

MISSION-CRITICAL PROFILE

Name: Bert Weiss

Organization: North Coast County Water District



Job Category (Check one below):

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Water Treatment | <input type="checkbox"/> Electronic Maintenance Technician/ Instrument Technician |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Water Distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrician/Electrical Line Worker |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wastewater Treatment | <input type="checkbox"/> Machinist/Mechanic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wastewater Distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

1. Please describe the work you do:

The work that I do and the duties that I perform are also ridiculously varied. If it happens in, or involves the District, there's a very real probability that I'll have the opportunity to participate in the activities. The seriously cool thing about my job is that there really isn't a typical day. I actually see my primary duty as doing whatever it takes to make the District's General Manger and the members of the utility crew that I serve as successful as possible with any and all of their responsibilities and endeavors. Therefore, my duties include, but are not limited to: developing and maintaining personal and professional relationships with the school districts, developers, members of the City of Pacifica, the surrounding water agencies, and other utility providers. I'm endlessly trying to optimize our efficiency and productivity as well as find simpler, safer, faster and easier ways of getting difficult and dangerous work accomplished. Thinking of ways of keeping the utility crew's work life varied with enough different types of projects to keep them from getting burned out doing the repetitive work often associated with water distribution construction, maintenance, repair and operation is a duty that I thoroughly enjoy. It should be noted that this latter duty can be challenging because this is one of those rare industries anymore where people work in the same job for 20 to 35 years.

Additional duties include training, teaching, mentoring, counseling the generation that will be running this water district in the future and doing everything in my power to set them up for success in the current and future careers in the water industry. I assist in the ideation and design phase of pipeline improvements and water tanks, make recommendations on capital equipment and then have the opportunity to go out and test the design by participating in the construction activity. An obvious duty common to all the people in this industry is to do whatever it takes to keep the water flowing, which is a reasonable expectation of our collective customers. One duty that spins off from there involves overcoming environmental policies that seem diametrically opposed to our efforts at

times. Dealing with uninformed but vocally critical members of the public is yet another duty that comes to mind. Honestly, there are countless facets of the work that I do and the list of actual duties is nearly endless, but in my mind's eye, that's a very good thing.

2. What combination of education, vocational training, apprenticeship, experience, and/or skill did you obtain in order to be qualified and selected for your job?

Before actually getting into this industry I earned an Associate of Science degree in Welding and a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Technology with an emphasis in Manufacturing. I spent the majority of my career in the private sector working in a variety of metals industries ranging from a materials testing and failure analysis lab, to a refinery, to heavy steel fabrication shop, a pipe fitting manufacturing company, and a few others. I got tired of the endless lay-offs, having companies move to out of state or off-shore locations, and booms and downturns. I was ready for a change. Admittedly, my initial attraction to public service was the job security and the excellent health and retirement benefits. I wasn't sure what I could do in the public sector until one day, while sitting in a boat on a lake, I realized water would be a good opportunity to explore. It had pipes, steel tanks, valves, corrosion issues, project type work, and many other aspects that would allow me to use the knowledge, skills and abilities that I had acquired over the years. Then, of course, there was the aspect of this industry that included my desired job security. Think about it, you can't move the water infrastructure (treatment plants and distribution piping systems) to another state or country because those places have lower wages, no labor unions, or less stringent environmental and safety laws when you have people living here expecting water to come out of their faucets when they are turned on. After this epiphany, I immediately set out to find out how to get a foot in the door.

One lead was the Office of Water Studies at Sacramento State University that offered home study courses and certificates of completion for both water and wastewater. I assumed that with my luck I'd surely end up in wastewater but to increase my chances of success I'd better study both sides of the industry. After having ordered a few of the home study books a transformation started to occur. The more I read about these industries, the more I realized that these are actually fascinating industries and that public service is much more than a steady job with good benefits, it is actually a vocation. It would be an opportunity to serve the public with an absolutely essential, life sustaining commodity and an industry that did more to prevent illness and disease than all of the hospitals and doctors combined. Additionally, I began to realize that this industry operates with such seamlessness, that everyone, other than those working in the industry, can take water for granted. It's basically always there, and I could personally rarely recall a time when I turned on a faucet and water didn't just start flowing.

The last step involved with my getting involved with the water industry was taking every opportunity to tour every water and wastewater plant that I could and apply for a job opening. I passed my water and wastewater treatment and distribution operators tests from the State. One thing was very clear, I would have to take an entry level position and that I had to be both persistent and patient but approximately one year after my epiphany on the lake, I landed a Plant Mechanic's job at the North Coast County Water District in Pacifica. It was a start, I was in. By good fortune, I

had the chance to become the District's Acting Project Manager within nine months and permanent Project Manager four months later. I enrolled in Hayward State's MPA program and a year later I became the Acting Assistant General Manager of Operations. One year after that, with degree in hand, I was offered the opportunity to become the District's permanent Assistant General Manager.

3. What do you like best about your job?

Oh boy, where to start? I guess the thing that I hands down love more than anything is the concept of serving the public, or maybe even more specifically the feeling of being able to help people, significant numbers of people, in my case 40,000 and in the case of larger agencies the number pushes into the millions of people helped/served. I had always thought that the Peace Corps has to be one of the most noble means of doing something fundamentally good, a means of doing something that is incredibly rewarding and is especially beneficial to others. As it turns out, now that I've been doing this for a few years, it strikes me that public service in the form of water treatment/distribution/wastewater treatment is one of the greatest opportunities to participate in a domestic form of a Peace Corps-like service. The part that I enjoy the most is that this service is, for the most part, provided to all people regardless of whom or where they are and again, because of the efficiency and effectiveness of the industry, it is performed in relative anonymity. Nobody thinks about water because other than a handful of people like my associates and me, nobody has to think about it – that means we're doing our job.

One of the things that I like most would be that it is a vocation that offers endless opportunities to overcome challenges. The challenges involve emergency leak repairs; finding ways to stretch each dollar; finding ways to do things better, safer, faster, more efficiently; finding ways to keep the crew motivated; expanding our capabilities; dealing with other agencies and players with conflicting goals; teaching, training, mentoring; doing work that exercises my head and even the opportunity to join the party doing the miserable, dangerous, penitentiary-type work – like getting your ass kicked by a jack hammer while breaking concrete. You know, I guess there are things that I do that I like more than others, but the bottom line is it's actually really ALL good. Now seriously, how many people can say that about their job?

4. Please tell us about the projects and activities you have enjoyed most in your work in the water/wastewater field, and what made them rewarding,

There have been way too many earthmoving projects, tank demolition and construction projects, pump station projects, piping projects, that I have thoroughly enjoyed, for me to come up with a favorite. The common denominator of all of them, however, is the challenge of figuring out the most efficient and cost effective way to get the work performed, the learning experience associated with every project, the hard work associated with the projects which involves planning, scheduling, and then pulling the trigger and actually doing the work. Operating the equipment is always physically demanding and can, at times, be white knuckle exciting. The physical labor is rewarding, and few things in life feel better than going home exhausted and sore and then having the water turn black in a hot shower as you wash away the dirt from a hard day's work. The waking up at 2:00 AM thinking about all the things that need to be done, plans that need to be modified and

revised, thinking about what can go wrong and coming up with contingency plans and having the anxiety build until the first light of the new day appears in the morning sky which seems to displace all of that anxiety with excitement and anticipation. Working with my team of coworkers, folks whose lives are in your hands and who hold your life in their hands, is a perpetual rush. The endless learning associated with every project, no matter how major or minor is nothing short of wonderful. The opportunity to teach people is exceptionally rewarding. The knowledge that you are doing all of this work to ensure that people will have a steady supply of cool, safe, clean, and inexpensive drinking water makes all of the hard work totally worthwhile. For me the harder the work, the bigger the challenge, the greater reward, if not immediately, then for sure in hindsight as I relive the time, or the day, or the weeks, or the months which have rolled into the years of the endless projects and activities that I've had the good fortune of being associated with keeping the public that we serve supplied with water. Please come by and visit us while some of our project work is occurring. You'll notice that despite the hard, miserable, dangerous work that we are often engaged in, we are laughing and smiling. We are thoroughly enjoying what we are doing. The vast majority of the time I am actually looking forward to coming to work, looking forward to spending another day working side by side with my coworkers, in taking on whatever challenge that is presented to us at any given time. What could possibly be more rewarding than that?

5. What qualities and capabilities are needed in order for a person in your area of expertise to be successful in the water/wastewater industry?

I'd have to answer this question with a question: What do you want to do in this industry? What's so incredibly cool about the water/wastewater industry is that it offers a nearly unlimited amount of career opportunities. It really depends on what you want to do and where you want to go. This is an industry that actually has a need for a ditch digger. If that is your aspiration in life, to have a steady job, to find a productive use for your strong back and your positive attitude, we just might have a job for you. However, you may also want to consider some of the countless other opportunities available. You can be a jack of all trades where you cover the roles of the janitor thru the general manager in a small agency that serves a relative hand full of people or you can be a specialist. If the specialist option has any appeal you can be an accountant, a bookkeeper, a backhoe operator, a biologist, a chemist, a PhD civil engineer, an electrician, a geologist, a water resource manager, a surveyor, a real estate professional, an environmentalist, a lawyer, a person stuck behind a desk, or a person that rarely steps into a building because he or she works out of a truck in the field. You can be a stuffed shirt, a talking head (if you want to be the spokesperson for a large agency), a crane operator, a mechanic represented by a trade union, a union contracts negotiator, a supervisor, a manager, an industrial safety professional, a marketing type, an instrument technician, an IT professional, a machinist, a truck driver, a project manager, or a meter reader.

The thing is that you need to bring *something* to the table. Really the only limiting factor is what you have to offer. If you are a high school dropout and the idea of being a ditch digger has little appeal because you fancy yourself behind a brass inlaid mahogany desk at the helm of a water agency that serves a huge metropolitan area, you'll likely have a long row to hoe. But if you are, for

example, a sociology major or a graphics design major, getting a foot in the door via the utility worker route might be a very real way of embarking on some real career growth opportunities in water or wastewater. There is no doubt in my mind that you can find general managers of agencies that started their career as a meter reader. Heck, if you beat the bushes hard enough you will likely even find a story of some social work major and/or human relations major that ended up in being an outstanding operations manager of a very large water agency.

What I would suggest is performing a realistic assessment of yourself – your strengths and weaknesses. Consider what you think you would like to do, accurately determine what qualifications you currently have, and then look into that aspect of the industry that appeals to you to see what you might be missing in terms of qualifications. Make a call or two, see if you can't get a tour of an agency from a person doing what you think you might like to do and ask them how they ended up in the position that they did. One of the many things that makes this industry so great is that there are so many great people that work in it, that contribute in some way to making it all work as well as it does. I will caution you though, if you want to be rich and famous, the next Larry Ellison, Warren Buffet, Richard Branson, or Bill Gates, you'd probably do best shopping some other industries/career opportunities. But if you're like the rest of us, check us out, talk to us, because we can probably use you. The bottom line is the more that you do to prepare yourself for the career avenue of your choice the better off you will be.

6. Do you have any advice for an individual who is considering pursuing a career in your field in the water/wastewater industry?

If you want a career in the water or wastewater industry, especially as an operator, sign up for the Sacramento State University Office of Water Programs and enroll in and complete as many of the home study courses as you can. This will be a strong indicator to us that you are really serious about getting into this line of work. Take the operators exam that you qualify for from the California Department of Public Health or State Water Resources Control Board for water and wastewater, respectively. BE FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT. Take as many tours of water and wastewater agencies as you can. You'll meet people in the industry and have a chance to see if the work is what you assumed it to be. BE FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT. Apply for every opening that you are qualified for and maybe a few that you're not qualified for. BE FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT. Get used to the panel interviews and then make notes of the questions asked – there is a very obvious reoccurring theme in the questions. BE FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT. Practice the answers to the interview questions so that you can do better next time. BE FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT. Get used to taking entrance exams. Brush up on basic grammar school level math (geometry and algebra). BE FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT. Study water and wastewater agency websites, and hunt down trade association functions and meetings and then attend them. If you really want a career in this industry, you'll get one, if you are FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT. Look for temporary help positions in agencies. Try to land an internship opportunity, and/or try to volunteer to help at an agency – AND BE FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT, because some agencies offer the aforementioned opportunities, others don't. If you see this industry as a means of serving the public, an opportunity to be selfless and to contribute to

the good, as a vocation of your own, you'll get in, though you might need to be prepared to be FOCUSED, PATIENT AND PERSISTENT.

On the other hand, if you want great benefits, lots of vacation, good pay in exchange for the opportunity to "ride the government leg" or to make your own special contribution to perpetuating the negative "public works worker" stereotype then do us all a favor and shop for another career – we have way too much work to do and have little interest or need for those, uh "attributes."