

What Every Operator Needs to Know About Starting an Operations Challenge Team

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Knowledge	Principles	Practical Considerations
What is Operations Challenge?	Operations Challenge is a competition to find and develop the most talented wastewater operators and maintenance personnel in the world.	Competition consists of five events. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Process Control,• Laboratory,• Maintenance,• Collections, and• Safety.
Why should teams compete?	Operations Challenge is a professional development program. It creates a safe place to develop skills that are applicable to daily work. It also encourages teamwork and networking.	The competition allows the team members to become better at cross-functional disciplines. For example, an Instrument Technician could learn laboratory techniques that could improve field instrument calibration accuracy. Operations Challenge creates opportunities for indirect leadership and mentoring opportunities. For example, a front-line mechanic could direct the maintenance event, even if a member of management is on the team. It also helps water professionals improve technical skills, such as reinforcing proper lockout/tagout protocols.
Who can participate?	Anyone in the wastewater sector can be on an Operations Challenge team. This competition encourages participants from all levels of experience — including newer and less-experienced operators.	Team members competing at the national level are required to be members of the Water Environment Federation (WEF; Alexandria, Virginia). Aside from competing, WEF members also can participate as coaches, judges, and enthusiastic cheering sections.
How are team members selected?	Teams are made up of four competitors. The same team members must compete in all five events. Factors such as motivation, experience, and skill level can influence the selection process.	Tryouts. Have candidates run through a sample of each event and score their abilities. For example, include a five-question process control test, a speed test for pipe cutting, etc. Training opportunities. Select candidates who show an interest in learning new technical skills as well as developing their leadership skills.
Where are competitions held?	Competitions are held at local events, invitational events, and the national event at WEFTEC® each year.	Many WEF Member Associations (MAs) hold competitions at their state or regional conferences. Some invite teams from across the country to join them. The MA typically helps determine which teams will be sent to the national event, and there may be qualification requirements.
How do teams prepare for competition?	The first rule of Operations Challenge is practice, practice, practice!	When first starting out, many teams walk through all five events, but really focus on just one event each competition year. The next year, they can focus on a new event. This can help a team optimize its chance at getting on the podium for their selected “best” event.

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What are some typical costs?	When budgeting for Operations Challenge, keep travel costs in mind.	Many teams compete at one or more local (MA) events prior to WEFTEC. Typical travel costs may include airfare or mileage, hotels, meals, and registration fees.
	Practice equipment varies widely based on the event.	Process control example tests and simulator licenses are available for free, but a new setup for the safety or maintenance event can cost USD \$10,000 or more. Often, utilities have equipment that can be used for practice and do not need to purchase the entire event setup at once.
	Labor costs can be a factor, depending on the utility.	Some utilities prefer to pay the team members for their practice time and participation. Other team members are unpaid, or a hybrid combination of work and volunteer time.
What if a team cannot fund all the event practice equipment?	Utilities should check if other local teams have practice equipment they can use for practice. Other municipalities might be interested in sharing expenses for equipment, or the local MA might be able to help. Teams can ask manufacturers or contractors to sponsor them. Be creative.	Many teams share practice equipment with others in their area. Most are more than happy to work with other teams to help them get ready for competition. Some MAs also have equipment that is shared among their local teams. Teams can choose to work on events with lower-cost equipment, or might be able to simulate many of the events using equipment already on-hand at their own facilities. Manufacturers, vendors, or contractors might be able to help with the cost of practice equipment. Before contacting potential sponsors, be sure to check with the municipality to ensure there is no ethics violation.
Where are the current rules, examples, and standard operating procedures?	Always refer to the Operations Challenge Resource Center for the latest event rules.	The Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association hosts the National Operations Challenge Team Resource Center at bit.ly/WEFTEC-OC-TeamResources . Each event has a rule book. Many also have video tutorials to walk teams through the events. The individual event pages include additional resources for teams, including an area where they can get their questions answered by event coordinators and view the responses to other teams’ questions.
How can teams generate excitement within the workforce?	Operations Challenge participants can spread the word to members of their front-line and management teams. Invite prospective team members and champions to see a local or national competition.	There is a treasure trove of Operations Challenge videos on YouTube. These videos often include exciting footage of the best teams in the world competing and demonstrating their mastery of the skills that are in use at their facilities every day.
What should participants know before competing for the first time?	Operations Challenge contestants do not have to win to get the benefits of being on a team.	The camaraderie, skill-building, and leadership development skills benefit any workforce. A trophy is not necessary to develop these skills!
How can a new team compete against teams with significant experience?	The competition is divided into three divisions, so that newcomers are not up against Operations Challenge veterans. Each division crowns the top three teams in each event, as well as the top three overall winners.	Teams compete in the following divisions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Division III: New teams (3 years’ experience or less, and have not won or placed overall in Division III)• Division II: Existing teams that have more than 3 years’ experience, or have won or placed overall in Division III.• Division I: The best of the best. Teams that have previously won or placed overall in Division II. All teams, regardless of experience, compete on the same equipment, following the same rules.
How can a new team get started?	There are many helpful resources available for new Operations Challenge participants.	Here are some ways interested participants can learn about Operations Challenge. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reach out to a local MA;• Contact WEF at opschallenge@wef.org;• Check out the Operations Challenge website at bit.ly/WEFTEC-OC; and• Visit the National Operations Challenge Team Resource Center. 📺

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