

Making the Water Sector an Employer of Choice: *Public Opinion and Messaging Research Findings*



Background on this Project

At the request of the Water Agency Leaders Alliance (WALA), the US Water Alliance led a project to study the public perception of the water sector as an employer among under-represented communities in the water workforce.

WALA members and the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) provided funding for this research.

This public opinion research built on previous research that WALA commissioned with Brookings to study the diversity of the water workforce. Brookings found that the water sector workforce was more male, white, and older than the general population and communities the water sector served. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/water-workforce/> June, 2018 Brookings “Renewing the water workforce: Improving water infrastructure and creating a pipeline to opportunity”

Our qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in late 2019.

We looked at respondents that were categorized as “white-collar workers” (some college education and more) and “blue-collar workers” (some college education and less).

Qualitative Research (conducted November 2019)

Six online focus groups: white-collar, blue-collar, and college students

Eight in-depth interviews: women and people of color

Quantitative Research (conducted December 2019)

Online Survey of 600 US adults (18-40) nationwide, consisting of:

- 300 White Collar (some college or more)
- 300 Blue Collar (some college or less)

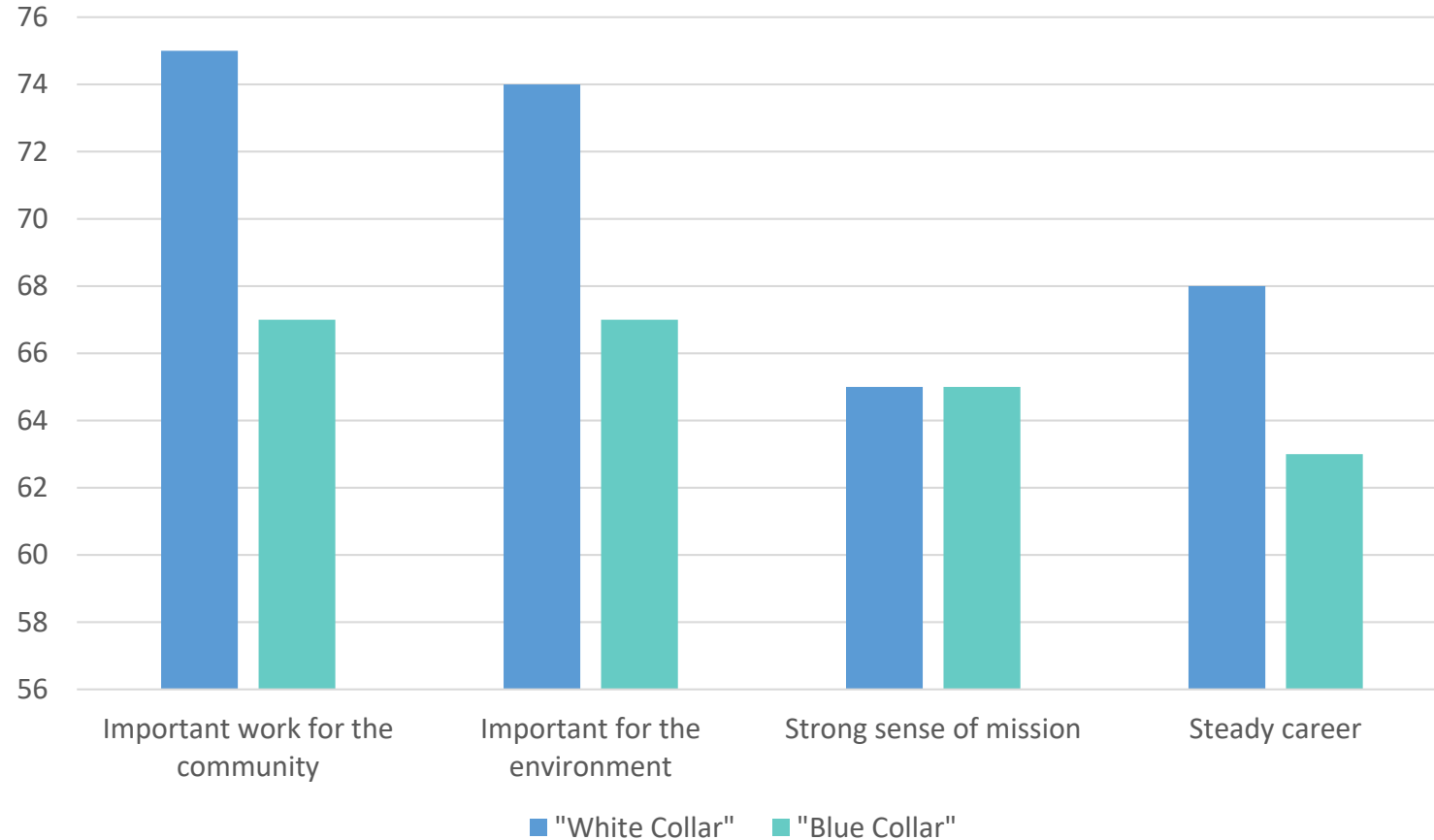
White and Blue Collar both contain at least 100 students, 100 women, and 100 people of color.

The findings from this research is now being implemented in the Value of Water Campaign's "Workforce Diversity Toolkit," launched in March 2022.

Initial Impressions

Initial Impressions: What People Think of Working in Water

Top traits in initial impressions



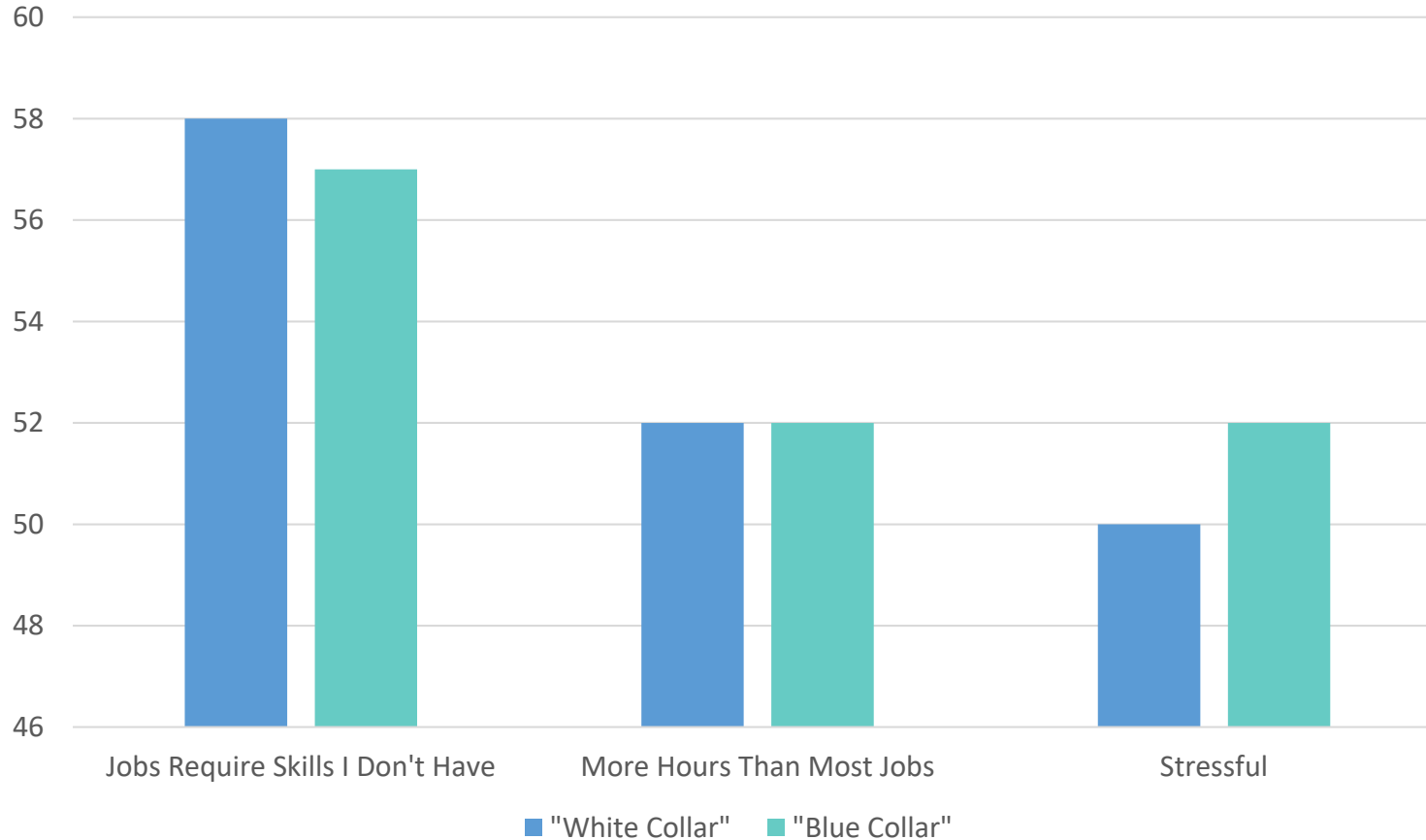
Before any new information is shared, blue and white collar workers both had the same top two traits about working in water: that it is important for the community and for the environment. The third most popular trait for blue collar workers was strong sense of mission. For white collar, it was that water provides a steady career.

Women associated water with “important for the community” at a higher level than men did. The gender gap was about 4 points in the white-collar group, but 15 in blue collar. White people answered important for the community more than respondents of color by a 20 point gap in the white-collar group.

Initial Impressions: What People Think of Working in Water

Negative traits in initial impressions

White- and Blue- collar workers shared the same top negative traits.



Messaging that Moved People

What We Tested 13 Different Messages

Tangible Benefits

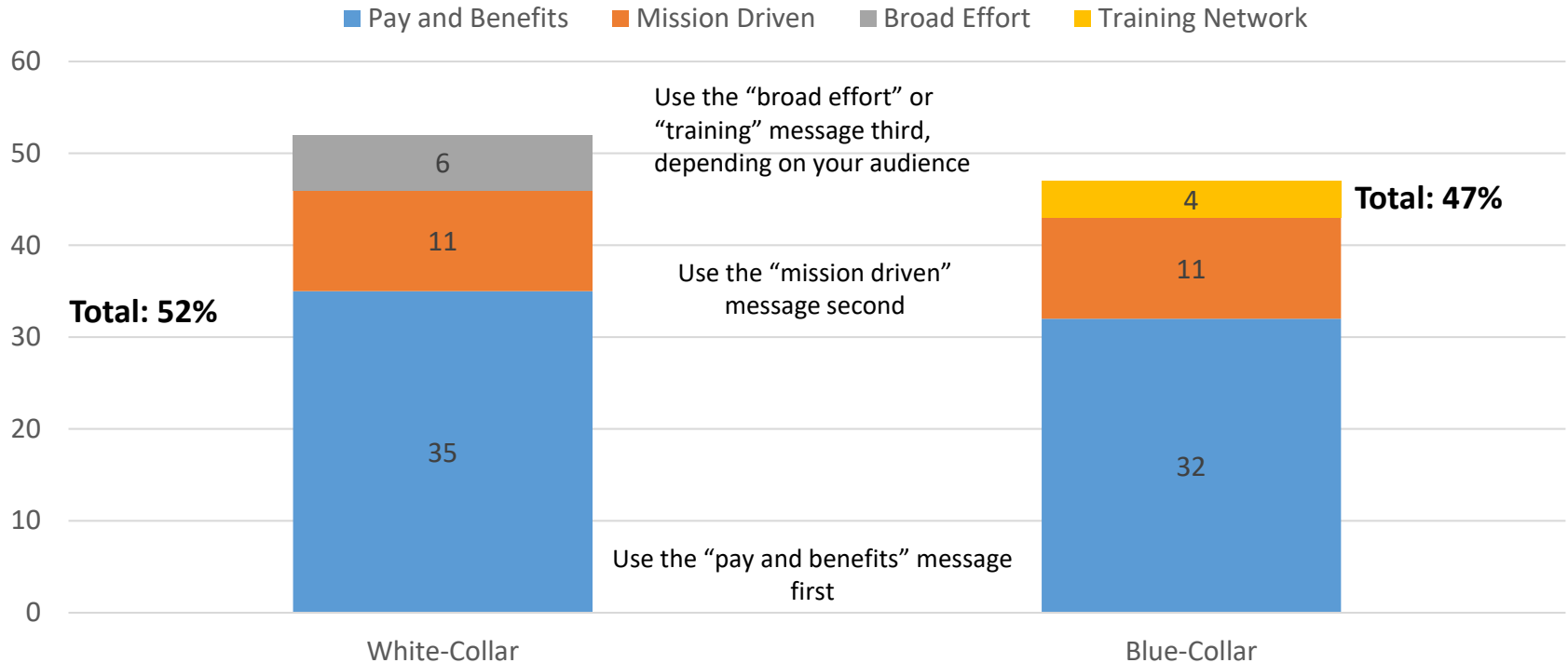
- Training in house
- Training in a network
- Open positions
- Many career paths
- Good pay and benefits

Intangible

- Heavily embedded in communities
- Environment
- Mission-driven
- Broad team
- Broad effort
- Example of a problem the water sector solved

We found what we said and the order we said it mattered

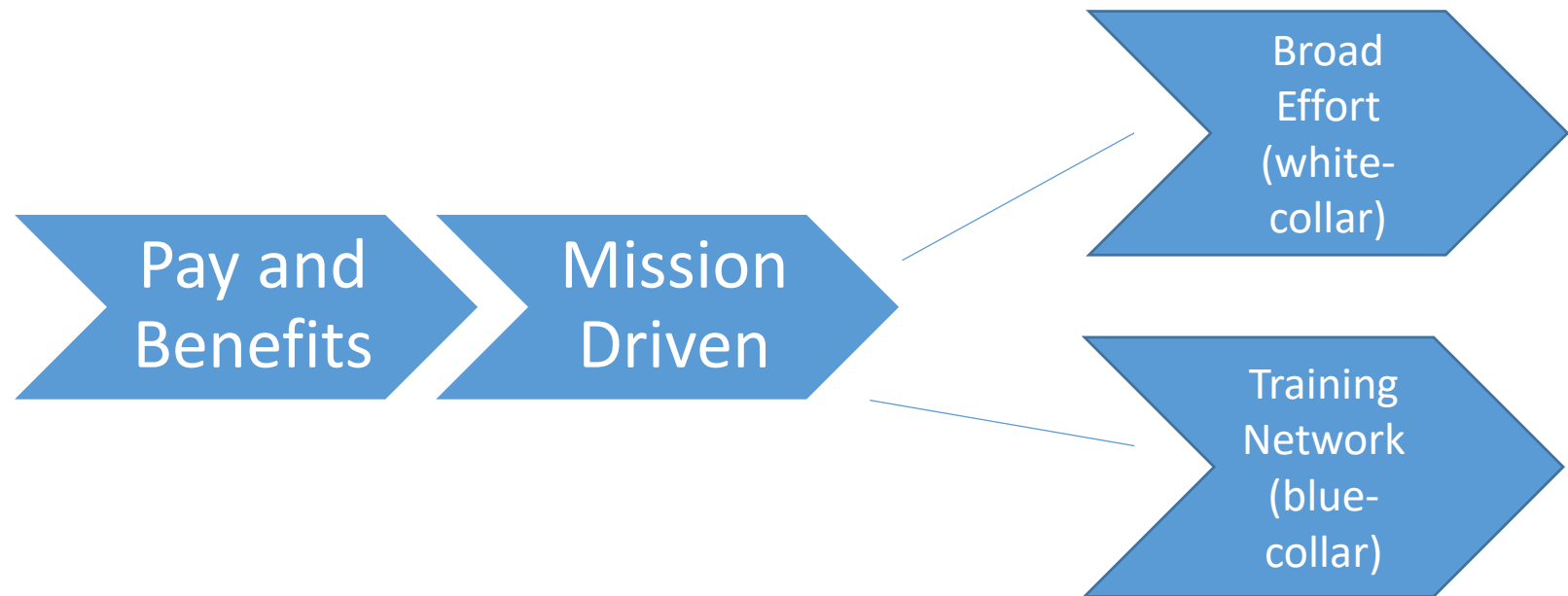
% of VERY LIKELY to consider working in water after hearing 3 messages in order



We found that there was a slight deviation between white- and blue-collar workers, but significant overlap. Each group had a series of three messages that were most effective at persuading them to become “very likely” to consider working in water. The pay & benefits message and the mission driven message were both first and second for white- and blue-collar messages. For white-collar the third most important message to hear was that you were joining a broad effort of professionals across the country. For blue-collar workers, they wanted to hear that they could get training from a network.

The Meta Message

“The water workforce: good benefits, stable career, and great training. You already know the importance of the mission, now join the team serving across the country.”



More language on tangibles: pay, benefits, stable career

“The water sector offers stable careers with better than average pay—6% higher than similar jobs and 50% higher for workers on the lower end—as well as great benefits.

The water sector is actively recruiting, with over 200 different types of positions across employers. The sector has a broad array of opportunities that span all education levels—from high school grads to people with graduate degrees. In fact, many utilities are facing 50% vacancies from upcoming retirements.

*Also, the sector is placing special emphasis on diversifying their workforce with more women and people of color.”

*We found from our research that women and people of color were not turned off by this acknowledgement; in fact they welcomed it and found it to be a positive. The assumption is most or all sectors are white and male. Being up front about this and saying we want to change is a positive differentiator.

More language on being mission driven

“A water sector career is a career with a mission: giving the public safe, reliable drinking water.

This mission touches every corner of every community. From urban to suburban to rural; the pipes that go into homes, and the rivers and streams throughout a community. The water workforce helps every community thrive and survive.

It’s a mission to secure clean water today for everyone, regardless of socio-economic status, and to sustain habitable environments and thriving ecosystems for future generations.”

(For Blue-collar) more language on training

“There are groups around the water sector playing an important role training the workforce, because the sector is defined by a very strong team approach.

This includes unions, nonprofits, professional organizations, universities, community colleges, vocational schools, and government bodies at the local, state, and federal level. They are all working to build and train the workforce.

Some employers offer financial incentives to pursue higher education—giving another opportunity in addition to training that comes from colleagues within the sector.”

Remember—one of the stressors about working in water was an assumption that people didn’t have the skills. They see crews fixing water mains and think “I don’t know how to do that.” So telling them there will be training opportunities and they’re joining a team across the sector is appealing.

(For White-collar) more language on joining a broadly supported effort

“One of the few things our elected leaders agree on is prioritizing funding for infrastructure like water—and that includes training the current and potential workforce. They are looking to build teams with diverse backgrounds, bringing together visionaries like scientists, engineers, techs, laborers, and so many more.

Workers in the water sector, no matter where they work, are all colleagues united by an effort to work as a team, training and mentoring each other instead of competing against each other. The successful and publicly supported programs in one area can become lessons available to workers across the sector.”

There seemed to be many reasons this message was popular: they liked that you are doing something good for the community, that is a priority no matter where you live, and it isn't cut-throat competitive.

Messaging Efficacy

After hearing the messages, double-digit increase in high-level of interest

After hearing our messages, over 40% of both white-collar and blue-collar workers were “highly-interested” in working in the water sector (rated their interest in working in water an 8, 9, or 10 out of 10).

Across different potential employers (i.e., public utility, private sector, nonprofit), people reported a 10-15% or more increase in interest in working in water.

After hearing the messages, more diverse employees were interested

Prior to hearing our messages, white men from non-union households were the most interested in working in water.

After hearing our messages, men and women, white people and people of color, union and non-union households, and young and middle-aged workers were all very interested in working in water.

Tips on where to post jobs

Top four and bottom four places people are looking for jobs

Top four

- Google
- Indeed.com or online job board
- On a company's website
- People in your network

Bottom four

- LinkedIn
- Glassdoor
- Other social (FB, Twitter)
- Job fair or in-person recruiting

These were the top and bottom four for both blue-collar and white-collar job seekers. Job fair and in-person recruiting was the last option for both groups, so we wanted to emphasize for people to be mindful of using the online tools like Google ads, your own website, and indeed.com or other job boards, plus by encouraging employees to talk to people in their network and not overly rely on in-person job fairs.