

UNESCO Webinar Speech – “The Power of the Public”

Speaker: Adam Cave

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Opening

Good afternoon and thank you to UNESCO for the opportunity to speak today.

I'm Adam Cave, Founder & MD of Murray McIntosh & Associates, which is a member of AquaFed. We are a Recruitment/Search firm that for the last 10 years has focused on working across the professional functions of Engineering, Commercial and Policy/Advocacy/Strategic Communications – predominantly across the Water and Utilities sectors.

I've been asked to talk about the current trends we see in our sectors and thoughts on scalable, resilient workforce strategies in public services, particularly in water and sanitation.

Hopefully, somewhere, on your screen is a one-page slide – you'll note the sources, and I'm happy to provide these documents following this meeting – which offers useful data reference points to our discussion.

Context & Challenge

The water and sanitation sector is facing a dual workforce crisis, one immediate, and one long-term.

Right now, we're in the middle of what we have described in our Labour Report as a “perfect storm”

- Nearly half of engineers in the UK cite skills shortages as the sector's biggest threat.
- Two-thirds are actively seeking roles in other industries, including renewables and nuclear power.
- And almost a quarter plan to retire within five years, creating a retirement cliff that threatens delivery of the UK water companies' current 5-year plans and long-term resilience.

We know however, through our association with AquaFed, that these are not just UK, but global trends.

But this isn't just about numbers, it's about misalignment:

- Engineers lack access to relevant training, feel unable to innovate, and are frustrated by rigid management structures.
- Only 61% believe their workforce is fit for the future.
- And nearly half say the education system isn't preparing young people adequately.

And career expectations have changed:

- Young professionals want flexibility, purpose, and mobility across sectors like climate, health, and infrastructure; but many organisations still operate as if it's the 1990s, focused on permanent hiring, siloed roles, and linear career paths. We must acknowledge this generational shift. The workforce of the future won't be built on legacy models, it will be built on agility, inclusion, and purpose.

Strategic Shift – Immediate and Long-Term Solutions

So, what are the solutions?

The first solution – unlock agility

Let's better utilise the contingent workforce, contractors, consultants, and interim specialists who bring flexibility and deep expertise. These professionals are often under-leveraged due to outdated hiring models and regulatory fears.

Also, we should open the door to talent from other infrastructure sectors. Skills exist in all of these that are more than transferable... we must stop treating water as a closed ecosystem.

In the UK, we have seen small steps towards cross-sector mobility, which has reduced onboarding time, improved resilience, and lowered costs.

The second solution – build a future-ready workforce

This means moving away from rigid, permanent hiring strategies that belong in the 1990s, and embracing models that reflect how people want to work today.

Young professionals expect:

- Purpose-driven roles aligned with climate and community impact.
- Flexible career paths that allow movement across disciplines.

- Opportunities to learn from experienced mentors, not just formal training.

The so-called “retirement cliff” should be an opportunity.

I’d highlight Anglian Water, in the UK, as an organisation adopting an innovative strategy and utilising this part of their workforce through a proactive retirement strategy that includes:

- Incentivising six-month notice periods for retirees.
- Using that time for structured handovers and mentoring.
- Embedding knowledge transfer into daily operations.

With 90% of retirees opting in, they’re turning risk into resilience, preserving decades of institutional knowledge and creating a bridge between generations.

It’s, in our experience, a relatively isolated example and we definitely need a more cohesive sector-wide approach to talent, one that treats skills, training, attraction, and retention as shared priorities, not competitive advantages.

Call to Action: The Power of the Public

This seminar is a reminder that public services exist to serve people. Everything we’ve discussed today comes down to communication, advocacy and education. We must:

- Connect our workforce strategies to education, so young people understand the pathways available to them.
- Connect our delivery plans to communication strategies, so stakeholders and communities know what’s coming and why it matters.
- Advocate for our sector, so the public understands the services they rely on and feels empowered to contribute to them.

Thank you.

References

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