

Getting There First With Fiber Is the Name of the Game

Service providers are adopting more straightforward fiber installation solutions that minimize the skilled labor necessary to turn up new buildings and houses.

By Kevin Morgan / *Clearfield*

Over the next five years, the boom in federal, state and commercial fiber funding will result in an unprecedented era of high-speed broadband connectivity. It will help close the digital divide and deliver substantial economic benefits to communities across the county.

But there are some catches – and one of the biggest is the availability of trained fiber technicians. As many as 25,000 new fiber technicians will be needed in the years to come to build, install and maintain the new networks.

Service providers must be more innovative to meet the booming demands for high-speed connectivity and a rapid path for deployment to revenue from investors. The environment is increasingly competitive, and Tier-1 and Tier-2 carriers embrace fiber as the path to achieving financial success.

Expanding the workforce through programs such as the Fiber Broadband Association's OpTIC Path Training Program will help. Still, these programs will take months or longer to make a significant dent in the need for more skilled labor.

SIMPLIFYING INSTALLATIONS

To get the ball rolling now, service providers are adopting simple-to-use installation solutions that minimize the amount of skilled labor necessary to turn up new buildings and houses, recognizing that getting more mileage out of

their existing workforce is the best near-term way to accelerate the pace of installations.

One such service provider is Blue Ridge Communications. The company has been in the cable business since the 1960s and has more than 300,000 residential and business subscribers throughout northeastern Pennsylvania. It ventured into the fiber business in the late '90s as it built an HFC network and then transitioned to all-fiber networks offering fiber to the home in 2015.

By 2030, Blue Ridge plans to replace its entire legacy cable plant with an all-fiber XGS-PON network because of the operational savings and competitive advantages it brings to the table today and in the future. "In many of our service areas, we are the only fiber broadband provider, but in others, we have competition with up to four providers," said Zac Cronauer, head of fiber initiatives at Blue Ridge Communications.

Reducing the time to install fiber is essential for Blue Ridge to maximize its current labor force and ensure it can realize revenue quickly. "The end solution is getting the customer up and running quicker, especially in this day and age of everyone trying to get fiber to the front door," Cronauer said. "If you don't get to customers first, it doesn't matter if you are the second provider in line and you're \$10 per month cheaper. You can best make the solution faster and better for the customer and get there first."

Blue Ridge worked with Clearfield to standardize its fiber deployment, streamlining



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its inventory and training needs. It uses a few select products that can scale as necessary to turn up different-sized MDUs. Such products require minimal training because of their plug-and-play functionality, the versatility of the Clearview Cassette platform, and the option to use the appropriate drop cable.

“Prior to using Clearfield in MDU settings, we had a mixed bag of solutions in play,” said Cronauer. “We took the baseline of 48 customers and chose a solution and panel for less than 48 and one for more than 48. We utilized Clearfield’s YOURx Flex Box, FieldShield Microduct and StrongFiber, and FieldSmart Fiber Delivery Point Indoor 288-Port Wall Box solutions.

“Everything is pre-connectorized and ready to [connect] once installed in the field without the extensive splicing you’d need otherwise,” Cronauer added. “This is the path forward for increasing the speed of installation at customer sites, something that is craft-friendly, easy to handle, easy to use and reliable.”

PRE-CONNECTORIZED FIBER COMPONENTS

By using pre-connectorized cassettes and a small number of products, Blue

Ridge substantially reduced the time to install fiber in MDUs by more than 50 percent compared with legacy installation methods.

“Every builder is different, every MDU is different, every customer floor is different, and every demarc location is different,” Cronauer said. “We like the ability to utilize the Clearfield Flex Box with cassettes in many ways; it wasn’t just one product for one solution. We were able to use it whether it was a centralized split and we had to run fiber to every apartment from one demarc point or if we were hitting every floor with a demarc location. It was the same product, just different fiber cassettes inside, and that’s something we appreciate. One Flex Box solves so many problems and made standardizing solutions a lot simpler.”

Using pre-connectorized products with fiber reels saves Blue Ridge upward of 50 percent in installation time compared with traditional splicing. Some MDU customers turn up in “an hour or so” because of the ease of installation and flexibility of leveraging a craft-friendly solution. “We can now train technicians once on how

to complete installs for MDUs and are confident they can complete any type of deployment they might encounter,” said Cronauer.

Simplifying inventory to a small but flexible product set and using craft-friendly technology that requires minimum training has proven itself as a way to get around the fiber labor crunch. It enables service providers to turn up customers much more rapidly without having to hire additional staff.

Faster customer turnout is a virtuous cycle, adding more subscribers and revenues to make investors happy and leading to more word-of-mouth business with increased customer satisfaction. Though these two practices may not solve all fiber challenges, they certainly help providers leverage existing workforces. ❖

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