Getting the UVM Job: Brush up on These Skills

By Chris Kelly, CEO, Clearion

A quick search on any online job board for “utility arborist” reveals hundreds of open positions across the country for utility vegetation management (UVM) specialists, foresters, botanists, groundsmen, trimmers, climbers, work planners, auditors, consultants, and the like. The majority of the posts are for entry-level candidates at state, federal, and private-sector organizations. Even though the job market is strong right now, recent graduates still need to compete for the best jobs. Some employers report having trouble finding qualified candidates. So, what skills matter? What can you do as an aspiring VM professional to be more marketable and increase your options? What can employers do to find the best talent?

I reached out to a couple of university professors and a large industry employer for their input and advice.

According to Professor Doug Miller, PhD, who teaches forestry and geography at Penn State, the students in the forestry department who have strong math and analytical skills are the most prepared for today’s job market. Students may go into the field because they want to work outdoors, but they don’t always have the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) background required to use the advanced technology that is so prevalent in vegetation work. LiDAR and other remote sensing tools, geospatial software, and data analytics are an integral part of the job. It’s a lot more than just cutting trees and mowing rights-of-way (ROW). Miller’s best advice for students is to work hard to acquire foundational math and science skills in order to succeed in the industry. He pushes the students in his geospatial technology classes to not only learn the software interface, but to question it, dig deeper, and figure out new ways to use it.

“The technology can give you data,” he said, “but without analytical skills, you can’t access and interpret the results.”

For the university’s part, Miller acknowledged that forestry departments don’t always have access to the latest technology in order to adequately train students to use it in advanced ways. Stepping beyond the classroom to experience real-world situations can help. In addition to recommending that current students join the available clubs and study groups specific to forestry, wildlife, and soils science, Miller believes strongly in the value of on-the-job experiential learning through...
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internships, summer employment, and study abroad programs. His star students have landed internships that take them to new cities, states, and countries where they can gain valuable perspectives, as well as problem-solving and critical thinking skills—yet only a small fraction of students seek out those opportunities.

Professor Donn Shilling, who teaches crop and soil sciences at the University of Georgia (UGA), echoes this advice.

“Students today are less willing to put themselves out there,” he said, “but when they do, it can give them the edge in the job market.”

You can start by putting your phone down, sitting in the front row in class, and volunteering to be the spokesperson for a group project. Join a club that aligns with your career interests or—better yet—start one. Professors will take note of highly engaged students. Those students will be the ones invited to work on a professor’s research project or recommended for internships and jobs. Shilling wishes more potential employers would reach out to nearby colleges and universities with internship opportunities and as visiting guest speakers to share their knowledge. Those relationships between academia and industry can be a win-win for both sides.

The challenges that many employers have locating qualified talent to fill vacancies are real. Matt Goff, a vegetation manager at Georgia Power Company, believes that students should leverage the career-matching resources offered by their institutions to help them become aware of careers in the utility, ROW, and asset management sectors of the VM industry. Employers tend to value job-ready candidates who may be difficult come by. “Labor is frequently a topic of discussion between owner/operators and contractors,” Goff said. “Today, many VM contractors have similar labor shortage issues. Growing crews is not easy these days. However, the demand for labor is also an issue for utilities. As our industry adopts more technology, and as we become more aware of what we don’t know, we will be expected, and perhaps required, to act upon what the data tells us. Who is going to manage the data for utilities?”

Most college curriculums may not make it easy for students to pursue jobs in the industry and maintain their course load; likewise, our industry typically does not focus on temporary opportunities, such as internships or co-op rotations. Goff said that it can take more than six months to find a qualified new hire, and then they often must provide on-the-job training. That disconnect can be bridged by efforts to increase communication and involvement between utilities and contractors and the education system.

Working with contacts at his alma mater, the University of Georgia, Goff served on a committee of university and industry representatives to establish a program for community forestry and horticulture. The program begins in the fall of 2018 and will incorporate internships and on-the-job training as part of the curriculum. The goal is to expose students to jobs associated with municipal forestry, private practice, or even tree care companies. Further, the hope is that the program will create a pipeline for future candidates to successfully meet the demand for jobs in the utility, ROW, and asset management industry. Goff hopes to involve the UGA career counselors, who can encourage students to participate in the new program and help them gain the foundational skills they need to succeed.

There is no doubt that the industry is relying more and more on digital solutions to help manage vegetation for utilities and other ROW owners. That trend means that job seekers at every level and for every position not only need to be comfortable and capable with new technology, but must be able to take full advantage of the tools. Candidates who are enthusiastic about becoming tech savvy will stand out the most. If you are the most knowledgeable user of the technology—GPS, navigational tools, hardware, and data—and also understand the work going on in the field and on the ground, you can help organizations find innovative new ways to operate that are better, smarter, and safer. We are in the early stages of gathering and interpreting data in this industry. As the jobs become more data-centric, candidates will need the skills and mindset to analyze that data for valuable insights and to build (or at the very least understand) visual, graphical representations of the results.

Beyond helping organizations transform their operations with new technology and fresh analysis of the data, candidates with good “soft” skills can bring a valuable new perspective to the human side of the job. Sure, the business is all about technology, trees, ROW, and habitat, but all of the users are people. If you can empathize with both the customer and the people doing the work, you can help advocate for positive change. That means being a good communicator and listener, being patient, and persevering—all good skills for your career and for life.
I had the privilege of visiting Alberta recently and the folks at AltaLink invited me to the transmission group’s annual safety summit. While there, I also had the opportunity to visit several areas on their transmission system in Banff National Park.

Based on my experience there, I could have focused my article on safety (it was a great summit) or environmental stewardship—AltaLink has earned their accreditation as a Right-of-Way Steward. This issue, however, is on career development, and I can still take my inspiration from my time in Alberta. As each participant in the safety meeting introduced themselves, they shared how many years of experience they had. There were a few new members, but I was amazed at the number of workers with 20–35 years under their belts. Every consenter had more than 20 years of experience.

AltaLink has given significant attention in recent years to the challenges of recruitment and career development. It is time for the UAA to take a more active role as well. The utility vegetation management (UVM) industry is desperate to recruit and retain professionals at every level. Why is it so difficult? It is a great industry in which to work. There are so many varied paths that all kinds of people with all types of interests can seek out a rewarding career. Our industry has electric utilities, gas and liquid pipelines, railroads, and more. It has equipment manufacturers, contractors, environmentalists, consultants, chemical companies, and numerous other specialties. All those offer careers. So, why are we having such a difficult time attracting and retaining people?

The 50 participants in this year’s System Utility Vegetation Managers Summit identified recruitment and career development as the most pressing matters and have decided to make this the focus of next year’s summit. If you are employed by an electric or pipeline company, plan on attending the summit next spring. Until then, keep watch for pre-meeting surveys that are in the planning process. After the summit, results will be published to better inform our members and hopefully we will all learn something.

UAA leadership has also been thinking about recruitment and career development. The board created a Students and Entry-Level Professional Task Force, focused on engaging with students in the college-level science field. This group is just starting to form, but has not found the number of volunteers needed. After forming, they will undoubtedly be formalizing the mission. If this is an area of interest to you, let us know.

Finally, consider being an ambassador. If the students graduating from your alma mater have never heard about UVM, it is because no one has told them. Consider visiting to talk to the students. Tell them about the breadth of this industry, your experience with it, and the diverse opportunities it might offer them.
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President’s Message
By Sara Sankowich

Training & Career Development

I cannot think of a more fitting topic for my last message: Training and Career Development. As I think about my career and advice I have gotten from mentors and colleagues, the number-one recommendation is to be involved in a professional organization like the UAA. If you are reading this, then you’ve already taken the important first step of being a member. The next step is going beyond just membership; it’s being involved and engaged. Use your membership to find professional contacts or a mentor, avail yourself of educational opportunities, certifications, training, and above all—never stop learning.

The UAA includes professional development in its mission. By being a member, you have tools and resources readily available. Here are a few of the items available on our “member portal” section of the webpage to help broaden your knowledge:

Quizzes & Continuing Education Units (CEUs)—We currently have six different quizzes posted that will provide CEUs with a passing score. Read the featured article and answer 20 questions.

UAA Fact Sheets—We have 18 different fact sheets available in English and Spanish on topics related to sustainability, integrated vegetation management (IVM), and safety.

Industry News—This section features up-to-date news from around the industry. It includes highlights, accepted industry practices, and white papers from recent System VM Managers’ Summits.

Webinars—You can view the current webinar calendar and view previous webinars.

Presentations & Podcasts—You can view the 2017 Trees & Utilities Conference presentations as well as the safety summit presentations.

E-Newsline—View the electronic version of the current Utility Arborist Newsline magazine or read previous issues. We publish six issues a year.

Events—Stay up-to-date with education, meet other professionals, and learn about new technology—attend a local workshop, a safety summit, or a national conference! You’ll find all the industry events listed here.

Coming Soon—We’re working on an expanded Research page with quick view abstracts and an updated Laws & Regulations page.

Now that you have used the webpage to brush up on the latest industry innovations, research, and trends, you are one step ahead of the competition. Take charge of your career and use the UAA to help advance and map your current career or search for a new career in your area of interest. Here are a few of the “member portal” items available:

Job Board—Look for currently listed industry jobs (or post one of your own).

Member Directory—Find the contact information for that person you sat next to at a conference or someone who gave a talk on technology you want to implement.

Social Media—Connect on Facebook or LinkedIn through the website by clicking on the social media icons at the bottom of the page.

Use social media to participate in discussions, use your peers as sounding boards, and make some new friends. Professional networking groups can help you meet new people and find events or webinars that are of interest to you.

There are also credential programs available in the industry which can help further training and career development. The International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) offers arborist credentials, including the ISA-Certified Arborist and ISA-Certified Arborist Utility Specialist. For those searching for a more in-depth program, the UAA has partnered with the UVMA and the online learning institute SAIT, and is offering a Professional Utility Vegetation Management (PUVM) course of study, whereupon successful students can apply to be UAA Certified in UVM and Advanced in UVM credentials.

Whether you are a seasoned veteran or you are new to the industry, a great way to connect, learn, and advance your own leadership and management skills (as well as add to your resume) is to volunteer on a committee or task force. Professional organizations can give you the opportunity to develop your skills as a leader, which is important for personal growth and growth in your company. A list of all the UAA committees and members of the committees is available through the member portal. If you are thinking of joining a committee, you can always reach out to the chair or a committee member to see if it’s a good fit for you.

My final suggestion is to set stretch goals and push yourself out of your comfort zone. I joined the UAA 18 years ago and joined my first committee a few years later. I never thought I’d be president, but one achieved goal after another, I made it here. Now go out there and use the UAA to set your own stretch goals and discover something new today!

Sincerely,
Sara Sankowich

P.S. I’d like to thank Phil Charlton and Diona Neeser for their immense help and guidance throughout this year, and the whole UAA Executive Committee for their hard work and dedication to the industry. Thank you for a wonderful year!
By Peter Stoltman, VM Program Manager, Oncor and Eric Brown, Electric Transmission and Distribution Program Manager, SMUD

Early this year, the Professional Development Committee compiled a list of tasks to help accomplish the UAA mission: “To drive excellence, innovation, and change through professional development, outreach, research, and the promotion of best practices.”

Many of these tasks include the production of materials that can be used to educate UAA members, partners, and the public about relevant industry topics through the use of different media. One goal we focus on is providing opportunities for people to continue their education in the field of utility arboriculture and earn continuing education units (CEUs) for maintaining professional credentials.

Webinars offer learning opportunities without having to travel. In the first half of this year, the UAA hosted four webinars about a variety of topics including: preparing for a rate case, measuring customer satisfaction, the Utility Arborist Research Fund (UARF), and bee diversity within utility rights-of-way (ROWs). We currently have three additional webinars scheduled with more in development. Another opportunity to earn CEUs while expanding your industry knowledge is online quizzes, which are available in the Members Portal of the UAA website.

The committee supports the Professional Utility Vegetation Management (PUVM) credentialing and training program that is offered through the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT). If you are interested in enhancing your knowledge and skills related to managing and leading UVM programs, I encourage you to go to sait.ca/programs-and-courses and look through the list of programs for the UVM Certificate of Achievement.

If you are interested in volunteering on the Professional Development Committee, contact Diona Neeser, at dneeser@gotouaa.org.
Davey Names New VP in Canada

The Davey Tree Expert Company of Canada, Ltd, is proud to announce the promotion of Pat Perry to Vice President of Safety and Employee Development.

Perry joined the company in 1986 and has held various field and management positions relating to leadership, policy development, client relations, quality assurance, project development, and human resources. In 2016, he was promoted to Canadian safety director.

“Pat is a decisive and innovative leader for our company, and for more than 30 years he has continuously focused on the importance of safe and excellent client service,” said James Doyle, executive vice president and general manager of Davey Tree Expert Co. of Canada, Ltd.

He is chair of the Board of Directors for HortEducation British Columbia and is the director of the Western Utility Arborist Association. Perry has more than 40 years of experience in the green industry including as an industry instructor and speaker.

The Davey Institute Names New Manager of Technical Services

The Davey Tree Expert Company is proud to announce the promotion of A.D. Ali to Manager of Technical Services for the Davey Institute.

Ali joined the Davey Company in 1998 as a technical advisor and has more than 30 years of experience in the green industry. He has written a book on pest management in the landscape, presented more than 130 scientific and training seminars, and authored more than 300 scientific and trade-oriented articles in his career.

“A.D. has an enthusiasm and technical expertise that both our service lines and clients have come to rely on over the years,” said Jim Zwack, general manager of the Davey Institute. “His dedication to the scientific aspect of our industry is highly valued as we continuously strive to lead with technical integrity and deliver the highest quality of practice for our clients.”

Ali holds a bachelor’s degree in Entomology and a master’s degree in Plant Protection and Management, both of which are from the University of California, Davis. He has a PhD in entomology from Louisiana State University and is an International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Board Certified Master Arborist®. Ali served on the Board of Directors of the Florida Chapter of the ISA including a term as president. He also served as Adjunct Professor at Edison State College and Hodges University in Ft. Myers, Florida.

Cunningham Retires from Davey Tree Board of Directors

J. Dawson Cunningham has retired from the Board of Directors of The Davey Tree Expert Company after 13 years of service.

Cunningham served on the board’s Compensation and Audit Committees during his tenure. He is the retired CFO of Roadway Corporation.

Cunningham joined Roadway in 1985. Between 1992 and 1996, he served as the vice president of finance and administration at Roadway. In 1996, he was promoted to vice president of finance and administration and treasurer. He was elected executive vice president, CFO, and treasurer in 1998.

Pat Covey, president and CEO of Davey Tree, said Davey has positively evolved its incentives and compensation for employees thanks in large part to Cunningham’s leadership.

“He’s been a wonderful supporter of the people and the employee-owners of this company,” said Covey. “He served the board with honor and distinction, providing a valuable contribution to the success of the company, for which we are very grateful.”

(Continued on page 10)
“PEOPLE ARE OUR POWER” - IS MORE THAN JUST WORDS.

Investing in our people is at our very core.
Wright Tree Service Promotes Gilmore to Division Manager and Appoints Larson to Regional Manager

Wright Tree Service, an employee-owned company specializing in utility vegetation management (UVM), recently named Jeffrey Gilmore Division Manager and Adam Larson Regional Manager. Collectively, the two bring to their new positions more than 40 years of experience in UVM. As division manager, Gilmore will oversee operations in Indiana, and Larson, as regional manager, will oversee operations in Illinois, Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

Gilmore started his career with Wright Tree Service in 1999 as a groundman in Illinois and eventually worked his way up, becoming foreman, general foreman, and most recently, a safety supervisor. He also served on the Ameren Contractor Safety Committee as the Committee Chairman from 2014 to 2017.

“From operations to our safety, education, and training departments, Jeff has spent nearly 20 years with Wright Tree Service and will bring that wide breadth of knowledge to his new role,” said Regional Manager John Church. “It is this type of experience that our customers have come to expect, and that Jeff will continue with our current customers and as we forge new relationships.”

Larson has worked in VM for more than 24 years. Throughout his career, he has worked as a supervisor, general foreman, and regional manager within the UVM industry. Most recently, he was the program manager of VM at Xcel Energy. He is an ISA-Certified Arborist and Utility Specialist and has served as a judge in sanctioned tree climbing championships in four states.

“Adam comes to us with extensive experience in our industry as a contractor and also as a utility customer,” said Wade Myers, senior vice president. “He is a great addition to our team.”

Land Management Group Joins Davey Resource Group, Inc.

Davey Resource Group, Inc. (DRG), a wholly owned subsidiary of The Davey Tree Expert Company, has announced the acquisition of the assets of Land Management Group, Inc., an environmental consulting firm based in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Land Management Group provides specialized services in wetlands science, geology, soil science, environmental permitting, marine biology, and many other facets of environmental management.

“Our staff at Land Management Group is very excited to join the proud tradition and client-focused approach embodied by DRG,” said Christian Preziosi, president and environmental scientist for Land Management Group. “In particular, we look forward to both the technical and business support of the Davey Tree Expert Company as we continue to strive to provide the best services possible for our clients.”

Karen Wise, division manager, DRG, said Land Management Group is a natural fit and complement to DRG.

“They are client focused and strive to provide timely solutions to complex environmental challenges,” said Wise. “Operating in the southeast U.S. with an emphasis on coastal systems and regulations, the partnership provides Davey Resource Group with an expanded set of services, new geography, strong leadership, and a talented team of scientists. Land Management Group employees will also now have the opportunity to participate in employee ownership and enjoy the benefits of our company’s solid employee-ownership culture.”

Based in Wilmington, North Carolina, Land Management Group consults with clients throughout the Southeast. The company has more than 15 employees, and Preziosi will continue to lead the Land Management Group office as the area manager.
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