

# Careers

## in the electric utility industry

**F**ORTY THOUSAND PERMANENT JOBS IN ALL SECTORS of the electric utility industry offer good annual salaries and steady employment. The jobs vary enormously, everything from knowing how to repair a storm-damaged line to maintenance of a coal-fired generating station to controlling a nuclear reactor to monitoring the flow of electricity through multi-state power grids.

A report by the National Electric Reliability Council states, "The reliability of the North American electric utility grid is dependent on the accumulated experience and technical expertise of those who design and operate the system."

But as thousands of older electric utility workers (the Baby Boomer generation) retire and leave the workforce during the next five to 10 years, who will step up to take their places?

Martin Lowery, executive vice president for external affairs at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), says, "We've studied this issue carefully and believe that electric co-ops will have a challenge similar to that being faced by the investor-owned and municipal electric sector – finding and training workers. So we're working with our member statewide associations to ensure that electric cooperatives can attract the best quality workers."

To reach that goal, NRECA is part of a group of electric utility industry leaders, the Center for Electric Workforce Development. The group is dedicated to identifying the skill sets that are going to be needed in the future and finding ways to teach

those skills.

Lowery notes that the electric utility system really consists of two parts – the physical world of distribution lines and transformers, generating stations and transmission grids, overlaid with a network of information about each of the physical parts.

Lowery says, "The flow of data is critical to reliability. A line technician today and into the future is a knowledge worker. It's not just a matter of climbing poles or getting up in a bucket truck. He or she needs to be able to analyze problems first, then fix them."

Information technology already in place in many electric co-ops, such as automated meter-reading systems, geographic information systems and geographic positioning systems, often make it possible to analyze an outage problem and pinpoint the solution from miles away. New technology also makes operating a generating facility or controlling the flow of electricity through the transmission grid more than just a mechanical activity; workers everywhere in the electric utility system rely on computers to help them do their jobs.

Bob Patton, senior principal for education at NRECA, notes that training workers is an ongoing process. Patton says, "In addition to training and hiring new workers, our member co-ops are also constantly looking for the best ways to update the skills of their existing workers. Getting workers up-to-speed in a safe and effective manner is paramount in our industry."

NRECA is a member of the Energy Providers

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Nancy S. Grant

For more on jobs at electric cooperatives, go to [www.touchstoneenergy.coop](http://www.touchstoneenergy.coop) and click on the Careers link. Jobs at electric cooperatives in South Dakota and western Minnesota are also posted at [www.sdrea.coop](http://www.sdrea.coop).



Coalition for Education, a partnership of public utility associations, investor-owned utilities and cooperatives working together to develop and standardize training resources. They've discovered that to develop qualified job candidates, one of the most practical solutions is to offer online courses.

Such Web-based training offers many advantages. Students can keep their current jobs and work through the lessons anytime of the day or night, weekdays or weekends. Students can live anywhere instead of disrupting their lives by traveling to and from a brick-and-mortar campus. And students can become familiar with the kinds of information technology that will be a vital part of their next job.

During the spring 2007 semester, 64 electric cooperative employees scattered throughout the United States studied online, taking college accredited courses.

The Electric Power Technology Program is one such program. Led by instructors at Bismarck State College in Bismarck, N.D., students around the country do their lessons online, interacting with each other and their instructors. Another distance-learning option focuses on the unique needs of the nuclear power sector, made possible through Excelsior College. In 2008, Clemson University will begin offering a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering with a concentration in the power industry through an online program.

In an experimental program in Colorado, a "virtual high school" offers teenagers a chance to see how math and science concepts work in the real world of work. Patton says, "Through their coursework, these high school students can learn about career options in the power industry. There's also a 'learn and earn' internship so the students can see what their new skills can mean in the workplace."

By getting these teenagers interested in the electric power industry before graduation, these potential workers may choose to enter a technical college or skilled trade apprentice program and get a head start on a lifelong career.

"With all these online learning options," Patton says, "we will be able to grow them right into the workforce – and help them continue to grow throughout their careers."

To find out about career options in the electric utility industry, check out these three Web sites: [www.getintoenergy.com](http://www.getintoenergy.com), [www.epconline.org](http://www.epconline.org) or [www.cewd.org](http://www.cewd.org).



## Careers Overview

**Why Work at an Electric Cooperative?** Working for an electric cooperative is a great career opportunity. Co-ops are looking for talented and resourceful people, offering competitive salaries and excellent benefits in some of the best places to call "home." Plus, you can feel good about what you do. Electric co-op staff receive satisfaction knowing their work makes a difference in their community, directly improving people's lives.

America's electric cooperatives employ approximately 63,000 people nationwide in a great variety of professional, technical and business positions. Some of the best, brightest, most creative and dedicated people have chosen to serve their communities and develop their careers through electric cooperatives.

**Jobs to Match Your Lifestyle** – If you have an entrepreneurial spirit, like to multi-task, are interested in growth and are mission-focused, you've come to the right place. We have opportunities in many diverse roles, ranging from information technology, communications, marketing and member services, engineering and operations and community and economic development to name a few.

**Where are the Jobs?** Electric co-op jobs are everywhere – in a small town, large city or the sprawling suburbs in the Northwest, South or anywhere in between. More than 900 people work at electric cooperatives in South Dakota. Best of all, once you are part of our cooperative community, you can count on receiving the same great benefits and opportunities wherever you go.

**Jobs at Distribution Cooperatives** – Distribution cooperatives supply electricity directly to the consumer member. Whether your career choice finds you working in the co-op office, outdoors with a crew or a combination of both, you will find the work fulfilling and purposeful. You will also find the cooperative spirit is contagious.

We strive to employ highly trained, professional and self-motivated individuals in all departments. These are the individuals that work, on a daily basis, with our most valuable resource – our members. A full-range of training and educational opportunities is also provided to our employees throughout their career at the co-op, to make sure they are knowledgeable of the most recent trends and technologies being used in the electric industry.

Here is just a sampling of career opportunities available at the distribution co-ops:

**Operations/Engineering:** Employees in this department are responsible for new construction of distribution lines, service facilities and installation of all electrical facilities, which ultimately insure more efficient service to our members.

**Customer Service:** These employees create, service, and maintain all billing records. They also respond to member needs, inquiries and concerns.

**Marketing/Member Services/Communications:** These individuals are charged with maintaining good member and community relations. They promote the cooperative through various media, marketing programs and community events.

**Finance:** This department fulfills general accounting, financial and material management functions by maintaining the accounting records in accordance with generally accepted accounting principals.

**Systems/Information Technology:** Employees in this department research, coordinate and maintain technology throughout the cooperative.

**Human Resources/Safety and Compliance:** These employees strive to maximize employee abilities and provide safe working conditions, while maintaining a work environment that motivates employees to provide the best possible service to our members.