

Municipal Water Leader

A photograph of three men standing on a blue metal walkway at a water treatment facility. The man on the left is wearing a dark polo shirt and khaki pants. The man in the middle is wearing a dark blue polo shirt and khaki pants. The man on the right is wearing a white polo shirt and dark pants. They are all wearing sunglasses. In the background, there are large white cylindrical tanks and a building.

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**Bay County, Florida: Restoring
Water Service After a
Devastating Hurricane**

How IPM Can Help Water Utilities With Personnel Transitions



When a high-level manager moves on to a new job, a municipal water agency may find itself caught flat-footed. It usually takes 4-5 months to replace a high-level manager or executive, and in the meantime, an agency may struggle to smoothly fulfill the departed employee's functions. This is the problem that Tim Pickering aimed to solve when he founded Interim Public Management (IPM). IPM has a network of over 200 experienced associates who can fill these positions while a company carries out the search for a permanent replacement.

In this interview, Tim Pickering, president and chief executive officer of IPM, speaks with Municipal Water Leader Managing Editor Joshua Dill about his company's niche in the business world.

Joshua Dill: Please tell us about your background and how you came to be in the current position.

Tim Pickering: I was trained as a city manager and ran four municipalities. We oversaw water and wastewater operations. When I was on my last assignment, a personnel issue arose and left me with a vacancy for an essential position. I wasn't able to bring someone who was truly qualified in to fill the gap—someone who had done the job before, was properly trained, and could be there in 2 weeks. That's when I knew there had to be a niche for this kind of service in the public sector.

Joshua Dill: Please tell us about your company's history.

Tim Pickering: I founded IPM in 2010, and the company has grown ever since. A newly incorporated municipality with about 500 residents and no employees called us, and we were a perfect fit for it. Today, we serve clients as large as the City of Phoenix, as well as other cities and counties. We are located in Fountain Hills, Arizona. We've got about 240 associates available for interim assignments. In background, they are mainly early retirees from the public sector who have served in executive-level positions like finance director, director of public works, or IT director. We also have four internal staff who make it all work.

Joshua Dill: What is the basic service you provide?

Tim Pickering: We provide interim employees at the executive level for public-sector organizations. An organization can't function for long without certain high-level employees like the finance director, so whenever someone leaves one of those positions, we have individuals we call associates who are ready to jump in and help. They typically spend 3-6 months at an organization. Our company doesn't do headhunting. We're not trying to fill a position permanently. We're just trying to help out organizations that need highly skilled individuals who can perform those roles for limited periods of time.

Joshua Dill: What sorts of organizations do you work with?

Tim Pickering: In the past, we have worked with public sector organizations such as cities. We have found that utilities and other public-sector agencies have the same needs as those organizations: They all need an IT director, a project manager, and a utility director. All those positions are similar across organizations. The public sector is quite different from the private sector, and you need to have worked in that arena to understand it. That experience allows us to provide experienced professional-level managers to water utilities and irrigation agencies as well.

Joshua Dill: How long does it usually take companies to find a replacement?

Tim Pickering: Without our services, it typically takes 4–5 months. However, if a company calls us, we can usually get someone there in 2 weeks' time. Sometimes we can turn it around more quickly. This isn't typical, but in one instance, I had someone at a company the next day after someone left unexpectedly.

Joshua Dill: What do companies that have never heard of IPM do when they have executive-level vacancies?

Tim Pickering: Currently, there are two alternatives for organizations in the public sector. The first one is to do nothing. That isn't a good solution in most cases because departments can go sideways quickly. The other alternative is to name an internal candidate. A few problems can arise in that case. First, this person is now doing two jobs, and it's difficult to do two jobs successfully. Second, that person sometimes develops the expectation that their new role will be permanent. If that's not the case, and someone else is selected, their feelings can be hurt, and that can be disruptive for the department.

Joshua Dill: How do you find your associates?

Tim Pickering: Mainly by word of mouth. An associate who works for me will tell one of their former colleagues about IPM, and that person will call and say, "Hey, I'd like to serve." The other way we do it is by contacting our large network and asking them for references. People often ask me how I know our associates are good. First of all, our associates have to have been in the public sector for around 30 years. Once a person has met that criterion, we think they're probably good at their job.

Joshua Dill: Have you changed your methods over the last few years as you have gained experience?

Tim Pickering: Yes, particularly in the types and numbers of positions we focus on. We don't focus on first-line employees;

we focus on supervisory-level positions. If the job needs a degree, we probably have a qualified associate who can fill that position. We've also expanded the number of positions that we serve. Last time I put the list together, we offered services for 60 different executive and professional positions. That's a big change from when we started. We've also expanded geographically. Not only do we work in Arizona, we've done work in Colorado and Missouri. We've also improved and developed our customer satisfaction tracking. At the end of each placement, we send out a survey, and we tally the results. We use those results to improve our customer service. Ninety-eight percent of our clients say they would recommend this service to their colleagues or friends.

The last thing I'd say is that we have improved simply because we've been through this process so many times that we can guarantee that we can meet your time frame and provide an interim employee within a couple of weeks, and you will know that that person has experience, is a professional, and has led departments before.

Joshua Dill: Tell me about your vision for the future.

Tim Pickering: We've already served at least 50 different public-sector clients, and I want IPM to be ready to help water utilities and irrigation districts as well. I want water utilities and irrigation districts to be able to improve their operations and handle any transitions that come up. During leadership transitions and other opportunities to improve their departments, I want to ensure that they have high-quality professionals in temporarily vacant positions. I envision having our team management employees ready when those types of agencies need them. *



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