

Progressive Companies Set New Courses in Data Center Workforce Talent War



Data Center owners and operators are increasingly being challenged to find and retain skilled staff to operate and manage critical infrastructure. Unabated, the data center staffing challenge will reach crisis levels within the next several years, resulting in a proverbial workforce talent war. Progressive companies are seeking winning strategies to deal with this challenge.

Root causes

Several factors are causing the crisis:

First, dramatic growth and reliance on a digital economy translates into increases in the size, volume and geographic reach of data centers worldwide. According to a Data Center Dynamics report, three hyperscale companies alone — Microsoft, Amazon and Google — built 100 data centers in 2020. Other cloud providers and colocation companies are also driving demand for operations engineering, IT hardware, network and connectivity, controls and monitoring personnel, and physical security officers.

Second, skilled and trained workforce supply isn't keeping pace with demand. Gender, age and race demographic disparities have muted a more diverse interest in the field. According to Uptime Institute, nearly 50% of a primarily male data center workforce now has 20+ years of industry experience. This population will be retiring over the next decade creating a silver tsunami the industry isn't prepared for.

Contributing to shortages are a lack of awareness of employment opportunities in the sector and the perceived and real demands on a 24/7/365 talent pool.

Third, while artificial intelligence (AI), remote and other smart automation technologies may blunt demand for some staffing needs, overall demand will continue to outpace supply for the foreseeable future.

Winning strategies

Today, progressive companies are developing business models focusing on people as their most valuable assets. From new thinking about diversity and inclusion to training and development to innovative partnerships, these companies are proactively deploying winning strategies to overcome the workforce challenge.

Diversity and inclusion: Perhaps the single largest area of opportunity is to find, recruit and retain more diverse and inclusive workforces — more women and more ethnically diverse and younger workers.

Studies have shown that more diverse and inclusive workforces financially outperform less diverse ones (McKinsey & Company 2020).

In recent years, organizations such as Women in Mission Critical Operations (WiMCO) have raised awareness and stimulated industry dialogue. The 2021 Infrastructure Masons Report on Diversity and Inclusion showed:

- One in four data center companies have a program intended to hire more women.
- 75% of design, build and operations organizations have women on their teams.
- However, women are only approximately 5% of staff.

Technology companies, faced with this same challenge, have made more progress in building awareness around women in STEM within our educational systems. But this has yet to translate to data center or critical infrastructure operations. COVID-19, which kept many school-age children at home for much of the last 18 months, set back or paused precious advancements.

This is not just a function of filling workforce demand. Studies have shown that more diverse and inclusive workforces financially outperform less diverse ones (McKinsey & Company 2020). And their organizations simply make better decisions (Deloitte Partners 2018).

Progressive companies are taking a top-down approach, positively evolving their cultures. They manage diversity and inclusion like any other business initiative with measurable outcomes and success metrics. In addition to increasing hiring volume, organizations need to recognize, promote and advance people.

In-house Investment: Data center owners and operators are taking a return-on-investment approach to staffing in-house recruiting departments and giving them the tools and resources to identify, screen, hire and on-board data center talent. At the same time, staffing companies that built their business models around mission-critical staffing are no longer providing the specialized value they once cornered.

Companies are creating apprenticeships and grow-their-own approaches that focus on developing staff from entry-level to executive through skill-mapping, skill-development and advancement programs.

Targeted Partnerships: Companies are developing partnerships with vocational and technical colleges, universities and military services to create new recruitment funnels. The challenge is to raise awareness of the field and drawing attention to the professional development opportunities. This approach can be used to calibrate supply to demand on a targeted geographic and functional level basis.

Training and Development: In a talent-constrained environment, training and skills development takes on greater importance. Organizations are rethinking their college/university and technical college requirements toward focusing on more on-the-job training and sector-specific education. Companies are creating apprenticeships and grow-their-own approaches that focus on developing staff from entry-level to

executive through skill-mapping, skill-development and advancement programs. This is vital in a workforce where certification, compliance to specific standards and very specific technical skills are required.

Putting people first

Today's data center workforce seeks more than a salary and attractive shift schedule. They want a more holistic, full life-cycle approach to work. The 2020 ADP Global Workforce Study summarized this by saying workers are not just looking for a place to work, they are seeking a place to be engaged and to thrive and grow.

Characteristics of this *engaged* worker:

- Enthusiasm about the company's mission
- Understanding of expectations in the workplace
- Being surrounded by people with shared values
- Recognition for excellent work
- Being challenged to grow

To retain engaged workers, it's also important to decrease the risk of losing skilled and experienced workers. Their needs include:

- Freedom and autonomy to get their job done
- Trust in company leadership
- Feeling excited to go to work
- Believing work situations will improve over time
- Believing leadership will give them needed information before they need to know it

To sum up, the industry's progressive companies — and enterprises that are utilizing data center operations providers — are taking notice and taking actions to win the workplace talent war.

About BCS Data Center Operations

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