

CASE STUDY

LINEWORKER HIRING PROGRAM

CLARK COUNTY REMC

Finding individuals with the work ethic and skills to succeed as electric cooperative lineworkers is an ongoing, never-ending task.

The relationship between lineworkers and their employers is symbiotic. Much is asked of lineworkers. They might be asked to leave home and family at any hour on any day, weekend or holiday to work in sleet and ice or sweltering heat to help restore power to their consumers. Working at great heights with energized power lines in these weather conditions — when any momentary lapse of concentration can seriously injure or kill them — requires both a physical and mental fortitude few possess.

Much is also invested in lineworkers. These workers require incredible amounts of training to do their jobs safely and skillfully. A cooperative makes a four-year investment just to bring a beginning apprentice up to the journeyman status. The estimated cost of that investment, not including wages and benefits and miscellaneous expenses involved in that education and training, is nearly \$50,000 over four years. Training is always ongoing for lineworkers. Retaining skilled ones, then, is also critical to each cooperative.

But every cooperative has its share of drama created by individuals who aren't team players. When it comes to the line crews, who must work so closely together and who literally put their lives into the hands of fellow crew members, dealing with bad actors who have that cooperative's investment of time and resources in their back pocket can create a serious dilemma for a cooperative.

Clark County REMC is in the 10th year of an innovative program intended to take some of the guesswork out of hiring lineworkers. The process is a study in human relations, spreadsheet tabulations and a group decision between management and the line crew members themselves to make sure new hires can handle the stresses and skills of the job and fit in with the existing crews by possessing the work ethic and mindset expected of them.

CHALLENGE

- Recruiting lineworkers who can physically meet the demands of the job.
- Recruiting lineworkers who fit in well with the culture and work ethic of the existing crews.
- Making sure lineworkers who are hired have a long-term commitment to the cooperative.

SOLUTION

- Creating an in-depth hiring process that requires applicants to interview and perform a series of task-related activities.
- Scoring applicants based on the interviews and their performance during the outdoor tasks, including notes and evaluations from their potential future co-workers. All of this becomes part of multiple page dossier on each applicant, which is thoroughly reviewed and discussed and then approved by consensus for applicants to move on to the next level or finally be hired.
- Following up new hires with continued input from crews working with new individuals during their six-month probationary period so there is continued buy-in for retaining or releasing the hire.

RESULTS

- Longer retention of hires who can handle both the physical demands and fit in with the existing crews with whom they work closely.
- More harmony among the line crews with a shared sense of work ethic, values, mutual respect and camaraderie.
- Safer work environment for crews and consumers as crews communicate better and work better together.
- Financial savings for the cooperative in insurance premiums as safer work translates to a better "experience modifier" from Federated Insurance and lower insurance rates the cooperative pays. Clark County REMC's experience modifier dropped since implementing its line crew hiring program: from 1.8 in 2010 to .94 today.

BUILDING AN ELITE TEAM

Clark County REMC thought it was making a good hire when an apprentice lineworker position opened 10 years ago. A well-liked, hard-working young man with some college and military experience behind him who worked part-time in the warehouse for the cooperative sought the job.

Unfortunately, Dave Barton, now in his 13th year as the cooperative's manager of operations and engineering, began to feel uneasy about the hire not long after as he and others observed the apprentice struggle with the heights and other physical aspects of the job at training workshops and schools. "We knew we were getting a good hire because of his attitude," Barton recalls. "But not long into his apprenticeship, we were not sure this was really for him."

Their concerns were confirmed when they came in one morning and found he had the same reservations — he'd resigned and cleared out.

"He's a great guy who figured out line work wasn't the best fit for him," said Barton. "We knew we had to come up with something that could find out if the person had the physical ability and everything it took to do that type of work," Barton said.

Clark County REMC looked at a hiring program Duke Energy used, modified it, and combined it with other predictive interview techniques, and innovated its own program. The program not only delves deep into interviewing applicants for lineworker positions, it assesses their physical abilities to do line work and their attitudes. What really makes the program unique for Clark is that others outside management make the hiring decisions. Hiring decisions become a consensus of management and the entire line crew, which participates in the evaluation of the abilities and the attitudes of applicants as they come through.

"This is a job that affects your whole family. We're going to ask you to leave Christmas dinner to come out to work because our members need help and your buddies need help. This is a family deal," said Barton. "We're not looking for an 'all-star'; we're looking for a team. When they get hired, we tell them, 'the successful candidates will be invited to join an elite group of people.' And the group invites them."

The very first class of hires in 2010 that went through the new process included Josh Bohlsen. He is now the operation supervisor who works closely with Barton and is the one who gathers all the interview notes, performance appraisals and comments from the lineworkers and presents a spreadsheet on each applicant the group gathers to discuss.

"WE'RE NOT LOOKING FOR AN 'ALL-STAR'; WE'RE LOOKING FOR A TEAM. WHEN THEY GET HIRED, WE TELL THEM 'THE SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES WILL BE INVITED TO JOIN AN ELITE GROUP OF PEOPLE.' AND THE GROUP INVITES THEM."

DAVE BARTON
CLARK COUNTY REMC

"They're really looking for a cultural fit," noted Jon Elkins, vice president of safety training and compliance for Indiana Electric Cooperatives, who has observed the program in action. "The goal for the lineworkers to assess the applicants is not to see if the applicants can complete each task. The applicants either can or can't. The line crews are looking more from the group standpoint — 'can we bring this person into our family?'"

"That cultural fit is difficult," added Elkins. "After the cooperative has that investment in an apprentice, dealing with a problematic person is a tough decision. But if you have that cultural cancer in there, it's just going to keep getting worse. If you can get that cultural fit right at the beginning, it sure makes things easier. They've had quite a bit of success with this process."

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAM

Clark County REMC utilizes an interview process that is proven, practical and consistent. This process gives the cooperative the ability to accurately predict a candidate's job performance and ensures every candidate is provided a fair and equal chance for the open lineworker position(s). The process is based on the principle that past work experiences predict future behavior. It takes a systematic approach to selection decisions and follows an outlined structure for every applicant.

Initially, 12-18 applicants, if there are that many, will be invited for the physical outdoor assessment. The applicants are told to show up wearing a long sleeve shirt, work boots and long pants and dress for the weather. The outdoor test takes about an hour and a half to complete and consists of three test stations.

Barton and Bohlsen said the lineworkers are excited to participate in the outside assessments. Depending on the work schedule that day or over the course of a few days depending on the number of applicants being tested, they said most all are allowed to participate in the process.

The stations give applicants an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to handle tasks associated with the electric line trade. Each station is equipped with a table with tools needed for that task and random other tools and instructions. Each applicant works the station individually without being seen by other applicants. And the stations give the lineworkers a glimpse into the aptitude and attitudes of their potential future partners on the lines.

At least one REMC lineworker is at each station to make sure applicants have the same opportunity and instructions. This person is also responsible for the safety of the applicant while at that station and assist with safety-related matters as needed.

Station 1

A stake is set where a hole, a least 20 inches in diameter and 24 inches deep, is to be dug. Once the hole is dug and checked by the lineworker manning the station, the applicant must fill in the hole and leave it as if it was never there.

Station 2

This station assesses the applicant's ability to follow instructions handling a ladder and to handle heights while also checking how mindful and respectful the applicant is of the tools and equipment and the structure on which the ladder is leaned. The applicant is also shown how to and then instructed to climb a ladder, belt off to a pole, lean out to the side and remove an insulator from a pin on a pole above his or her head.

Station 3

This station gives the applicant five minutes to study a blueprint drawing and then has him or her install hardware on a crossarm structure with the correct bolts pulled from a tub with various-sized hardware. The applicant is instructed to drill a hole about eye level, assemble the hardware to make this structure, mount it to the pole, level the crossarm and drive the lag screw. All bolts, nuts and lock nuts should be tight.

The scoring for the tasks themselves, Barton said, is simple: 0 means the applicant did not complete the task in the allotted time; 1 means he or she did but with difficulty; 2 means he or she had no problem. Barton said the scoring creates tight groupings, but expanding it to 1-10 for instance, can also create problems. "One guy's 4 could be someone else's 6," he said.

Along with the aptitude, the lineworkers assigned to the stations also evaluate attitude they observe as the applicants complete their tasks: 0 means they wouldn't want to work with the applicants; 1 means the applicants were OK; 2 means the lineworkers would like to work with them.

LINWORKER ASSESSMENT

Beyond supervising the outside stations, the lineworkers are observing the applicants going about their tasks and talking to them. This is the part of the interview process Clark County REMC has found to provide the most insight when it comes assessing personalities of the applicants and that "cultural fit."

"When there's not a guy in dress clothes standing around," said Barton, "applicants will open up."

In this next phase, applicants are interviewed about specific past work and relevant experiences. For each question, the STAR format is followed — a format also taught in Indiana Electric Cooperatives' Cooperative Leadership Edge program. That is:

- S/T Situation/task for which the applicants describe a past job, situation or task
- A Actions they took in addressing the situation or task
- R Results of their actions

"You'd be floored to see how much more comfortable they are out there talking to the guys than they are when they've got Dave and me talking to them in the boardroom to give a test," added Bohlsen.

They noted lineworkers will come in after a run of applicants feeling really good about certain individuals. Then they'll also hear about applicants doing nothing but complain about their current employers while another asked the guys, "Gosh, you think they'll make us take a drug test?"

"WE ALL MAKE THE CHOICE TOGETHER. IT'S HELPED THE INTEGRITY OF THE PROGRAM AND HOW MUCH THE GUYS RESPECT IT BECAUSE WE DON'T BYPASS IT."

DAVE BARTON
CLARK COUNTY REMC

After the interviews and outside assessment, Bohlsen compiles the scores and notes into a large spreadsheet on each remaining applicant. The entire hiring group reviews and discusses this document — sometimes long after quitting time. Barton said the responsibility of making new hires weighs on each person. But he said, "It's benefited us every time."

"When you start backing up and getting the comments, then it becomes an interaction," Barton said. And in the end, it comes down to everyone asking the question: "Is this guy going to be the type

of guy I need by my side — just like the rest of my brothers.”

“We don’t finagle anything through or push anything through,” Barton said. “If you’re going to join this group, it’s going to be through this process. Everybody agrees at the end. This is a consensus.”

In the 10 years the program has been in place, Barton said about 16 employees have come through it. They have lost a few very good workers to other cooperatives and new career opportunities in other states, but for the most part, the core of the 16-member line crew has been hired with input from the others.

THROUGH PROBATIONARY AND BEYOND

In addition to the hiring, the line crew also works closely with management during the first six-month probationary period under which new hires work.

The crew’s involvement includes writing reviews of the new employees with whom the lineworkers had some work experience. That participation also helps them understand when a new hire, even the one or two under this program, turned out not to be the worker they thought they were hiring.

Barton said lineworkers noticed one apprentice they all liked and hired had started turning negative during his probationary period. Bohlsen said he saw it and was going to address it. But he was also hearing about it from the rest of the crew. Their reviews helped Barton and Bohlsen make the difficult decision to terminate the new employee. “He let them down, too. He was chosen by them. And as soon as he came in, they started seeing all this negative stuff,” said Barton.

“THESE GUYS ARE DOING IT BECAUSE THEY’RE LOOKING OUT FOR EACH OTHER. THEY HAVE EACH OTHER’S RESPECT BECAUSE THEY’VE HIRED EACH OTHER. THEY BELIEVE IN EACH OTHER. AND THAT’S A GOOD FOUNDATION THAT BUILDS ON THEIR RELATIONSHIP AS BROTHERS IN THE FIELD. THEY’RE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER AND PROTECT THE COMPANY AND OUR MEMBERS.”

JOSH BOHLSSEN
CLARK COUNTY REMC

“We would have had to deal with him in the mornings and afternoons, but they’d have dealt with him all day long.

“We all make the choice together. It’s helped the integrity of the program and how much the guys respect it because we don’t bypass it.”

“OUR CULTURE OF SAFETY IS AT THE HEART OF EVERYTHING WE DO. TAKING THE TIME TO HIRE THE RIGHT PEOPLE, ENSURING WE HAVE A WORKFORCE DEDICATED TO KEEPING OUR MEMBERS AND FELLOW EMPLOYEES SAFE, IS AN ACHIEVEMENT WE ARE VERY PROUD OF.”

DAVID VINCE
CLARK COUNTY REMC

The camaraderie and closeness the program has brought to Clark’s crew has paid off in lower insurance premiums, cutting in half the experience modifier for premiums based on compensated losses in the 10 years. “And this is absolutely just as big a part of the safety culture — hiring the right people that can believe in it and buy into it,” said Bohlsen.

Bohlsen added guys follow safety procedures now not because they are going to get caught and written up for breaking safety rules. “These guys are doing it because they’re looking out for each other. They have each other’s respect because they’ve hired each other. They believe in each other. And that’s a good foundation that builds on their relationship as brothers in the field. They’re going to take care of each other and protect the company and our members.”

Clark County REMC CEO David Vince echoes that sentiment, “Our culture of safety is at the heart of everything we do. Taking the time to hire the right people, ensuring we have a workforce dedicated to keeping our members and fellow employees safe, is an achievement we are very proud of.”

Barton and Bohlsen both agree this hiring process might take a little more time and effort and has a little more cost involved for the cooperative than just bringing in applicants for a sit-down in the boardroom and a tour of the garage and pole yard. But Barton noted a lot of the lineworkers who are now retiring and creating all these new openings have been at the cooperatives for 40 or more years. He noted, “Can you put an amount of time or cost on finding a really great 40-plus year employee?”