

Fiber Leads – Watch Out, Future!

Training the next generation of fiber broadband workers is essential to realizing the economic and community benefits of a fiber future.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

The U.S. and its territories are gearing up for the largest investment in the history of the nation for broadband buildouts. As stakeholders finalize their five-year plans to meet the 270-day post receipt of planning funds, the future of high-speed, reliable broadband is coming into view. In multiple states, fiber continues to be the leading choice of technology.

But putting “fiber first” starts with advocacy and addressing the things that matter most to the broadband industry. This necessitates building a workforce through hands-on skills training and showcasing the value that fiber brings to a community.

As a leader in fiber advocacy, the Fiber Broadband Association (FBA) continues to show strong support from its members across the board. With the government funding on the horizon, the notion of “fiber first” is strong as states diligently work on broadband planning, creating broadband



Building a fiber future depends on building a strong workforce.

offices (in states that previously did not have one), and establishing workforce development agencies to best prepare for building fiber networks that promise digital equity and improved quality of life for everyone.

WORKFORCE SHORTAGE AND TRAINING

Today, the fiber industry is in a rather unique predicament in that it has not actively kept itself in the spotlight as a viable option for young people thinking about what they want to do for a living as adults.

This leads to a few significant challenges.

- The industry has an aging workforce. Those who started in the early days of fiber, roughly 40 years ago, are essentially on the retirement path and could be the next generation of instructors – or the first – but they are still working.
- From the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, as four-year college degrees were promoted and coding and other tech-related jobs became popular, vocational training was largely left behind. Young people do not appear to want to be part of building the bridge, they just want to drive across it. They are not interested in installing and connecting pipes, they just want to use running water. Unfortunately, telecommunications is no different than any other vocation. Some young people don't appear to be interested in building the infrastructure that enables internet, they just want to be able to access TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and other social media applications.
- For nearly 40 years, the fiber industry training has largely been conducted via on-the-job training (OJT). Hands-on skills are taught, such as splicing, testing and troubleshooting, which are essential to know and to help advance careers. The industry needed to recruit people, train them, and get them out in the field to “git'er dun,” as Larry the Cable Guy would say. There is nothing wrong with the OJT model – but deeper knowledge can get lost. Hands-on skills are extremely important, but so is deep knowledge, which can propel long-term career opportunities.

Today, the industry lacks the people needed to build fiber networks and perform in-home installations, and also

CONGRATULATIONS TO FBA TOP 100 MEMBERS!

It is a pleasure to congratulate the many FBA members named in the **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** Top 100 this year.

There's no show without punch – whether an 800-pound gorilla or small regional provider, all fiber-related businesses continue to show their passion and dedication to the industry. The FBA is proud they are recognized for their contributions and commitment.

Interest in all-fiber broadband networks continues to grow and take the lead. It is validation that only fiber can bring economic value to communities and a better quality of life to all. Get in line!

lacks an industry-trusted credential. Existing courses are great at providing familiarity with the job of being a fiber optic technician, but many do not provide deep knowledge or include best practices in terms of how to be successful in the field. OptIC Path, a course created by FBA, aims to help fill the gap in the much-needed workforce that exists today and to provide the in-depth knowledge and hands-on skills to shorten shadowing and onboarding. This should result in a faster ROI from months to weeks.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Technology is designed with the goal of improving lives. But the internet – more specifically an internet fueled by fiber optic technology – by far has had the most significant impact not just on society but entire communities.

An example of how fiber impacts communities is that it attracts new businesses to areas where unemployment rates were high. When businesses move out of an area because of the struggle to thrive, unemployment follows. Bringing fiber to a community

means that businesses can operate more efficiently and provide more resources to residents. It also allows for more teleworking and entrepreneurship opportunities. As more businesses move into an area, new jobs are created and everybody thrives.

Fiber to a community means access to critical resources such as health care, education and first responder services. Fiber is responsible for providing medical facilities with the ability to transmit important, large-file medical records such as images, CT scans and MRIs. It also brings value in the way of annual cost savings and recognized revenue.

Fiber serves as a foundation that gives a community something to build on, such as a smart grid, providing high transmission rates and bandwidth. Fiber-powered smart grids accelerate and connect valuable resources, such as electricity networks, transportation, wind turbine farms, solar plants and more. Fiber also plays a role in precision farming and sustainable and renewable energy production. The benefits of fiber are vast, and can be recognized almost immediately. 🙌



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