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Wiring Failure: How Low Pay and Overwork Undermine AT&T's Technicians and Customers



Introduction

AT&T is among the most iconic companies in the United States, providing telecommunications services for over 15 million broadband customers and 114 million wireless subscribers, with a corporate history stretching back over a hundred years.¹ The services AT&T provides have long been foundational infrastructure for the modern economy, and with the company's plans to invest in cutting-edge technology like fiber-optic internet service and 5G wireless, AT&T will play an increasingly vital role in the lives and careers of people across the country.

However, the relentless pressure placed on a growing group of AT&T Technicians due to low wages, demanding schedules, and unrealistic performance expectations is fueling a crisis within the company, threatening both its workforce and its customers.

Called Premises Technicians in most of the country and Wire Technicians in the Southeastern U.S., these Technicians install broadband in homes and businesses and make repairs in the event of outages.

The Premises and Wire Technician positions were created twenty years ago by AT&T as a lower-paid, "second-tier" Technician position. This position was created as an alternative to "Core" Technicians, who have bargained for decades with AT&T over pay, benefits, and working conditions. Since these titles were created, members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) have fought to extend collective bargaining agreements to cover these workers and to bargain improvements to their wages and working conditions.

Over time, Premises and Wire Technicians have become an increasingly important part of AT&T's field operations. In 2008, Premises and Wire Technicians made up 8% of all CWA-bargained Technician positions at AT&T across the country. In 2023, that number had grown to 32%.

Though the union has made gains in improving the quality of these jobs, they are still behind in terms of fair compensation and the best employment practices and working conditions that characterize other AT&T Technician jobs.

As a result, these Technicians report very low job satisfaction and experience high turnover rates. Workers cite inadequate compensation and scheduling policies that obstruct work-life balance as the primary factors driving these bad outcomes. AT&T's low-road

employment practices for Premises and Wire Technicians impair the company's ability to adequately staff their service areas with well-trained Technicians who can effectively address customer issues and install new service. This hurts our communities, and it hurts AT&T's bottom line.

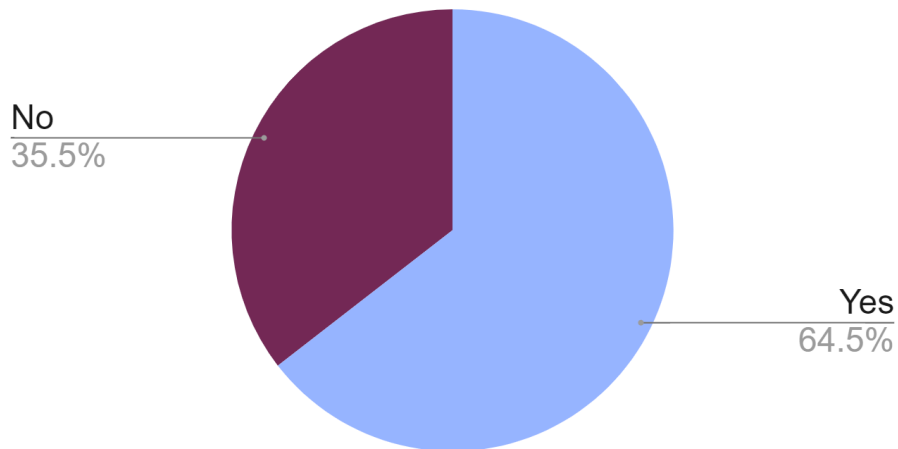
In today's economy, high-speed internet is an essential part of public infrastructure. As AT&T moves forward with fiber deployment across the country, it will need a well-trained and effective workforce to connect millions of new customers.

This summer, AT&T and CWA entered into negotiations over the collective bargaining agreement covering 15,000 Customer Service Representatives and Technicians in Southeastern states, and the two parties remain in negotiations for a contract covering 9,000 members in California and Nevada that expired in April. Together, these contracts cover more than 6,800 Premises and Wire Technicians. **To improve its service to customers and be in a position to install fiber for new customers throughout these service areas, AT&T must agree to significant improvements in Wire and Premises Technician pay and working conditions.**



Wire Technicians Report Low Job Satisfaction and High Turnover Rates

WIRE TECHNICIAN SURVEY: Have you applied for other jobs outside of AT&T in the past year (or since your start date, if less than a year)?



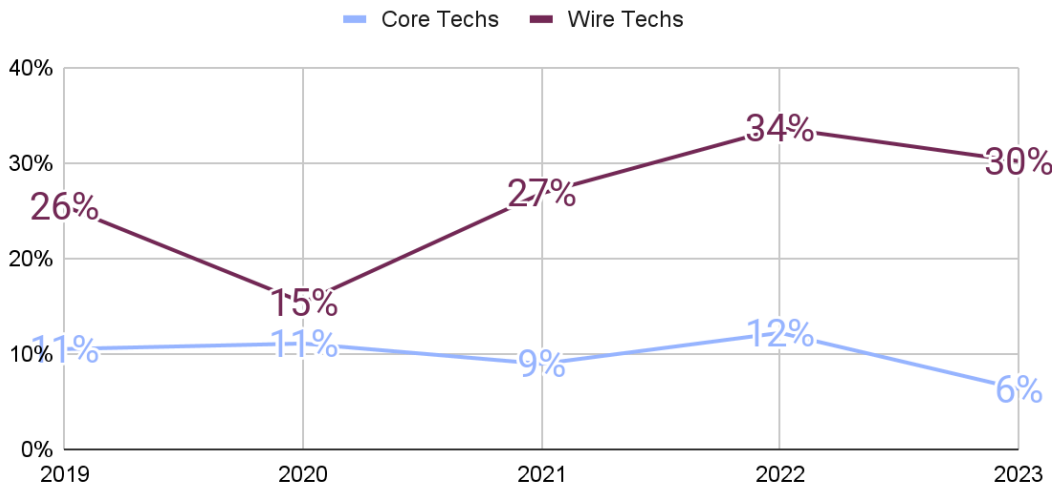
From May to June 2024, CWA conducted a survey of 647 Wire Technicians across the nine Southeastern states covered by the AT&T Southeast contract (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and South Carolina). This survey sample represents roughly 13% of Wire Technicians in the region.

The survey revealed low levels of job satisfaction among Technicians. 48% of Technicians reported being “unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied” with their jobs. Another 34% reported “neutral” feelings on job satisfaction, and only 19% of employees reported positive job satisfaction.

This low job satisfaction is contributing to high turnover intentions among Technicians. 70% of respondents reported having considered leaving AT&T for reasons other than retirement in the past year, and 65% reported applying for other jobs outside of AT&T in the past year.

Data on Wire Technician attrition in Southeastern states also indicates turnover is a serious issue. Wire Technician turnover rates in the Southeastern states have been nearly three times higher than “Core” Technician turnover rates over the past five years, and the gap has grown every year since 2020. In 2023, the Wire Technician turnover rate reached 30%, compared to 6% for “Core” Technician titles.

Turnover Rates for Wire Technicians and "Core" Technicians at AT&T in Southeastern States, 2019 - 2023



High turnover creates a deficit of knowledge and expertise that comes from experience in the field and working with customers over many years. Nationally, 45% of Premises and Wire Technicians have less than 5 years of experience in the position, compared to 5% of "Core" Technicians.



Low Pay Among Wire Technicians is a Primary Contributor to High Turnover

Low pay was overwhelmingly the number one workplace issue cited by Wire Technicians in the survey. Nearly 73% of Wire Technicians reported “increased pay” as the most important improvement that would impact their decision to stay on as a Wire Technician when presented with a range of options.

Not having enough pay or time to build a family or provide for a family...they wonder why turnover rates are so high; it's because you have to have a roommate or second job to be able to afford to live.

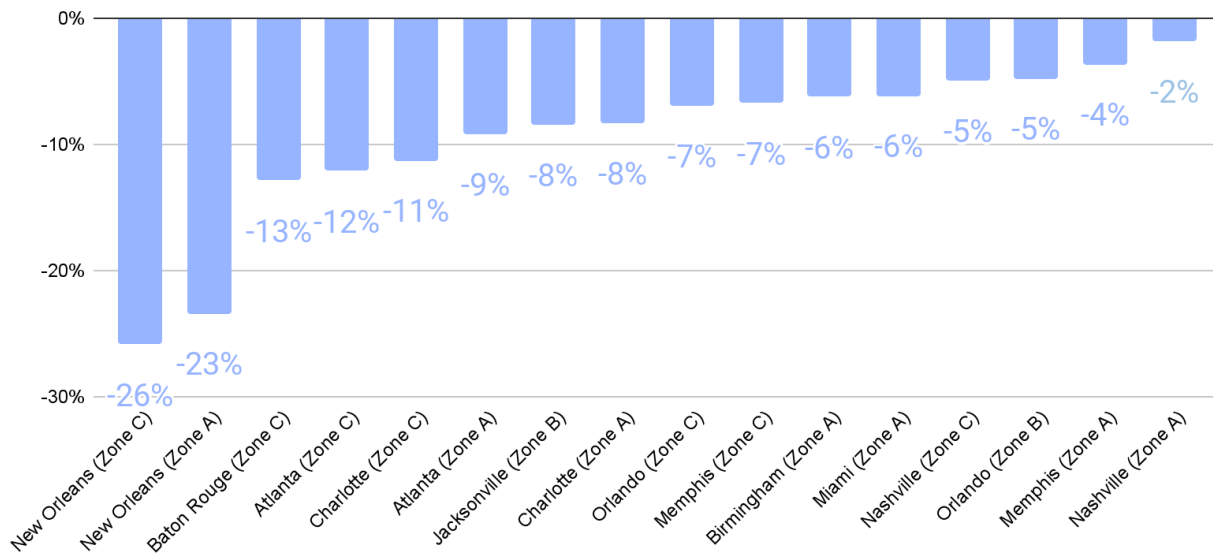
— Wire Technician, Georgia

A review of comparable wage data for Telecom Technicians confirms that Wire Technicians experience wages below those of other union-represented Technicians at AT&T and the market rate for similar titles. Nationally, Premises and Wire Technicians are paid 35% less on average compared to AT&T “Core” Technicians.

Beyond AT&T, Premises and Wire Technician pay is also below the average rate for Telecom Technician pay across all employers. AT&T Premises and Wire Technicians represented by CWA were paid 8% less than “Telecommunications Equipment Installers and Repairers” on average, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2023.²

This disparity between AT&T wages and market wages is even greater when looking at major metro areas, where market wages tend to be higher. Across the ten metro areas covered by the survey with the highest Technician employment, the “top of scale” Wire Technician pay (meaning the highest rate available under the collectively bargained agreement) ranges from 2% to 26% below the average market pay for “Telecommunications Equipment Installers and Repairers” in that metro area, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2023.³

Percent Below BLS Average Wage for Top Paid Wire Technicians, by Metro Area



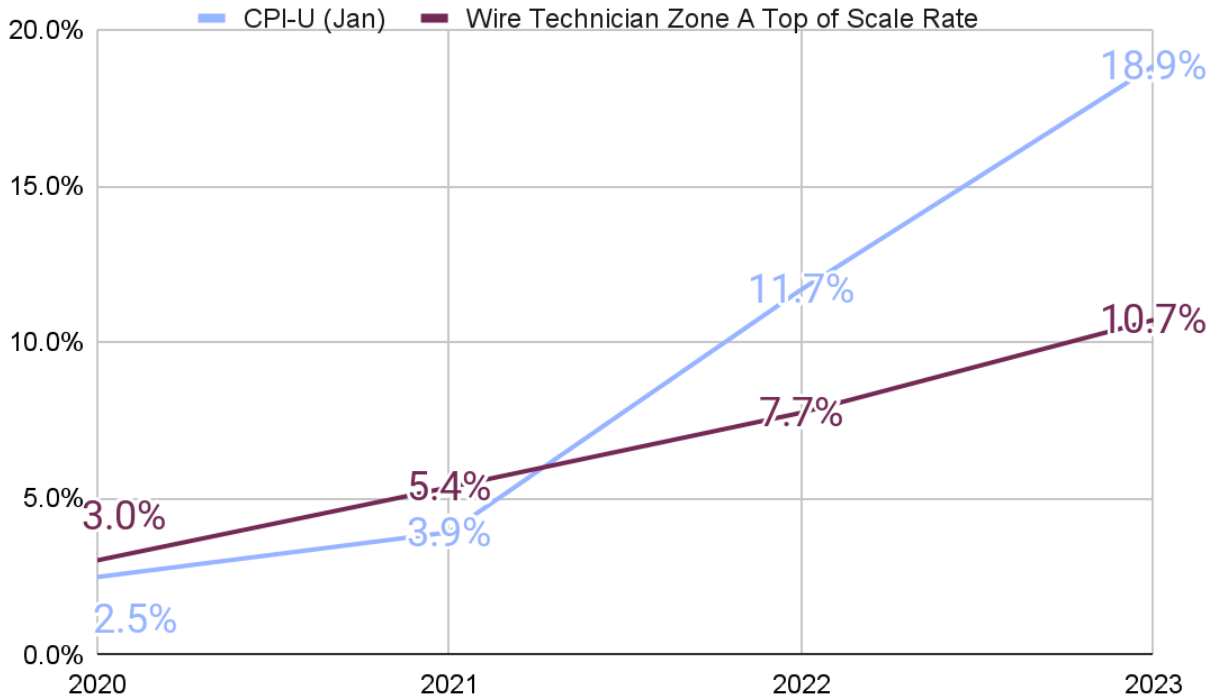
AT&T’s failure to pay competitive market rates for Wire Technicians exacerbates stagnant wage trends across the broader Telecommunications industry. According to analysis from the Economic Policy Institute, while overall industry productivity has grown 1.4% per year from 2003 to 2023, inflation-adjusted wages for the median telecommunications worker have remained flat, and the median inflation-adjusted wage rate for “Telecommunications Equipment Installers and Repairers” has decreased at a rate of -1.3% each year.⁴

It used to mean something to be a technician at AT&T. Competitive wages, better benefits, and loyal technicians that had the intuition for the job. Not anymore. The pay is not competitive.

— Wire Technician, Tennessee

For workers, these below-market wage rates have been compounded by AT&T’s failure to raise wages to keep up with the skyrocketing cost of living. Over the past four years, national inflation measured by cumulative percentage increases (CPI) has outpaced Wire Technician wages by just over 8% cumulatively, resulting in a substantial reduction in the standard of living for AT&T Technicians.

Cumulative Percentage Increases for Wire Technician Wages and Inflation, 2019 - 2023



The current pay for Wire Techs is not enough. Inflation and the cost of housing have skyrocketed in South Florida. Wire Techs are struggling to make ends meet. Wire Techs need a significant pay raise to keep up with the cost of living in South Florida and the region.

— Wire Technician, Florida

We have seen entry-level McDonald's and Walmart employees close the gap in pay with our craftsmanship. With everything going up and up by the day and inflation, I can't even make ends meet on an 80-hour paycheck. The stress has had me thinking of looking for different employment or a possible second job. I love doing what I do for this company, but there has to be some type of drastic compensation for being on the front lines of this company.

— Wire Technician, Florida

Wire Technicians Report Overwork and Work-Life Balance Challenges That Hurt Morale and Result in Worse Customer Service

Wire Technicians in the Southeast report that overwork and abusive scheduling practices create significant challenges in balancing their work lives with family and personal responsibilities. 61% of Wire Technicians report that they are “unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied” with their work-life balance over the past six months, with only 13% reporting any level of satisfaction. Technician work can be highly seasonal, with repair and installation work peaking in the spring and summer months. 84% of Wire Technicians report that AT&T’s scheduling and work assignment practices do not promote a healthy work-life balance during these periods of high workload.

I have missed so many of my kids['] games that it is a gut-wrenching feeling. I hope the people sitting in those fancy buildings calling the shots in field operations realize you are just losing by forcing this huge workload.

— Wire Technician, Kentucky

If you work for AT&T, you will never have a home life. It's that simple.

— Wire Technician, South Carolina

When asked about specific AT&T practices that contribute to overwork and poor work-life balance, Wire Technicians pointed to several issues:

1. Unreasonable expectations for the time needed to complete work assignments (70% of respondents identified this as an important issue),
2. Additional assignments added to the work queue through the day (69%),
3. The over-scheduling of weekend shifts (69%).

Unreasonable Deadlines for Completing Work Assignments

AT&T uses estimates for how much time is needed for Technicians to complete installation and repair jobs. These estimates are used to determine staffing levels, daily workloads, appointment windows for customers, and the “efficiency” of Technicians. Wire Technicians in the field report that these estimates do not account for the real-world time needed to assist customers with complicated problems and perform high-quality work. This leads to crushing workloads that can’t be reasonably completed in eight hours.

They have loaded so many jobs on each Tech that we are forced to rush through or come home late to our families. It at times makes me sick to think about. There is no work[ing] a good 8 hours and go[ing] home to your family with a decent paycheck at AT&T.

— Wire Technician, Kentucky

Wire Technicians are required to stay on the clock until all work is completed (“the load clears”), meaning these unreasonable work demands result in long hours.

I've been here for 11 years, and it's always load first. The company does not care about your family or kids. [T]hey care about the work getting done. We're forced to work until there's nothing left to do, no matter what "shift" your [sic] on, especially on the weekend.

— Wire Technician, Florida

The workload is very unrealistic for one person to do in 8 hours. Load balance will put 2 to 3 a.m. appointments on your work list, which in turn makes you feel obligated to work through lunch to get the work done to keep the customers happy...Then, when we have any complaints, we are just told by management if you don't like here you can go to work somewhere else...Work-life balance is a joke because we work until the load is clear.

— Wire Technician, Georgia

These unreasonable work assignment practices result in bad customer service, including missed and late appointments.

We still roll to appointments super late, and many times throughout the day we are trying to ease the customer's frustration before we can even begin our tasks.

— Wire Technician, Georgia

MISSED APPOINTMENTS! I will often be assigned an 8-10 install and a 10-12 install. Both of these jobs are full fiber installs. The kicker is that my first job is an hour away from my work center, and my second job is 45 mins from my first job.

— Wire Technician, Mississippi

Even more importantly, Technicians who are evaluated based on their ability to keep up with these time estimates don't have time to tackle complicated repairs and fix underlying issues, potentially leading to future service disruptions and additional repair jobs ("repeats").

If we are so busy trying to close tickets vs actually have time to find and solve problems, there are more repeats.

— Wire Technician, Alabama

It's hard to complete the job in the timeframe [AT&T] allows...They want us to gold plate it, but then add more work to us, so we feel rushed. We are treated like a number, not a person. No thought into the fact that not every customer or house is the same. There's no buffer zone for things that come up.

— Wire Technician, Florida

The practice has gone from "do what's right" to "do what's minimum."

— Wire Technician, Florida

AT&T's practices that force Technicians to rush through jobs cause frustration for customers who have to repeatedly make new appointments. Overall, this increases costs for AT&T because Technicians must be sent out again for the same issue. Allowing

Technicians time to fix the underlying causes of complex issues would improve customer service and save costs in the long run.

Additional assignments added to the work queue through the day

The daily schedule for Wire Technicians can vary by workload in the area and by the complexity of each job assigned. On top of this, AT&T has a dynamic scheduling practice of adding new appointments to Technician job queues throughout the day.

For example, you're loaded up with a.m. installs and repairs and given a 2p to 4p install and 4p to 8p repair. You complete your 2p to 4p at 5pm and still have to go do your 4p to 8p repair, and you're not able to go home till 7p or 8pm. We should be allowed to have a life outside of AT&T and spend time with our families!

— Wire Technician, Tennessee

In effect, mandatory overtime and long after-hours jobs can be assigned at any point during the Technician's work day. Unpredictable work schedules make it impossible to fulfill family obligations.

You cannot ever plan anything if you are working that day due to there not being a deadline when they can force you to work overtime.

— Wire Technician, Kentucky

I do not know when I will get off work. I cannot plan for dinner or plan to go to my granddaughter[']s soccer game at even 7:00 or 8:00 because there is a pretty big chance I won't make it on time. I have very little spare time, and the little I have, I'm exhausted from doing 2-3 full fiber installs per day. My schedule says 8 a.m.– 5 p.m. I would like for that to be my actual schedule.

— Wire Technician, Mississippi

I've had to miss [my] daughter[']s appointments and my wife has had to go by herself with four kids to these appointments and then call me so I can answer any questions or help. Ask any questions. I've had to miss funerals. I've had to miss

birthdays. AT&T does not promote work-[life] balance; they tell you to use your paid time off to schedule it.

— Wire Technician, Florida

Over-scheduling of weekend shifts

Wire Technicians are scheduled to work every weekend except one each month, severely limiting the opportunity to connect with family. In addition, Wire Technician schedules do not provide consecutive days off.

Being a father of 2 boys i[t']s really hard to do anything with them due to working every weekend.

— Wire Technician, Georgia

Work schedules are a major issue for me and many others. I have a family, a grandchild who visits, and an autistic brother-in-law living with us. Working weekends is unnecessary and strains our family time.

— Wire Technician, North Carolina

When work is at its normal pace, I am unable to plan around when I'll be off because I never know. I also am unable to coach any of my kids teams because of this. I've watched my oldest daughter, who is graduating high school this year, grow up through videos and pictures because I had to always work. I have 1 Saturday a month to do something with my family, and that is absurd. I will not watch my other children grow up and achieve things through videos and pictures; it's about time AT&T started giving a damn about the people that make it run!

— Wire Technician, Alabama

I've already missed a lot of seeing my son grow and develop and being there for my wife. More consecutive days off and more weekends off would greatly improve my work-life balance. In my experience, I don't have days off; I just have days I don't get paid for.

— Wire Technician, Kentucky

Wire Technician Turnover Hurts AT&T and Its Customers

Overstretched and underpaid Technicians suffering from low job satisfaction are important concerns for AT&T's business and customers.

The high and growing turnover rates caused by AT&T's low pay and low-road scheduling practices incur big costs for the company in terms of separation, recruitment, and training. In addition to these direct costs, there are also indirect costs that hurt AT&T, including lost productivity, reduced quality of service, and low morale.

A 2012 survey of research papers estimated typical turnover costs to be 21% of annual salary, with higher costs associated with jobs that require specific skills.⁵ In its 2024 report, the Work Institute estimates turnover costs to be 33% of annual salary.⁶ These estimates suggest AT&T is losing \$40 to \$60 million annually as a result of Premises and Wire Technician turnover across the country. Other sources estimate higher costs associated with turnover, as much as 200% of annual salary.⁷

Wire techs quit after realizing AT&T doesn't care about them or their personal lives!

— Wire Technician, Georgia

Ultimately, customers and communities suffer when high Technician turnover leads to low levels of staffing.

I deal with angry customers on a semi-regular basis that have had their appointments missed. One area in particular has a lot of growth in our service, and zero techs have been hired in that area. They just keep sending us an hour or more north to pick up the slack.

— Wire Technician, Mississippi

Lack of technicians means we have more morning and even afternoon jobs that are almost impossible to meet in the req window. Even if we (I DO NOT) skipped

some of the required steps. Sometimes we still won't be able to meet the other waiting clients for their installs/repairs.

— Wire Technician, South Carolina

Due to the lack of respect given from management and the insufficient amount of pay, and poor scheduling, it is hard to keep new hires on with AT&T past 6 months, which makes the workload go up and down, causing customers to have to wait multiple days for us to come out on repair tickets...or even get installs created for new customers. And if we have any type of issue with cable, or fiber, etc., it prolongs the delays even further, causing bad surveys as well and very unhappy customers. Being the face of the company We as technicians have heard this nearly on a daily basis, and it is a bit unfortunate that a multibillion-dollar company can't hold onto technicians, and they are unaware as to why.

— Wire Technician, Alabama

When new hires replace experienced Technicians, it often takes years of on-the-job experience to gain the expertise needed to efficiently address the range of unique issues Technicians experience on the job. Customers will inevitably see lower quality service and additional unnecessary service calls (“repeats”) as experienced Technicians are replaced with Technicians who are new on the job.

Turnover has caused increased repeats; instead of having a workforce with experience, many are new and haven't [run] into certain problems before.

— Wire Technician, Tennessee

I was terrified my first week solo dispatching because I felt so unprepared. This is an entry-level position, and we really get told we will figure it out once we are out there on jobs. But these are people's homes that we are essentially playing trial and error with.

— Wire Technician, Mississippi

I've been doing this for 11 years and am extremely confident in my abilities. However, new hires are thrown to the wolves. They receive zero training on copper, tv services, voip, etc. Yet, they are expected to go out and do these jobs.

— Wire Technician, Georgia

Conclusion

AT&T has committed to passing 30 million locations with fiber by the end of 2025 and will have the opportunity to take advantage of new federal subsidies from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to expand cutting-edge fiber networks across the country to previously underserved areas.⁸

However, AT&T is undermining its own goals for new fiber deployment with its poor employment practices.

Fair market pay and improved work-life balance would ensure experienced Technicians are available to install and maintain service for AT&T customers.

It is very important that the pay increases, seeing as wire techs are a key factor in having a happy customer, who is responsible for keeping the company in business. This should not be looked at as an entry-level position. Once the sale is complete, it is up to the technician to seal the deal by providing good customer service and quality craftsmanship, not to mention mitigating any miscommunication from the salesperson and the customer.

— Wire Technician, Louisiana

AT&T should bargain fair agreements with CWA to improve wages and quality of life policies for Wire Technicians, which in turn will improve its workforce stability, operational efficiency, and customer satisfaction.

I shudder to think of the millions of dollars this company has wasted on the revolving door, bringing people on board just to have them leave because of the terrible work-life balance and insufficient compensation. Surely, it would be cheaper and more efficient for them to do the right thing and improve the lives and benefits of its employees; if they did that, many more people would stick around and want to grow with the company.

— Wire Technician, Alabama

Wire technicians are the face of the company. We are the ones face-to-face with the customer and going in there [sic] homes. Wire technicians should be treated with a lot more respect than they do by all levels of AT&T.

— Wire Technician, Tennessee

3X

WIRE TECHNICIAN
TURNOVER COMPARED TO
OTHER TECHNICIANS

73%

REPORTED
NEEDING RAISES

61%

REPORTED BAD
WORK-LIFE BALANCE

\$40M+

ANNUALLY LOSS AS A RESULT OF PREMISES
AND WIRE TECHNICIAN TURNOVER

8%

AVERAGE WIRE /
PREMISES TECHNICIAN
PAY IS 8% BELOW BLS
NATIONAL AVERAGE PAY
FOR TELECOM EQUIPMENT
INSTALLERS AND
REPAIRERS

Endnotes

1. AT&T 1Q2024 Results <https://investors.att.com/financial-reports/quarterly-earnings/2024>; "AT&T's History of Invention and Breakups," The New York Times (February 13, 2016) <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/02/12/technology/att-history.html>
2. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2023, 49-2022 Telecommunications Equipment Installers and Repairers, Except Line Installers <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes492022.htm>
3. Wage Zones in this graph refer to geographically-adjusted wage tables under the collectively bargained agreement. Wage Zones are assigned by county. Technicians in the same metro area may be paid under different wage zones depending on their work location within the metro area.
4. EPI analysis of Occupational Employment Statistics data for OES codes 492022, 499052, and 492021, and Bureau of Labor Statistics Labor Costs and Productivity data. Wages are inflation-adjusted to 2023 using the CPI-U-RS. Provided to CWA on July 1, 2024.
5. Heather Boushey and Sarah Jane Glynn, "There Are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees," Center for American Progress (November 2012) <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/there-are-significant-business-costs-to-replacing-employees/>
6. Work Institute, "2024 Retention Report" <https://info.workinstitute.com/decoding-the-emerging-workforce-2024-retention-report>
7. Gallup, "This Fixable Problem Costs U.S. Businesses \$1 Trillion" (March 13, 2019) <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/247391/fixable-problem-costs-businesses-trillion.aspx>
8. Jeff Baumgartner, "AT&T resets fiber plan, sheds light on BlackRock JV," Light Reading (January 25, 2023) <https://www.lightreading.com/broadband/at-t-resets-fiber-plan-sheds-light-on-blackrock-jv>

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