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At left, a PowerPathway instructor reviews safety procedures with a candidate. Below, PowerPathway candidate Carl Wash

Pathfinders

Prospective employees get the tools to succeed through PG&E's PowerPathway™ program



It's right there at the top of the pyramid representing our vision and values: PG&E aims to be the leading utility in the United States. Achieving this will require commitment, integrity and intelligence from the highest caliber of employees. But the sheer demographics of the current workforce present a challenge: Some 42 percent of PG&E employees will be eligible for retirement within the next five years, and PG&E will be left to fill the shoes of those dedicated and experienced workers.

Faced with this challenge, PG&E is taking a proactive approach toward workforce development through its new PowerPathway™ program. Working in partnership with community colleges, local community-based organizations,

unions, workforce investment boards and many other leaders, the company is reaching into communities to hire locally, provide promising new career ladders and enhance its role as an integral part of the communities it serves. In doing so, PowerPathway creates systematic pipelines of job-ready candidates for future openings in high-demand, skilled craft jobs.

"You always have people watching out for you, making sure that you're doing everything right."



"We're looking ahead to make sure we have the skilled workforce that we need," said Van Ton-Quinlivan, director of Workforce Strategy and Diversity, who is leading PG&E's PowerPathway efforts. "We want to leverage existing infrastructure and institutions within California so that there is in-state capacity to produce the types of skilled workers that our company and our industry demand."

The PowerPathway pilot program launched this spring at Laney College in Oakland and the College of San Mateo. Classes at Fresno City College begin in June, and the program at the City College of San Francisco starts in September. Up to 25 students will be selected by external caseworkers to undertake a "Bridge to Utility Worker" course jointly developed by PG&E and the community colleges. External funding from the U.S. Department of Labor and the community colleges support program costs.

The coursework focuses on strengthening skills in the areas of math, reading comprehension, physical conditioning and communication skills. In addition, technical and job-specific skills are covered, with topics including safety at heights, confined space awareness, first aid, tools and materials identification, three-day basic climbing and more.

Pathfinders

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The initial pilots lead into the entry-level position of utility worker. Additional pathways into welding, instrument and electrical technician, and mechanic classifications are on the horizon. Of course, all pathways will place an emphasis on service, teamwork and safety.

“They make sure that you’re safe, [that] it’s always safe,” said Carl Wash, a PowerPathway candidate. “You always have people watching out for you, making sure that you’re doing everything right.”

Peter Crabtree, dean of instruction for vocational technology at Laney College, noted that the emphasis on safety is absolutely essential—and intentional. “A lot of our training is hands-on in labs with equipment, tools and apparatus,” he said. “So we do a lot of safety work before anyone gets into the labs. We make safety not something that you do, but part of who you are.”

Students who successfully complete the course at one of the four community colleges in the 2008 pilot will move into the regular employment application process for PG&E and will undergo the same screening process as all other applicants.

If Web traffic is any indication, interest in the program is already quite high. The new PowerPathway Web site (www.pge.com/careers/powerpathway) began fielding hits almost from the moment it went live, even though the program had not been announced. The site, which is the only way to apply for the program, has received over 4,300 applicants to date.



Carl Wash, Corteney Tuggle and Omar Maldonado (left to right) are part of the first wave of PowerPathway candidates

“PG&E, like some of the other companies we work with, can become the proving ground for a lot of people,” said Justin Bradley, director of energy programs at the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. “More broadly, we need to build a more effective workforce infrastructure. Make sure that what you’re doing gets linked up with others. Let’s connect the region together.”

Given the interest, it’s no surprise that the PowerPathway program is already drawing industry-wide attention.

“We’re getting lots of interest from other utilities that want to learn about what we’re doing because they see it as a best practice in workforce development,” Ton-Quinlivan said.

Strengthening its workforce, connecting with the community and training the leaders of tomorrow: PG&E is doing it all right now to support the vision at the top of that pyramid. ■

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