

CONVERSATION

Auston Van Slyke

Wind energy technology program director
Ecotech Institute in Colorado

+1 (720) 213-2634
www.ecotechinstitute.com
/EcotechInstitute
EcotechInstitute



Tell us about the Ecotech Institute.

The Ecotech Institute is a career college — a two-year associate’s degree type of college — and it’s the only college in the world that offers all these degrees in renewable energy, so everything that we do here is dedicated to sustainability and renewable energy. We’re only one campus out in Aurora, Colorado. We do have some online stuff that we’ve started. But we’re still a young school. We’ve been around five or six years now. I’m head of the wind program for wind technicians, but we also have solar and energy efficiency and power-utility programs.

How did you transition from being a wind technician to teaching and instructing future techs?

That transition really began when I was

a technician. I think every wind technician can relate that you get pushed into a management position fairly quickly. You’re put into situations where you have to start training others around you really quickly.

So as a wind tech, you get used to doing technical training, on the job training, and one day, I got injured at a wind farm up in Canada and that kind of put me on light duty for a while, so actually I really heavily started getting into curriculum development, admissions, while I worked for Vestas on light duty.

And from there I became adviser for colleges. These colleges needed to have advisory boards, and they needed to find some people who were in the field, so I would travel to a couple of different colleges and do some advising on their boards. And then the wind industry kind of took a little dip, and that’s when I decided to try the training fulltime. I helped Redstone College start their wind program, and once Ecotech opened up, I came here to do the same thing.

How did you get into being a wind technician?

My background was actually in the Marine Corps. I was doing repairs and upgrades to Harrier Jets. From the military, I got trained on all the electrical and hydraulics systems for the planes, which translated very well into the career of wind technician because the skills are the same — the electronics,

the mechanical, the safety culture that we were in. It really landed me the job having that experience working on the fighter jets.

What makes wind technician such a fast-growing profession?

You need a blend of technical skills on the electrical side and the mechanical side. And you need to have the professionalism and the safety culture put into your day-to-day activities.

Can you give a quick “day in the life” of a wind technician?

You’re going to drive up to a maintenance headquarters somewhere close to the wind farm, and from there you’ll get split into teams. You’ll take the work truck and the tools and do all your research in the morning before you head out. You’ll get dispatched to one particular wind turbine for that day. It’s pretty common that these jobs on the wind farms will be multiple days per wind turbine. It’s not like you have to go out to different wind turbines in the same day. It’s usually the same wind turbine for days in a row. So you work on a team of three or four people between eight and 12 hours a day. You’re just up there getting the job done.

Does it take a certain personality to perform a job 300 feet above the ground?

It doesn't. There is no sense of where you are when you're working on a wind turbine. You really do forget really quickly about the physical location of where you are because your whole day working on a wind turbine is within four walls.

Yes, those four walls just happen to be held up on a 300-foot tower, but you're still working indoors, so you really don't notice the heights.

It takes a personality to want to work in those types of conditions. I think that's really the biggest thing; you're basically all outside. If it's hot outside, then it's hot in the wind turbine, and if it's cold outside, it's cold in the wind turbine. So you don't have a sense of heights necessarily, but you do have a sense of the weather.

It's about a six- to seven-minute travel to the top and about the same getting down. And the newer wind turbines are getting elevators, so you don't have to climb a ladder anymore.

Do you see a lot of students coming in from other established professions?

I find a lot of transitional students here that are looking to get into renewables as a career move into something that wasn't so good for the environment or the economy here. I find a lot of veterans, people transitioning from the military.

Some other trends I've seen is people in the medical field getting into wind. That's just a personal insight, I've got a lot of students that were prior medical field. I think in the medical field, you're working with some smaller items and you've got to have the patience and the technical skills to do the medical field. ... So as a transition you get into this wind-energy job or this solar-energy job, and here you're still using technical skills, but you don't have the customer service all day long. So I think there's some transition because of that.

What kind of salary can a wind technician expect to make on average?

All these jobs in wind — all of them except in-office jobs — all of them are going to be hourly. Right now, I'm placing a lot of my graduates at Eco-tech right around \$25 an hour. And that's going to be 50 hours a week, 60 hours a week.

So doing the math on that, it's somewhere between \$45,000 and \$80,000, depending on the hours and depending on the year as well, whether your work is going to be yearlong or a seasonal thing.

Is there a lot of travel involved?

There are different jobs in the industry. Some of those jobs require a lot of travel, so there are those 90 percent to 100 percent travel jobs. But the typical wind farm technician does not travel.

The jobs in the field that you see the guys climbing up the wind turbine, the majority of those jobs you're not going to have to relocate. You're going to be at one wind farm for your career.

But for the construction of wind farms, all those technicians are 100 percent travel. They'll be at one site, at one wind farm, through that phase, which is usually a couple of months, and then they'll relocate to the next wind farm, and they'll just do that for years.

When I was a technician in the wind industry, I was a warranty guy, so I was at wind farms when they had some serious mechanical failure, and we really wanted to find out if they had voided the warranty or what was the root cause, so we can better design the wind turbines out of the manufacturing process, and so I was only at a wind farm for maybe about a month, and I relocated every month for years all over North America. I traveled more than

a majority of the wind techs out there.

But that was a good time in my life. I was fresh out of the military, still no significant other, no kids. I traveled with people that had the wife, the kids, and they would actually travel with their family. Either they would do the flights and the house, or they would actually just tow a fifth-wheel trailer and live out of the trailer.

And so I've seen the gamut of types of individuals, and it's really hard to stereotype a wind technician because they just come from all walks of life.

What advice would you give to someone considering becoming a wind technician?

Somebody considering being a wind technician should really make sure they're comfortable living in these smaller towns and these rural areas. Some of the most common reasons for the high turnover as wind technicians is they've never been outside of a big city before, and they don't know how to be happy out in Kansas or Nebraska.

It's culture shock, and what do you do on a Friday night with no dance club to go to? They've just got to be flexible in where they live.

And the other big piece of advice I have is everybody is reluctant to get into the industry because they think they might be a little afraid of heights, and my advice is don't use that as a way to procrastinate. Don't use that as an excuse.

Everybody has a fear of heights. It's healthy. You can get over it. The first day I ever climbed a wind turbine, I was so afraid of heights I couldn't even stand up.

I was crawling around. But a week or two later, I was having a blast. I was super comfortable with standing or jumping up on top of the wind turbine. A lot of people use that fear of heights, so don't let that scare you away. ↘