

# Opportunity Knocks:

## Co-ops Offer Job Variety for Evolving Workforce

By Brenda  
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**L**IKE MANY INDUSTRIES ANTICIPATING A WAVE OF baby-boomer retirements, electric cooperatives are bracing for some major changes in their work forces.

Think of a job at a co-op and the image of a line worker aloft in the basket of a bucket truck is likely one that comes immediately to mind.

While it's true that outside operations personnel are an essential part of a co-op's workforce, they are but one part of the crew that provides essential services at co-ops.

Your local electric cooperative is a business. It's owned by you, its members, but it still is a business with a work force of individuals specializing

in human resources, accounting, business, billing, customer relations, communications and a host of other technical positions necessary to provide you with the service you expect.

And, co-ops have a lot to offer those seeking a career.

"There are some big advantages to working for an electric co-op," said Jim Edwards, assistant general manager of operations at East River Electric Power Cooperative in Madison, S.D. "There are different co-ops around the country and they're all part of the same co-op family."

Edwards is one of about two dozen individuals with engineering degrees working at an electric





cooperative in South Dakota.

“Working for utilities is very stable and challenging. There are a lot of good new technologies being used. With the co-op, you can move from one co-op to another; co-ops are a bigger network than working for one utility,” said Edwards.

While Edwards can speak from many decades of experience with the co-ops, his observations are shared by relative-newcomer Ryan Schneider, who joined the workforce at Charles Mix Electric Association in Lake Andes, S.D., as an electrical engineer.

After a period of training with the co-op’s outgoing engineer, Schneider will be the only engineer on staff at the co-op located in the south central part of the state.

“There are hundreds of people to call. The network and the environment of co-ops makes everything easier. You’re not going at it alone,” observed Schneider.

Part of the appeal of working at an electric co-op for Schneider was location.

“I’m used to small-town life, so for me, that was a pretty big role in deciding where I wanted to go,” said Schneider, who grew up in the Sioux Falls, S.D., area.

While co-ops pride themselves in being local, small-town businesses, they are also on the leading edge of technology and rely on a highly skilled workforce.

**Left: While line workers are one of the most visible occupations at electric cooperatives, co-ops employ a wide variety of positions from accounting and business to engineering and communications.** Photo By Brenda Kleinjan

**Above: Ryan Schneider joined the staff at Charles Mix Electric in 2010, months after graduating from college.**

**Right: Lobbyists and attorneys are among cooperatives’ work forces.** Photo By Brenda Kleinjan

Most line workers’ jobs, as well as other positions, are increasingly technical and require advanced training.

In the past 10 years, more than half of the state’s electric distribution cooperatives have seen a change in the co-op’s top management position, mostly due to retirements.

These top positions draw on a variety of skill sets from business and accounting backgrounds to engineering and line worker experience.

In addition to filling jobs that are being vacated due to retirements, co-ops are seeing new positions develop.

As Basin Electric Power Cooperative has developed generation facilities in the state, new positions at power plants in Groton, S.D., have been created as well as wind technician positions at the newly constructed Crow Lake Wind Project near White Lake, S.D. When the Deer Creek Station in eastern South Dakota comes online in 2012, approximately 30 new jobs will come along with it.

In combination with competitive salaries, cooperatives offer excellent benefits rewarding employees for the vital work they do and protect them and their families. Electric cooperative benefits often include medical, dental and vision insurance, retirement plans, protective insurances, vacation, holidays and sick leave. Co-ops are also focused on worker safety, wellness and continuing education.

Co-ops are committed to giving their employees opportunities to learn, grow and advance in their careers. Whether you are looking to increase your skill set, advance in your job or change jobs, you can take advantage of a full range of distance learning and professional accreditation and certification programs, as well as professional development programs. Most electric co-ops offer tuition reimbursement to obtain a certification or degree.

To learn more about jobs at America’s electric co-ops, visit <http://www.touchstoneenergy.com/Pages/default.aspx> and click on the “Careers at Co-ops” tab.

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