common for an employee to come to her and say that he or she has something to tell in confidence but then ask that no action be taken. “I stop those folks then and there and point out that if their job or the company is involved, it may not be something that I can keep confidential,” she said, pointing out that she may have to take action by law. “In the case of harassment, I can’t hear about it and do nothing.”

Employment lawyer Hass said HR managers should tell employees that they have a duty to act on what they are told. “At the very least, they have a legal obligation to look into this and investigate the claim,” he said, noting that employees sometimes request that no action be taken because they fear retaliation. “Use this meeting to review your policy and point out that employees are protected from retaliation. The law protects people who report problems. HR must be an advocate for this person.”

As the HR manager, Case said her job is to protect both the employee and the company. “It’s a fine line to walk between those two,” she said. “Sometimes I ask people to think about it a little longer before they talk to me.”

Philip Hayes, vice president of HR services and operations for the Arnold Group, a consulting firm, said that if an HR manager knows about a problem and chooses not to act and not to tell management, this can be a risky move for the company. “The court will say that ignorance

is no defense because the managers and owners of a business should know what is going on in their own company," he said. "If it's a case of sexual harassment or a hostile work environment, you can't sit on your hands in those cases. If an employee is being sensitive about a one-time incident, HR can take a different direction."

Sometimes employees merely want to vent about a pet peeve, Case said. "If you're working month after month in close quarters with people, eventually people get on your nerves," she said, adding that she takes these complaints on a case-by-case basis but usually advises the employee to go to his or her co-worker and talk it out. "This almost always works because I don't hear about it again. It's also good because it cuts out office gossip."

Compassion, not Counseling

Glenn Lovelace, chief executive officer of Penasco Valley Telephone Cooperative (Artesia, N.M.), said he has urged his HR managers over the years to be compassionate to employees who are going through personal troubles. "At some point for all of us, life gets in the way and affects your job," he said. "Companies should be caring and sensitive and give you a break and accommodate you if there's sickness or death in the family or you're having some sort of issues in your relationship."

But compassion doesn't equal counseling or a confessional, Lovelace said, noting that sometimes employees will divulge immoral or illegal behavior to the HR manager. "Some employees would like nothing more than a daily chat with the HR manager because they know her and feel comfortable with her; but the job of the HR manager is not to provide therapy, and her time can't be taken up discussing these sorts of things," he said. "The HR manager represents the company. She is not your best friend; she is not your priest."

Instead of taking up company time and resources, Lovelace said a good HR manager can steer a troubled employee to professional counseling. "If the HR manager has the nitty-gritty on the home situation in something like a divorce or a battle with alcohol or drugs, she can confidentially point that employee in the right direction," he said.

While even the best employees can suffer in their work from troubles in their personal lives, Lovelace made it clear he has less patience for those who have self-induced problems. "We try to be considerate and kind, but some people are a constant soap opera and will come up with a serial list of why they can't do their jobs," he said. "If this is a permanent lifestyle choice, our message becomes: 'You need to make a change, including your job.' Some things are beyond the realm of HR to navigate."

All in the Family

While many small telcos and co-ops are family owned and operated, most HR experts noted that being a family

The High Price of HR

The "2014 Compensation and Benefits Survey" from NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association shows the average annual salaries of human resources workers at small telcos, but those salaries are just a drop in the bucket compared with the high price of a mishandled HR problem.

The latest data from Jury Verdict Research found that the median award for employment-related claims is more than \$325,000. Consulting firm Bennett Thrasher estimated that employment liability claims have increased fourfold in the past 20 years. A survey by the Society for Human Resource Management found that more than 60% of all U.S. companies are sued by employees or former employees every year. Of these lawsuits, more than 40% are filed against small companies (defined as 15 to 100 employees).

member should not impact how an HR problem is handled. "When a company is family owned, there's got to be fortitude on the part of the HR staff," Hass said. "Regardless of who's doing what, treat it like anyone else. Courts aren't going to care if the harassment or discrimination was done by a family member. Everyone's got to follow the same laws and the same rules."

Consultant Hayes pointed out that it's not uncommon for nonfamily employees to believe family members play by different rules. "The perception of favoritism gets magnified," he said, adding that this also comes into play with long-term employees. "Be fair, be consistent, and document everything. These are the three guiding principles to HR."

Rural Telephone is family-owned, but Case said that the family members all behave professionally and do their jobs well. "It would be hard to know who to turn to if they didn't," she said.

Still, Case agreed with the need for documentation, particularly if the HR manager's advice on how to handle an issue was not taken. "Put a note in the file that states that this was the recommendation; this is what was done," she advised. "HR officers themselves—not just the company—can be sued, so your accountability becomes very important."



“Any time you have employees, you have employee problems and HR issues. OSHA rules start going into effect at 11 employees; at 15 employees, Civil Rights Act rules go into effect. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act goes into effect at 50 employees.”

PHILIP HAYES
THE ARNOLD GROUP

Too Small for HR

It’s not uncommon for telcos and co-ops with very small staffs not to have an in-house human resources manager, but there are still ways to bring in HR expertise. Most HR experts agree that this is a smart move.

“Any time you have employees, you have employee problems and HR issues,” Hayes said, adding that even with 10 to 15 employees, companies start running into federal government compliance issues. “OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] rules start going into effect at 11 employees; at 15 employees, Civil Rights Act rules go into effect. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act goes into effect at 50 employees.”

For Danny Busche, general manager of Minnesota Valley Telephone Co. (Franklin, Minn.), the threshold number is 25. “Once you hit more than 25 employees, it makes sense to have an HR manager,” he said, explaining that his telco operates two offices with four employees at each site.

“The same group of people has been working together for 30 years,” Busche said. “We’ve been to weddings and funerals and births and graduations. Our telco family is like part of our own family. If we had employee issues, it’s doubtful that our people would’ve stayed around as long as they have.”

Despite the harmonious work environment, there’s still HR work to be done, such as the paperwork necessary for insurance, disability and 401k plans, Busche said, adding that these HR duties fall to him because there is no in-house HR manager. “It’s tedious and it takes up time,” he said.

To help with other HR concerns, Busche said he relies on the Education and Safety Department through the Minnesota Telecom Alliance (St. Paul Minn.). “They come in eight to 10 times a year and talk to the staff about everything from OSHA laws and employment

and hiring rules to ergonomics,” he said. “In the case of topics like bullying or sexual harassment, it helps to have a trusted third party who everyone feels comfortable talking to come in and give these talks. It would be uncomfortable and awkward for us to discuss these topics on our own.”

Employment lawyer Hass pointed out that even if a telco doesn’t have an HR manager on staff, it should still spell out in the employee handbook who employees should go to if they are having a problem. “Say two techs

have a fight out at a tower site, and the first time the telco even finds out about it is when there’s an EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] charge or a lawsuit,” he said, adding that this scenario is made worse if there’s nothing in writing about whom employees should turn to. “That’s a real strike against you. But if you’ve documented that first you go to your supervisor; or if you’re having a problem with the supervisor, you go to the board or to the president or general manager—that’s a good defense. How can you react to a problem if you weren’t even told about it?”

HR Consultant Hayes pointed out that, too often, companies don’t seek out HR help until there’s a crisis. “Small companies often don’t see the need for this until there’s a squeaky wheel or until they find themselves waist deep into a problem,” he said, noting that HR consultants can still come in and help resolve the situation on an ad hoc basis. “But we also like to be proactive and go in and conduct an HR assessment to show companies what they’re doing right and where they need to improve.”

HR consultants can act as a virtual HR department, Hayes said. “We can be just a phone call or an email away to act as a sounding board or to offer advice and guidance,” he said, adding that this is helpful because HR issues can sometimes be time sensitive.

But if a telco finds itself embroiled in an HR problem that is likely headed to court, an employment lawyer, not a consultant, may be the better fit. For those cases, legal firm LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell states that the hourly rate for an experienced lawyer in rural areas and small towns typically runs between \$100 and \$200.

If a small telco doesn’t feel it has enough HR work to merit either an HR manager, a consulting firm or a lawyer, Rural Telephone’s Case noted that it still wouldn’t hurt to have a little HR expertise in-house. “Look around your office for a key person who works with both employees and managers—someone who is professional and confidential,” she advised, noting that this could be the person who handles payroll or the executive assistant to the general manager. “Send that person to HR classes. It’s risky not to have some HR help.”

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Pre- Employment Assessments



APPLICATION

APPLICATION



INTERVIEW 1

INTERVIEW 1

INTERVIEW 2

INTERVIEW 2

INTERVIEW 2

BY TENNILLE SHIELDS



HIRE SLOW, FIRE FAST” is a phrase that business leaders and human resources professionals have been batting around for years. Various industry studies have shown that replacing an employee who doesn’t work out can cost up to nine months’ salary on average. That’s not to mention the emotional toll it takes on existing employees to fill that void.

So, as an employer, how can you be sure that who you hire is the same person who wowed you with a killer resume and stellar interview? Looking beyond a potential employee’s skill sets, some companies are using pre-employment assessments to determine not only if a candidate is truly the right fit, but also if their existing employees are in the right seat. While HR consultants say you have to walk a fine line to skirt legal issues surrounding these types of tests, assuming the tests are legal and properly administered, pre-employment tests can be useful in helping a company screen and select a strong job candidate.

Just Another Tool

In recent years, lawsuits surrounding pre-employment assessments have made national headlines, as courts have considered the validity, reliability and application of these tests to narrow the pool of job candidates. But as Rick Tiemann—president of the Executive Group, an organizational development firm that specializes in assessments for selection and development—sees it, “It’s not the assessment that causes problems, it’s really the process or lack thereof that gets companies into trouble.”

He said the problem lies in the lack of protocol that companies use when administering the tests, such as who has to take it and who doesn’t. For example, he said, “If you have a male and female job candidate and only require the female to take the test, and you end up hiring the male, some would point to the test as being the deciding factor, but this is where discrimination suits come into play. It’s not the assessment, it’s the lack of a process that is adhered to.”

Tiemann said there are several types of assessment tools that can be used. He cautioned against using four-dimensional personality tests (e.g., Myers-Briggs, personality inventory), which he believes do not measure personality at a deep enough level to understand emotional intelligence or how a person handles stress. Instead, he recommended the use of a psychological assessment (e.g., 16 PF, Hogan, CPI), which reveal a deeper level of human behavior.

“Pre-employment testing allows you to gauge critical thinking skills such as problem solving, analysis, methodology, team building skills, employee awareness and tendencies,” he said, adding that companies would be wise to use a battery of assessments that complement each other to measure diagnostics. “This will create a set of diagnostics that evaluates an individual’s complete psychological makeup and makes it harder for them to ‘outsmart’ the process.”



Types of Tests

Rick Tiemann—president of the Executive Group, an organizational development firm that specializes in assessments for selection and development—pointed out that there are several types of assessment tools, ranging from simple four-dimensional assessments (e.g., Myers-Briggs, DiSC, Predictive Index, etc.) to more sophisticated psychological assessments (e.g., 16 PF, Hogan, CPI, etc.).

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a popular instrument and highly used, he noted.

“While it is highly validated in some aspects, its retest reliability falls short in that only 50% of the time, an individual falls in the same ‘type’ as when they originally took it. It is also not validated to be used as a selection tool,” he said. “One must be very careful to not only choose the correct instrument, you must select a provider who understands the world of assessments. The world of assessments is extremely complex ... when you start adding skills tests and critical thinking skills tests, you need to work with a skilled provider that will help you understand where the land mines are.”

Narrowing the Pool

Nate Brickner, general manager of Bascom Communications (Bascom, Ohio), said he administers two types of tests to job candidates who make it to the second interview stage to aid in his hiring process. “At the end of the first interview, we let candidates know that if they make it to the next round they will be asked to take the test,” he said. “By then, we have already narrowed the pool down and then use this as almost validation to what we are feeling.”

For technical positions, the company administers a skills test to determine just how skilled (or unskilled) a candidate is. “Everyone thinks they are a computer guru just because they can work a laptop,” he said. “This test really tests their skills level. Some test just fine; others do not.”

For other positions, candidates must take the Divine Inventory, a 30-minute, Web-based behavioral assessment that gauges a candidate’s behavior, competencies, areas of strength, needs for development, etc. Brickner said the test asks the same question multiple ways, and the feedback helps him to determine whether a person will be a good fit for the company. If a person doesn’t score well in a certain area, the report offers suggestions for follow-up questions to ask the candidate during the interview.

The tests have been very helpful for Bascom Communications. “We hit a home run with the last CSR we hired,” Brickner said.

At Panhandle Telephone Cooperative (Guymon, Okla.), Mitzi Dain, director of human resources, tells candidates upfront that the telco conducts an in-person interview and an online assessment, in addition to a resume and reference check, as part of its hiring process.

Candidates must take the Wonderlic personality test, which provides an overall idea of their skill level and their ability to “think on their feet,” Dain said. Panhandle doesn’t require the candidates to achieve a certain score, she said, noting the results are factored in as less than 20% of the overall decision-making process.

Twin Valley Telephone Co. (Miltonvale, Kan.) conducts pre-employment assessments before or after the job interview, depending on the circumstances. Mick Payne, human resources manager, said conducting the analysis beforehand allows the company to follow up during the interview process on areas that may indicate red flags.

“The interviews allow [candidates] to give their opinions and talk about their skills. ... Candidates can tell you whatever they want you to know,” he said. “The assessment reflects their attitudes and behaviors, which might show if they are not a good fit for the department or company.”

In the past, Payne said, the company hired people from the community for open positions based on what was known about them personally. “They didn’t always work out the way we thought they would. We wanted an additional tool that would help us with our hiring decisions,” he said.

Everyone in the Right Seat

In addition to helping employers identify the strongest external candidates for open positions, assessment tools also are useful for helping employers identify and groom future leaders of an organization.

At Golden West Telecommunications Cooperative (Wall, S.D.), Human Resources Manager Melanie Ann Weber, SPHR, said development assessment tools have been useful in helping the company cultivate new managers. The assessments help identify areas where managers may need additional coaching or training on, she said.

It’s a similar case at Twin Valley Telephone, where assessment tools have been useful during succession planning, promotions and coaching. “It also helps us gauge where an employee fits within the company if they want to move to a different department,” Payne said. “We can see if they are the right fit for the new job or department or if they will get along with the supervisor.”

Understanding What to Look For

With so many different types of assessments available, Rick Tiemann—president of the Executive Group, an organizational development firm that specializes in

assessments for selection and development—said hiring managers would be wise to ask a few questions to identify whether the assessment tool is a simple one or sophisticated one.

Those questions include:

- > How is the test constructed (i.e., how it is designed and structured)?
- > How is distortion evaluated (i.e., is the person “faking good” or “faking bad”)?
- > How many distortion scales are used?
- > What is the test-retest reliability coefficient? How consistent is the assessment over time?
- > Is it forced choice or open choice?
- > How long does the assessment take, and what kinds of behaviors are measured?

For example, conducting a comparative analysis would show if a person is high energy or how assertive he may be in a given situation. Someone with a more dominant personality may not mesh well with a supervisor who has a similar personality, Payne said.

To gauge the accuracy of the personality assessment, Bascom Communications' Brickner said he administered the test to all of his employees and found it to be "pretty spot on."

"It gives us insight on how people work and helped us to determine if we have the right people in the right place," Brickner added.

The information gleaned from the assessments has helped Brickner decide whether existing employees should lead certain projects or perhaps take on new or different responsibilities that may be better suited for their skill sets.

Penny Wise and Pound Foolish

The prevailing consensus of those interviewed for this article is that pre-employment assessments are a worthwhile investment, providing employers with some critical insights into a candidate's personality, attitude and work ethic that may not come through clearly during the interview process.

As Bascom's Brickner noted, some people are "professional interviewers," and if a new hire doesn't work out, everyone at the telco feels the pinch. "We're a small company and don't have the time and energy to interview and retrain people if we hire someone who doesn't work out. If we [hire someone], we want to do it right," he said.

The Executive Group's Tiemann conceded that he only became a believer of pre-employment assessment after having to fire the first two people he hired. "I made some bad hiring decisions," he said. "Data speaks louder than a job candidate. ... It costs 2.5 times an annual salary if you make the wrong hire. You'd be penny wise and pound foolish to not use a pre-employment assessment before hiring someone."

Perhaps Twin Valley Telephone's Payne summed it up best, stating, "We realize that it is just another tool that gives us a clearer picture of the candidate. It's not an end all be all that we are hiring the right person."

Payne advised hiring managers to be open minded.

"Just because someone scores low doesn't make them a bad hire," Payne said. "You can't make a hiring decisions on the assessment alone. You have to take their resume, knowledge, phone interviews and in-person interviews into account as well."

Tennille Shields is the senior writer/editor for NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association. Contact her at tshields@ntca.org.

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Over the years, Blackfoot Telecommunications Group has grown from simply providing telephone service in rural Montana to delivering state-of-the-art communications services to more than 20,000 customers in eight counties in both Montana and Idaho. In 2013, with the help of a \$40 million loan from CoBank, Blackfoot made a series of acquisitions that helped enable some of that growth. In addition to traditional voice and high-speed data, the company now offers a variety of other services, including owning western Montana's largest private Voice over Internet Protocol network.

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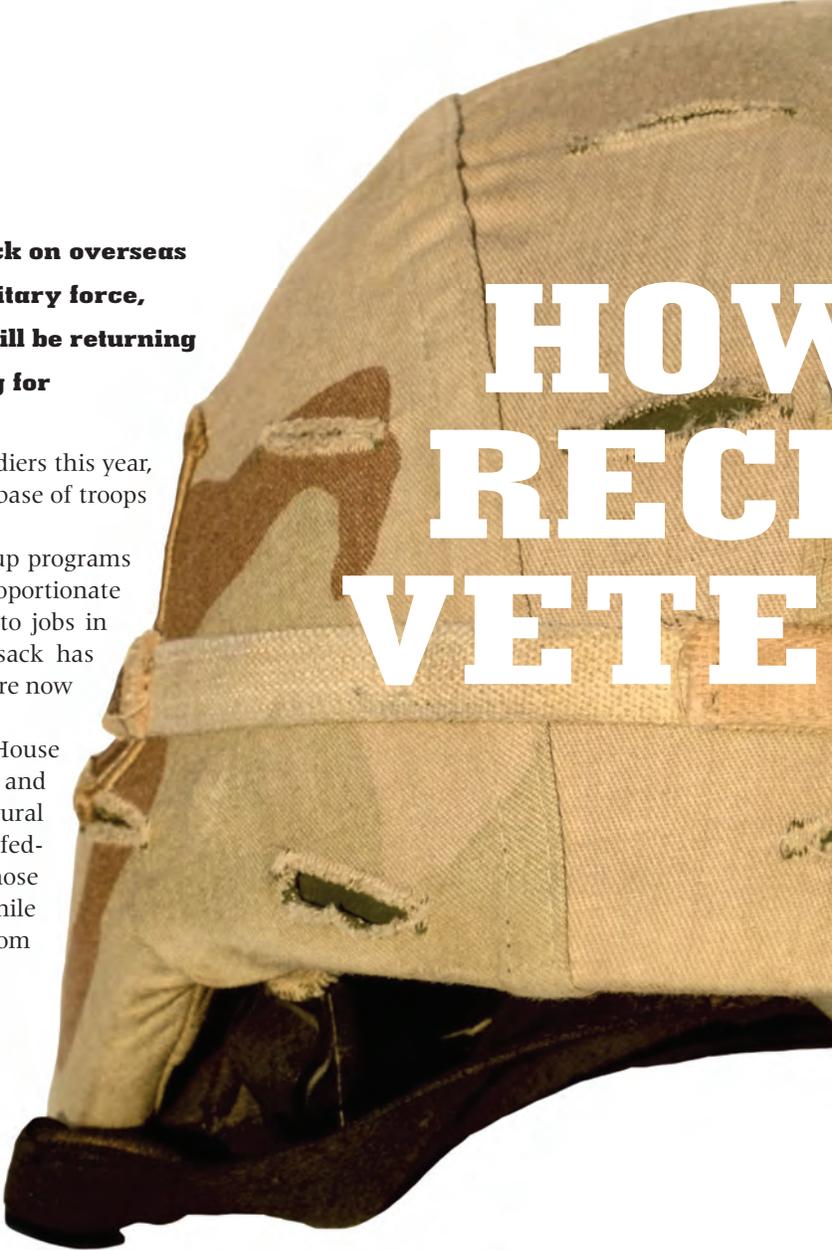
BY WHITNEY PIPKIN

As the United States scales back on overseas conflicts and its full-time military force, tens of thousands of troops will be returning to the country—and looking for out-of-uniform work.

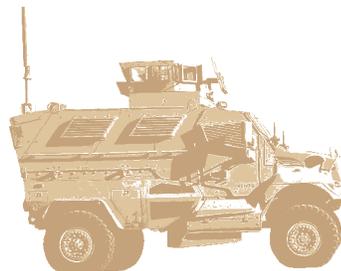
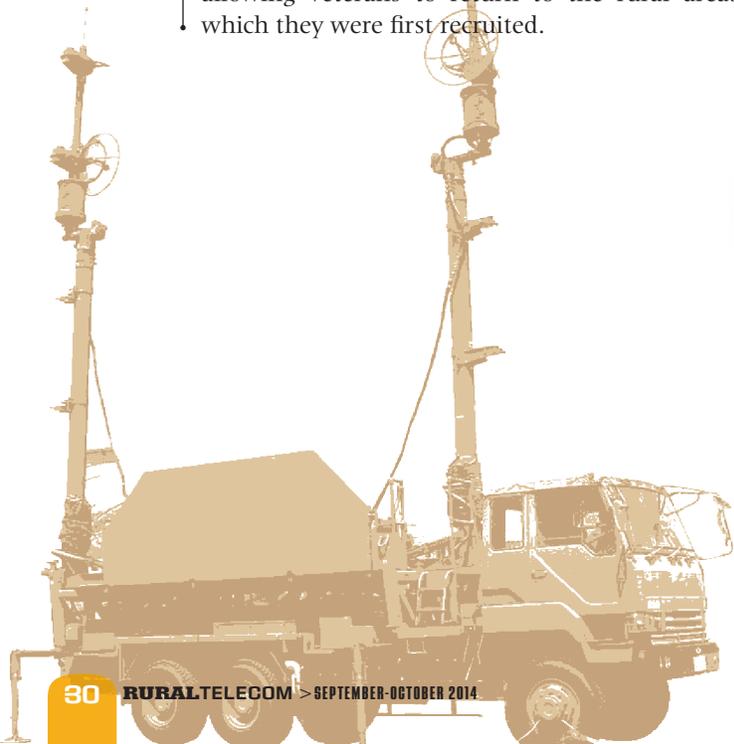
The Army said it could release 80,000 or more soldiers this year, while the National Guard is scheduled to reduce its base of troops by up to 35,000 people.

Meanwhile, the federal government is ramping up programs to help connect these service members—a disproportionate number of them from rural parts of the country—to jobs in their fields. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has pointed out repeatedly that many of these veterans are now struggling to find work.

President Barack Obama established the White House Rural Council in 2011 to expand rural infrastructure and increase access to capital for small businesses in rural areas, among other goals. New initiatives to connect federal dollars to military veterans could help meet those goals from the federal government's perspective, while allowing veterans to return to the rural areas from which they were first recruited.

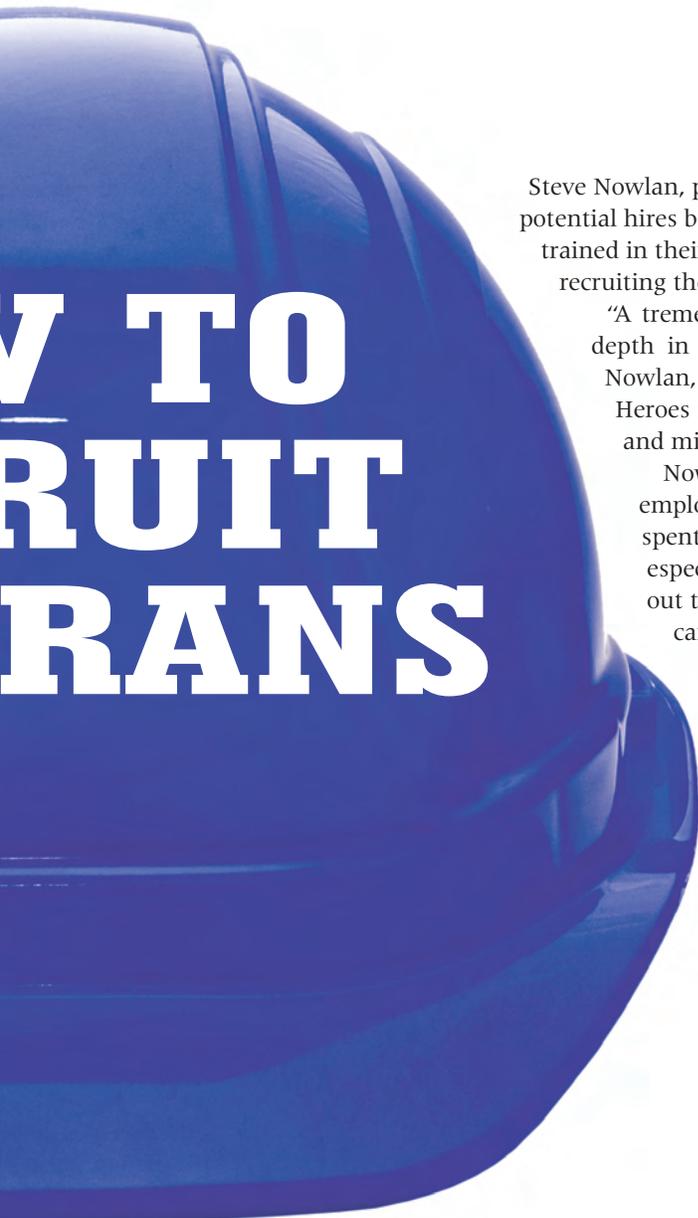


HOW RECI VETE





ND READY



W TO RUIT RANS

Steve Nowlan, president of the nonprofit Center for America, said this influx of potential hires bodes especially well for companies seeking employees already trained in their area of expertise, though many don't know how to begin recruiting them.

"A tremendous percentage of the people in the military are trained in-depth in technical disciplines that relate to telecommunications," said Nowlan, whose organization coordinates the American Jobs for America's Heroes (AJAH) Campaign to connect National Guard members, veterans and military spouses to careers in the private sector.

Nowlan said military cutbacks present an opportunity for private employers to tap into a ready workforce that the government has spent "up to \$100,000" per person training. But many companies, especially small employers in rural areas, don't know how to reach out to military audiences with job postings or aren't aware of what candidates with military backgrounds might bring to the table.

Finding Applicants

Heather McDonald only recently joined the 60-person team at S&T Telephone Cooperative Association (Brewster, Kan.) as human resources manager, but already she's noticed a number of applicants for employment with the telco whose resumes show military backgrounds.

"I think, given the nature of our company, I've definitely made a correlation between this industry and military service people," McDonald said. "Frequently the applicants do have that background."



But McDonald said she has not made a special effort to recruit people with military experience, though she's open to the idea. So far, "they've found us," she said.

One of the goals of the AJAH campaign is to help smaller businesses with HR professionals who might not have experience with hiring National Guard or military members—or companies that don't have devoted HR professionals—tap into this unique pool of potential employees.

Stacy Bayton is chief operating officer for Corporate America Supports You (CASY), one of two nonprofits spawned by the overarching AJAH campaign. CASY manages a free job-posting portal that delivers openings from participating employers to military job counselors in every state.

She said 70% of the more than 1,000 employers participating in the campaign don't have an organized military hiring campaign.

"We can help these employers modify their postings to be more relevant to veterans, plus explain how a candidate's experience and training relates to the job requirements," Bayton said in a press release, adding that these small clarifications often make the difference as to whether an employer makes an offer.

It's free for companies to register with the campaign and to post job openings to its portal. Nowlan added that the portal is not "a passive job board" but a tool to get job openings in front of military counselors "whose full-time job is to match veterans with these jobs."

In some cases, those jobs can be posted to military installations where specialty units have been training service members in specific fields, like telecommunications.

"If you're trying to put your posting in front of people who are especially qualified, we can go out of our way to make sure those specialty units know about your job," Nowlan said.



HOW TO BEGIN HIRING MORE VETERANS AND NATIONAL GUARD MEMBERS

★ Contact the Transition Assistance Program Office at a military installation in your region or state. Search for one near you at www.taonline.com/tapoffice.

★ Register for the American Jobs for America's Heroes campaign at www.centerforamerica.org/register.html.

★ After registering, post job openings through the Corporate America Supports You confidential online portal. Directions for doing so will follow after registering.

★ Establish goals for hiring veterans and meet them.

★ Recruit company leaders in the effort. Steve Nowlan, president of the nonprofit Center for America, said companies with chief executive officers who are committed to hiring veterans and following up on goals to do so have more success attracting them into the company.



The Telco Connection

Nowlan said telecom companies, in particular, often have positions "that line up very well with the skills, training and technical background of members of the military."

An Army veteran who has kept communication lines up and running during combat in Afghanistan, for example, is especially qualified to do a comparable job in the states. In a broad sense, rural telecom companies face similar obstacles to delivering their services—whether rivers, mountains or vast plains—as military veterans faced while achieving their missions overseas.

Nowlan pointed out that, beyond having specific skill sets, employees with military backgrounds are generally team-oriented, disciplined and accustomed to meeting exact, specific standards in their fields.

That's why a handful of national telecom companies have committed to hiring more military veterans as they deploy federal dollars to grow broadband and wireless networks while employing more of those leaving federal service.

AT&T, which participates in a national Warriors 4 Wireless program, announced at the end of 2013 plans to hire 10,000 veterans and their family members in the next five years. And Frontier Communications, which has had its own military hiring program for several years, now boasts that 11% of its workforce has some form of military experience.

These larger companies "are doing everything they possibly can to hire as many vets as they can get in the front door," Nowlan said. "Companies that are smaller may not be well known to military veterans. They may not have a large staff that can reach out to the military hiring campaigns."

That's where campaigns like AJAH, which already has more than a dozen companies in the telecom field currently participating and posting jobs, can help fill in the gaps, Nowlan said.





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Companies that were only considering hiring military veterans may have to act on the opportunity beginning this year if they work on federal contracts of \$100,000 or more. A law that went into effect in March now requires that 8% of new hires stemming from those contracts be “protected veterans,” a category that includes those who recently separated from active duty, served in a war, are disabled or received an Armed Forces service medal.

As the federal government works to expand communications networks to more of rural America—and to transition tens of thousands of military service members into the private sector—these two initiatives could coincide more frequently for rural telecom companies.

Rural Lifestyle

S&T Telephone’s McDonald said many of the applicants for positions at her company are drawn to the rural lifestyle that comes with the job. Though her company is based in a town of about 250 in Northwest Kansas—which is several hours from military bases in Colorado Springs, Colo., and Wichita, Kan.—a growing number of those applicants come with military backgrounds. That has piqued McDonald’s interest in programs that might help her recruit more of them to the small town her company calls home.

“We like to create positions that give people more of a chance at a career rather than just a job, whether they are military or otherwise,” McDonald said. “When you’re in small communities, you like the people to want to be here.”

Whitney Pipkin is a freelance writer. Contact her at whitpipkin@gmail.com.

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A Listener's View



The goal of every presentation is to successfully influence how listeners will think or act. If that's so, few presentations make the cut. Although many treat presentations rather casually, every one counts and each one is equally important.

And here's why: We are our presentations. We're the one on stage, and we're judged by our listeners not only by what we say, but by the effectiveness of the performance.

Every presentation tells a story—our story. It's that serious because presentation skills influence the destiny of a business career, and the advantage goes to the top presenters.

Whether speaking one-on-one or to hundreds, it's always a presentation. Formal or informal, it's always a presentation. Whether it's long or short, it's still a presentation. Whether it's a sales speech, management briefing, staff meeting or discussing a concept, plan, or presenting a proposal, it's all the same: It's a presentation, and the presenter is on the line.

Here's the way to make every presentation a success.

1 Start with asking, "What do I want someone to say, do or think after hearing my presentation?"

If you don't have a clear picture of how you want listeners to respond, they will be confused and dissatisfied. A presentation gets a focus and comes under your control when you know exactly how you want it to be perceived. Write down your answer and make it specific so it becomes your built-in GPS as you develop your presentation. If you don't, expect a low grade from your audience.

2 Think about some presentations you've heard lately

at work or anywhere else. What didn't you like and what was good? Again, write down your answers and then get it right when preparing a presentation:

What didn't you like?

- Went too fast or too slow
- Boring, no excitement
- Too long
- Hard to follow
- Too much information
- Not enough information
- Didn't learn anything
- Heard it before
- Not prepared
- Sounded like a lecture
- Didn't involve listeners
- Confusing, couldn't follow
- Not organized
- Didn't understand the listeners
- Talked down to us
- Poor use of media aids

What did you like?

- Good stories
- Involved listeners
- Well organized
- Easy to follow
- Energetic
- Right length
- Good pace

Every presentation tells a story—our story.



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- Learned something new
- Understood the listeners
- Helpful information
- Interesting
- Well prepared
- Wanted to hear more
- Good use of media aids

3 A presentation is always a “joint venture” between presenter and listeners.

It belongs as much to them as it does to you. This is why pretending they’re looking over your shoulder as you’re preparing it is a good way to think about it, but it also makes it hard work. How so? Because a presentation is always a compromise between what you want to say and what the audience wants to hear.

Having a thorough understanding of the audience (who they are, what they’re thinking, what they’re looking for, the problems they face and so forth) is essential in reaching the goal of successfully influencing how they will think or act so they will want to do business with us.

4 Connect your listeners with stories. The good news is that listeners want to believe in you as someone who cares about what they care about. Unfortunately, this occurs infrequently.

The way to do it is with the right stories—those that keep the focus on your listeners. Nix those about yourself, your company, your job, your dog, your significant other or your vacation—unless they’re a good fit for your audience. If you have kids, you may have great stories, but leave them at home. If you don’t, you’ll lose your listeners. Always keep in mind that your presentation is about them, not you. Here’s an example of a story that works:

A page-one story in the Boston Globe told of an unemployed 58-year-old man who spent two years job hunting. Trying for a middle management job in the computer industry, he had sent out hundreds of resumes without a nibble. Now, he thought he might never work again.

Yet, buried in the story was a telling comment. Years before he was known

Having a thorough understanding of the audience (who they are, what they’re thinking, what they’re looking for, the problems they face and so forth) is essential.

as “Mr. Fixit.” It was something he loved doing. So, fixated on getting a job, he was blind to the one staring him in the face.

There are times when we’re so stuck on going in one direction we miss the opportunities that are in front of us. Always keep your antenna up. The best stories come from everyday experiences, news articles, biographies and even ads.

By using stories to connect with your listeners, something important happens to a presentation. Slides, that common tool that’s too often used as a crutch, become far less important. If you use them as a road map to let the participants know where you’re going, use words sparingly—one or two on a screen with a graphic or a short video, perhaps. The objective is to keep the focus on the audience, not the visual aids.

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5 Write them out word-for-word. “But that’s a lot of work, and this is just an informal presentation,” someone says. Of course, it’s work, but the deadly mistake both new and experienced presenters make is cutting corners on preparation, starting with thinking that writing out presentations isn’t needed.

The writing is a given only if you want to make winning presentations. If you don’t write it out, count on forgetting something, missing or messing up a major point, or saying something you’ll regret.

6 Turn on your presentation GPS. From the get-go, you have no more than 30 seconds to grab attention and make clear what you want to accomplish. One presenter looked at the audience of 75 or so life insurance agents and said, “Only three of you are going to get rich. How do I know? Only three of you will do what it takes to get there.”

What follows are the three steps a life insurance agent must take to reach success—and this is where stories, supported by facts, can help engage listeners.

Then, wrap it up, summarizing what you want the listeners to remember about your presentation, and close with a challenge. Here’s how the presenter did it with the life-insurance-agent audience. “About 40 of you may be thinking that it sounds interesting, but I’m doing pretty good now,” he said. “Another 25 has found something they would like to try, while seven are thinking you want to get on board, but will drop off tomorrow by early afternoon. That leaves only three, the ones who will strike it rich.”

By the way, never end with a question or a quotation. It’s the easy way out, but it doesn’t work. Always end with your own words.

7 Get some coaching. This seems to be the universal solution today. Yet, it can be a big help for presenters. No, don’t fret because you can’t hire Scott Pelley or Diane Sawyer (although just watching them in action is an education for presenters).

Your best bet may be in the next cubical, a friend or a significant other. It’s a person who recognizes how much you want to do well. Then set the stage with your new coach. “Be honest. Make

some notes and let me know what you like and what you don’t—and why. Then we can talk about it.”

Can’t find a live coach? Get a digital one. Prop up your smartphone, tablet or laptop and video your presentation in three- to four-minute segments (yes, watching may be a bit overwhelming at first). Play them back and do it again, and again. You’ll be amazed at the improvement, and you’ll hear and see where you will want to make edits to the text. You may be ready for YouTube!

Making great presentations is an immense challenge. They’re never spontaneous, never left to the last minute and never read from PowerPoint screens. They’re always written, always edited and always rehearsed. Those who do it best are those who recognize that giving a presentation isn’t what they do; it’s who they are. ■

John Graham of GrahamComm is a marketing and sales consultant and business writer. Contact him at johnrg31@me.com.

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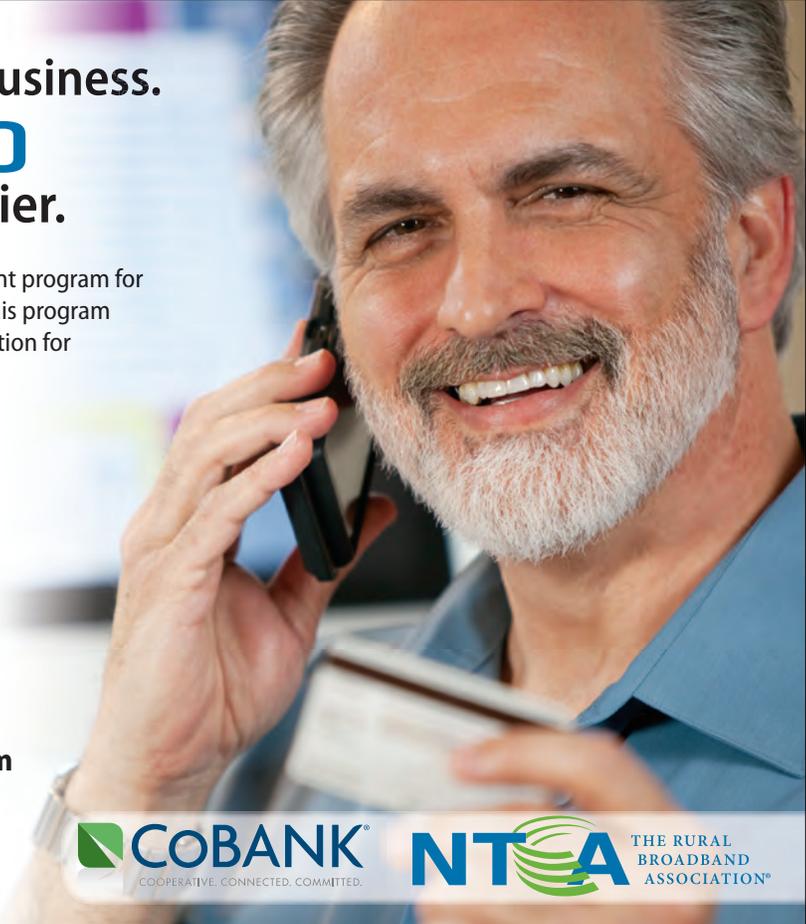
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Western Iowa Network Technicians hard at work on an extensive fiber project.

Rural Telcos Accept the Gigabit Challenge

By Megan Badding, Western Iowa Networks Director of Marketing and Business Development; Bruce Forey, GVTC Communications Manager; and Tennille Shields, NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association Senior Writer/Editor

Former FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski made headlines in January 2013 when he issued a nationwide Gigabit City Challenge to establish at least one gigabit community in all 50 states by 2015.

"American economic history teaches a clear lesson about infrastructure," he stated at that time. "If we build it, innovation will come."

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association members such as GVTC (New Braunfels, Texas), Home Telecom (Moncks Corner, S.C.) and Western Iowa Networks (WIN; Breda, Iowa) have accepted the commission's gigabit challenge, rolling out lightning fast, high-speed Internet service to rural communities in their service areas.

Speeds of 1 Gbps are approximately 100 times faster than the average U.S. fixed high-speed Internet connection. At gigabit speeds, connections can handle multiple streams of large-format, high-definition content such as online video calls, movies and immersive educational experiences.

"NTCA is thrilled to see the enthusiasm and innovation by our member companies in providing cutting-edge telecommunications services," said Shirley Bloomfield, NTCA chief executive officer (CEO). "Our members continue to show their dedication to not only providing broadband but also top-of-the-line services to their customers, regardless of where they live and work. This is another



FCC Commissioners and Sen. Thune Check Out South Dakota Telcos

By Greg Dean, South Dakota Telecommunications Association Director of Industry Relations

At the invitation of Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), FCC Commissioners Ajit Pai and Michael O'Rielly in late May spent two days in Sioux Falls, S.D., learning more about the challenges faced by NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association members and how entrepreneurs are using broadband technologies to enhance their small businesses.

Prior to the start of the official visit, the senator and commissioners had an informal dinner with a variety of local stakeholders to learn more about the state and the services and difficulties each group faces in serving customers on the High Plains.

The next morning, Thune, the ranking member on the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, accompanied the commissioners on a small-business Internet crawl in downtown Sioux Falls. Later in the day, the commissioners met with a variety of industry groups, including representatives of the South Dakota Broadcasters



The Gigabit Challenge

from page 41



example of the important role broadband providers can play in the enhancement of their customers' lives and the economy in the communities they serve."

'WINning' in Iowa

On July 15, WIN officially launched its 1 Gbps Internet service to the rural Iowa communities of Breda, Carroll, Lidderdale and Westside, making the company one of 16 gigabit communities across the country. The foundation of the gigabit communities in Iowa is the 100% fiber-optic network built by WIN that allows customers to enjoy all of the same benefits that larger providers in other communities offer their customers.

The next phase of WIN's business plan is to offer a range of Internet speeds and pricing to make it affordable for current and future customers to have access to a state-of-the-art connection to the outside world.

"We are launching our gigabit services so businesses can grow, schools can develop one-on-one initiatives, telemedicine can be offered in rural communities, and communities can enhance their economic development," said Chuck Deisbeck, CEO of WIN. "With these faster Internet speeds, people in our rural communities will be able to live the lifestyle they want to enjoy without having to sacrifice access to services that have previously only been offered in urban areas."

Reflecting on this important announcement and what it means for rural Iowa, Dave Duncan, CEO of the Iowa Communications Alliance (Urbandale), stated, "Whereas Google only serves those in densely populated urban areas who have

'presubscribed' and laid down hefty deposits, Western Iowa Networks is taking the lead by offering gigabit service to anyone who wants it within those four service areas. This is also a great example of how locally owned and operated communications providers are addressing the growing digital divide that separates many rural customers from their urban counterparts."

A GigaRegion™ in Texas

With San Antonio and Austin vying for Google Fiber, GVTC Communications, headquartered just north of San Antonio, made its move this summer to become the first rural telecommunications provider in Texas to power more than 2,200 miles of fiber-optic cable with gigabit Internet service.

The company deployed fiber broadband to south Texas nearly a decade ago. Through a unique partnership with the cities of Boerne, Bulverde and Gonzales, GVTC launched a two-year marketing campaign to promote the economic development, business and lifestyle benefits that life in the GVTC GigaRegion™ can provide.

GVTC President and CEO Ritchie Sorrells stated, "With the untapped possibilities of a gigabit Internet connection, we'll work together with our partners to make the GVTC GigaRegion™ a center of ingenuity and entrepreneurialism."

More than 39,000 GVTC rooftops are eligible for a gig connection as of September. This announcement was welcome news in Gonzales, which is experiencing a boom of oil and natural gas activity, as well as in Boerne and Bulverde, which are part of the San Antonio metro area.

"The GVTC GigaRegion™ partnership puts Boerne in a great position to compete with San Antonio, the seventh largest city in the United States, for the same jobs they are seeking," Boerne Mayor Mike Schultz said. "With GVTC's ultra-high-speed Internet, in addition to Boerne's top-ranked school system and exceptional quality of life, we will have an edge when working to attract new companies and retain those already here."



Innovation in Action in South Carolina

Nestled in the historic town of Summerville, S.C., lies the up-and-coming residential and commercial community of Nexton, where the "build it, and they will come" philosophy certainly holds true.

Home Telecom recently launched a gigabit service, dubbed GigiFi™, making Nexton the first area in South Carolina to receive such advanced services. The 4,500-acre community serves as home base for the MUW (MeadWestvaco Corp.) Community Development and Land Management regional headquarters, the South Carolina Research Authority (SCRA), and a mix of corporate and retail businesses. Construction is also underway for a neighborhood and elementary school.

"Nexton's commitment to technology has been a key attractor for a number of commercial tenants," said Kenneth T. Seeger, president of MUW Community Development and Land Management. "SCRA was attracted first by the availability of

land in a location so central to their workforce. And there is no doubt that the presence of gigabit service was 'icing on the cake.' In addition to SCRA, Nexton has commitments from a health care provider interested in leveraging Nexton's gigabit service for emerging telemedicine needs."

Will Helmly, president and CEO of Home Telecom, shared that the GigiFi™ gigabit packages that the telco and Nexton developed are exclusive to MUW developments. "The Nexton partnership allowed Home Telecom the opportunity to launch gigabit service sooner than our road map had planned," he said.

The gigabit service will be launched in other Home Telecom fiber areas in the future. The infrastructure has generated "a great deal of buzz" among area businesses, and the commercial space has attracted interest from some high-tech tenants, he said.

As the FCC foresaw, Newton and the other communities and telcos building out gigabit Internet service are starting to see innovation bloom. ☰

The Power of Broadband

Broadband is vital to connecting loved ones near and far. Bethany Chinadle, product development manager for Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association (Havre, Mont.), submitted an email to Exchange to share the amazing effect a broadband connection had during a local family's special event.

She wrote:

"I was contacted by a community member asking if Triangle Communications could help with allowing the grandparents to watch their granddaughter's high-school graduation. The grandpa is undergoing cancer treatments in Texas and was unable to make it home for graduation. They had mentioned their disappointment in missing the big event to a community member who then contacted me.

"From working with the customer, I discovered they had an iPad with them at the cancer treatment center. I worked with the school on installing a wireless access point in the gym where graduation was being held. We were able to set up Facetime and Skype through the school's firewall. We turned the school up to a 100 Mbps connection for the weekend. A community member provided their laptop for the second half of the Facetime connection, and Triangle gave the school an iPad to have for a backup device for the weekend just in case.

"The family was very grateful that we arranged and utilized technology for them to feel a part of the graduation." ☰

SHARE YOUR STORY

NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association seeks to spotlight the efforts of member companies across the country. Exchange is a great place to share your company's success stories on economic development, community outreach, technology rollouts, and state and regional collaborative projects. To share your story, contact Tennille Shields, NTCA senior writer/editor, at 703-351-2097 or tshields@ntca.org.



Hartelco Fiber Signals End of Copper Service

By Mike Becker, Hartelco Regulatory/
Marketing Manager

Hartelco, aka Hartington Telecommunications (Hartington, Neb.), cut a 50-pair copper cable in a ceremony signaling the end of copper-based services and formally ushering the telco into the age of fiber optics.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development State Director Maxine Moul was on hand to cut the copper cable. She presented Hartelco with a special plaque for using a Rural Utilities Service (RUS) program to bring top-grade telecommunications to northeast Nebraska.

Hartelco began providing copper phone service in 1905, and has been an RUS borrower since 1956. The telco financed a three-phase, eight-year fiber-to-the-home project through three RUS loans totaling more than \$12.6 million in investments.

"With the completion of the fiber deployment, everyone with our service will be able to take advantage of the extremely high speeds available," said Bill Dendinger, Hartelco general manager. "Fiber optic cables enable data and voice to literally travel at the speed of light and are capable of delivering up to 1 GB data speeds. This provides the opportunity for all users to utilize the fiber to expand personal and business growth."

The new system required replacing rural connections to each home, farm and business with

fiber cables and installing new optical interfaces at each subscriber location.

Word spread throughout the area that fiber optics were being deployed by Hartelco, and a dozen customers were added to the Hartelco service area after the Nebraska Public Service Commission approved their petition to change local service providers.

"Our technicians reported that one customer in our new service area had only 300 kbps Internet speed prior to connecting to our services," said Dendinger. "After the conversion to Hartelco, the customer had 10 Mbps speed, which for us is a midlevel tier speed. But they were thrilled.

"Another new customer is a regional manager for one of the nation's largest farm implement manufacturers," he continued. "She was very excited to have the faster broadband speeds at home allowing her to work more efficiently, and she attended our copper-cutting ceremony with USDA to show her gratitude."

The fiber optic projects began in 2006 when fiber was deployed to nodes throughout the rural area. In 2009, fiber optics were deployed to businesses and residents within the city of Hartington. And in 2013, fiber was buried from the rural nodes to each farm in the rural service area, resulting in 100% coverage by June 2014. Hartelco is a single exchange company serving approximately 1,250 customers in rural northeast Nebraska. [E](#)

South Dakota Telcos

from page 41

Association, as well as representatives from other regional communications providers.

Representatives of the South Dakota Telecommunications Association (Pierre), South Dakota state government and SDN Communications (Sioux Falls) also met with the commissioners and Thune to discuss supplying services in remote areas and E-Rate reforms.

Following his visit to Sioux Falls, Pai released a statement highlighting broadband's impact on the schools and libraries in South Dakota and the need

to reform the E-Rate program. He noted that South Dakota schools and libraries are doing more with technology, despite receiving far less resources than their urban counterparts.

"A student-centered E-Rate program would cut the red tape. It would end funding inequities and focus E-Rate on connecting citizens—young and old—to digital opportunities. And it would bring more transparency to a process that is hopelessly opaque to people in the Best Little City in America and beyond," he stated. "It's time for real reform." [E](#)

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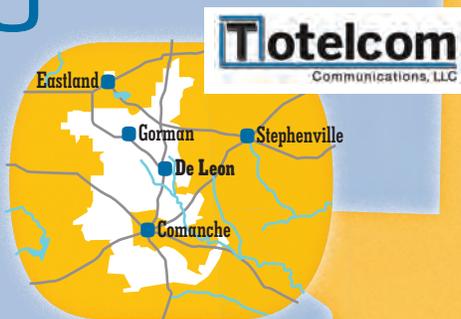


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BY TONEY PRATHER

Totelcom Communications LLC

De Leon, Texas



NTCA
Member Since
1960
President
Toney Prather

Service Territory

Totelcom has eight exchanges and our service territory covers 1,200 square miles. Our line count is down to 3,700 from high of 6,300. Slightly over half of those lines have our broadband.

History

We are a unique NTCA member. Originally, Totelcom was a full cooperative member. It was then converted to a widely held commercial company in 1968, then a tightly held company in 1995. We remained a commercial NTCA member throughout all of the years. In 2010, I had the opportunity to turn it into a family-held company. Both of my children have come back here to join in the operation, something I never dreamed would occur. They both bring skills they learned away from here and we're using them to streamline and expand into other areas. Instead of thinking about retirement or something similar, I'm committed to continuing generations.

Customer Profile

Our customers are generally older than the national median age. Twenty-three percent are over age 65. Many retirees are coming back to their childhood roots here around De Leon. As is true in all of Texas, Hispanic people are a growing percentage



of the population. The size of our population has remained stable. The number of people in our primary service county is within 4% of what it has been for over 30 years.

Since our population is older, broadband adoption is a challenge. We opened a Learning Center with free classes to help give people computer skills exposure in a non-intimidating environment, keeping class sizes small. My wife is the instructor, and it seems she always has a new story to share with me that shows how great the need is out there for our older people. She recently taught basics to an 86-year-old who never had a computer but wanted to learn.

Technology

We have several loops that are 28 miles from their serving central office. Troubleshooting with old copper pair could take half of a day to find. Their local loop is only four miles, making remote trouble analysis so much easier. The newer technology components have also made the network much more dependable.

We have recently begun to offer new equipment for our farm customers to do remote monitoring and devices for older folks to help them stay independent as long as possible. Our future is not voice conversations, but information conversations.

Workforce

We have a workforce of 40 people. It decreased from over 100 in 2009 after we sold off our cellular operation.

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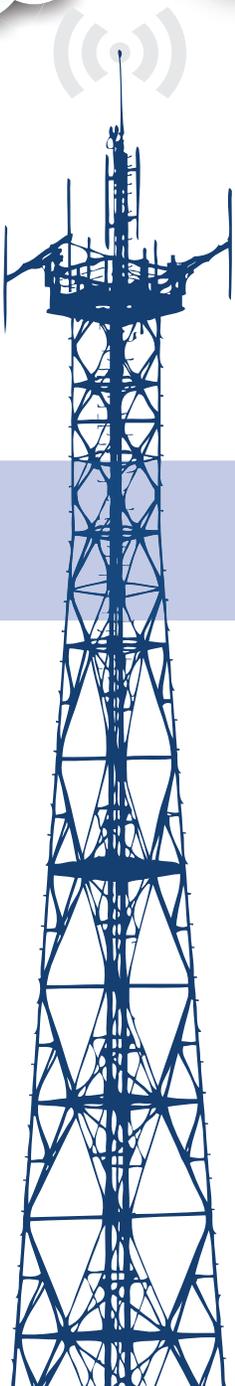
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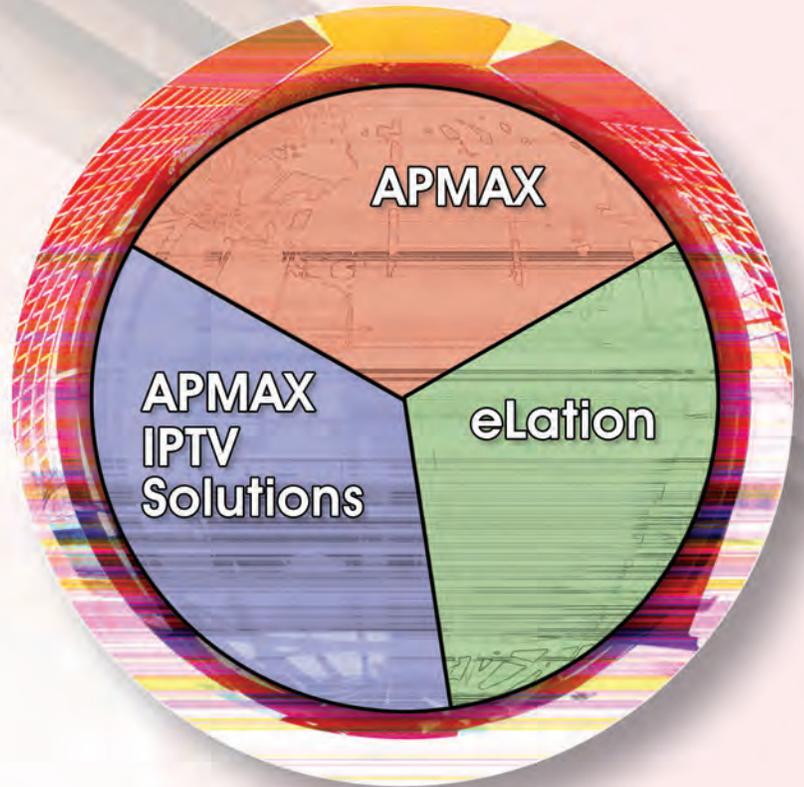
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