

Addressing the Tower Climber Skills Shortage in Telecom

Background

SIGNIFICANT DEMAND, LIMITED SUPPLY OF TOWER WORKERS

Our client is a leading global networking and telecommunications company. Network services is a key line of business for our client and they consistently bid on new wireless construction and upgrade projects that require a substantial number of Tower Climbers to complete.

Tower Climbing, once dubbed as the most dangerous job in America by OSHA, has approximately 15,000 workers in the US. Despite the significant occupational hazards, the position has typically been low paying and staffed predominantly by sub-contractors.

Cell site towers are traditionally owned by communication infrastructure companies and leased to wireless carriers. Wireless carriers in turn contract the work to services companies, who often sub-contract to local tower work companies. Sometimes there may be an additional company or two in the mix, resulting in 5 layers between tower owner and tower climber. As a result, quality and compliance have been historically low and a real concern for wireless providers.

Tower Climbers often work in crews of four - three climbers and one supervisor. There is a clear skills shortage in tenured workers and many have traditionally worked for small subcontracting companies. The talent pool – already a very small number – is actively employed and engaged in sub-contractor work.

Our client recognized the need to employ more Tower Climbers on a full time employee basis as opposed to subcontracting the work. They invested in extensive training programs in order to ensure workers' safety, project quality, and regulatory compliance. In 2019, our client opened a state-of-the-art facility to train tower climbers on industry standards and carrier specifics in an extensive three week program required for all hires – regardless if entry-level or experienced.

As our clients' RPO provider, Pontoon needed to match our clients' investment and aggressive sales with tower crew headcount.

Our Approach

CULTIVATE, ENHANCE, TRANSFORM

To meet demands, Pontoon researched and identified trade schools as a potential talent opportunity. Our client selected six schools in fourteen different locations to partner with. In a targeted campaign, the client spoke often at these schools to persuade students to consider telecommunications tower work over the more popular power occupations. All day information and interview sessions were conducted, and students received Letters of Intent for job offers once they graduate. In addition, these students often get exposure to climbing heights and extreme conditions before graduating and starting in this line of work. These two factors often create a high attrition rate for entry-level candidates and the trade school education programs helped curb that significantly.

Our team also recognized weaknesses in the interview process. In a tight labor market, time is essential, and the interview process was taking much too long. Pontoon restructured the full process. We first identified process owners and designated one or two interviewers per region. The interviewers in turn provided allocated interview times on a weekly basis, allowing our team to schedule interviews in real time with candidates. Many candidates were unable to schedule time for face to face interviews and dropped from the process as a result. To improve candidate retainment, we eliminated face to face interviews and implemented Skype video interviews. Interview feedback and hiring selection had become a time concern as well so our team created automated interview forms in the ATS and set an SLA with hiring teams of 24 hours. Having only a handful of interviewing managers now allowed us to meet this SLA and offer positions much quicker, ensuring we didn't lose the candidate to other offers. This also created a more streamlined and consistent hiring experience for the candidates.

Furthermore, our team noticed common communication habits within the tower community. Text proved to be the most impactful line of communication. We implemented LoopSMS and automated recruiting and onboarding messages. For instance, SMS messages are now sent to candidates the day of their interview to confirm again or request a reschedule. This notably improved engagement and the overall candidate experience.

Lastly, our client needed scalability from Pontoon. The number of workers needed is based on project bids won. Our client could not forecast demand even in the short term, which made a traditional RPO contract difficult. To support this, we created specialized teams in our Shared Services centers that work off of a contract separate from our general RPO agreement. The Shared Delivery team can easily ramp up or down based on project supply and demand.

Client Results

LEADS THE US MARKET WITH TOWER CLIMBING EMPLOYEES

In 2018, Pontoon's RPO team hired approximately 1,000 tower workers in the US – a significant market share considering there are approximately 15,000 workers in the country. 43% of these hires were from trade schools, up from only 2% in 2017.

Time to fill also significantly improved in 2018 due to the changes in the interview process, communications enhancements, and an increase in talent from trade schools. At program inception, time to fill cycle time was 70 days. In 2017, the time to fill cycle was down to 40 days and in 2018 the cycle time was down to 15 days.

These changes in the process dropped time to fill by 63% last year and by nearly 80% since program inception.

Despite a clear skills shortage, the speed to hire and increased talent pool coupled with the client's investment in training has allowed the client to meet aggressive timelines, improve project quality and compliance, and continue to bid and win new services projects.