

The art of hiring

SUPERINTENDENTS LEARN FROM THEIR MISTAKES AS THEY TRY TO STAFF THEIR MAINTENANCE CREWS WITH QUALITY WORKERS

by **JOHN WALSH** Ask any superintendent what the most difficult aspects of his job are and hiring employees will be one of the first things mentioned. Hiring the right workers is as important as purchasing maintenance equipment, if not more, but is much more difficult.

Hiring people with the right skill sets and the right personalities is extremely important because they work as part of a team, according to John Gosselin, the assistant general manager at the 54-hole DuPont Country Club in Wilmington, Del.

"It's extremely hard to find the right help," Gosselin says. "There are a lot of good people out there, but finding and hiring them takes a lot of time and effort."

Hiring is the second or third most important thing superintendents do, according to Walt Wilkinson, superintendent at the public 36-hole Indian Creek Golf Course in Carrollton, Texas.

"It's extremely important to have the right chemistry, but it's difficult to do," Wilkinson says. "People who you interview tell you what they think you want to hear. Everybody wants to add their personal touch to the operation. I'm looking for efficiency and quality in the operation. That comes first."

Jim Loke, certified golf course superintendent and golf course manager at the 18-hole Bent Creek Country Club in Lancaster, Pa., has hired workers who didn't work out.

"I'm considered an expert because I've made every mistake when it came to hiring," Loke says. "Some years I've made the mistake of hiring anybody who comes through the door because not many people applied for the job."

Gosselin says he used to interview 80 to 90 people to hire 35 seasonal employees who worked eight or nine months a year, but it was too much effort.

"Now we've started an H2B visa program to get foreign workers," he says. "We get 20 to 25 workers that we can count on. It's a cumbersome process, but it's worth it in the end."

Gosselin, who has depended on H2B workers from Mexico for the past three seasons, says he will continue to use H2B workers for the foreseeable future. To help with communication barriers, DuPont employees who are bilingual work with H2B workers. The company also offers English classes to the workers. Gosselin says the same people usually come back annually.

This year, Loke says he, too, will bring in



Photo: The DuPont Country Club

The DuPont Country Club likes to keep more people on staff to reduce overtime because it makes sense financially.

some H2B candidates from Mexico and is currently going through the process with the green chairman at the club.

"We are enthusiastic about it," he says. "The only red flag is that no one speaks Spanish, but they say one out of five workers will be able to translate both ways."

To fill out the rest of Gosselin's staff, he hires 10 college students from the area who aren't in turfgrass management programs, as well as retired people and people in between jobs from the area to maintain a good relationship with the community.

"Seasonal workers have limited benefits, and those are the hardest positions to fill," he says. "Full-time positions with benefits are easy to find. We carry 30 full-time positions in grounds and golf course maintenance. We have full-time equipment operators who have to be proficient on all equipment and have a good safety record. We always fill the operator positions with full-time workers."

For seasonal help, Wilkinson stopped hiring college and high school kids because school is lasting later and starting earlier and they end up working for only 12 weeks or less.

"I'm hiring contract employees as much as I can," he says. "Eight people are working on eight-month contracts, and 80 percent are foreign workers from Central America."

The interview

When interviewing candidates for a maintenance-staff position, Loke goes through an internal checklist with each. He starts by observing the appearance of an applicant, and looks at the neatness, clarity and detail of a

candidate's application. He also looks for preciseness, communication skills and style, and personality. Loke wants to hire people who are conscientious and determined.

Wilkinson asks candidates how they react in certain situations.

"If someone has experience in the field, I'm not asking where the start key is," he says. "I'm not looking for cowboys that want to hop on the equipment and go. I'm looking for someone who will take care of the assets that the employer has entrusted us with."

Wilkinson tries to give candidates as much of a feel for what they will do in a week on the job, and it's not the same thing every day.

"If they're looking for continuity at the work place, arriving early for work is the only continuity I can give them," he says.

Hiring assistants

Hiring an assistant superintendent is a more involved process. Loke's checklist is similar to the summer-help applicants, but there are more steps. He begins with the resume, cover letter and application, looking for clarity, grammar and detail, as well as for education and field experience.

Loke has at least two face-to-face interviews with an applicant for an assistant superintendent position and looks at the person's communication style, appearance, attitude, sincerity, intuition and willingness to work, learn and be managed.

"Is he able to lead and manage a crew, and is he someone who will become a superintendent in the future," he asks. "Will the person represent the industry and the coun-

try club in a responsible way?

"I'm looking for perspective," he adds. "Will they provide me new, insightful ways to do things, will the person intellectually stimulate me and does he have natural curiosity about the industry?"

Loke has an informal discussion about various topics with a candidate and then has him spend time with other members of the staff. He also goes through an assessment program generated by an outside company that determines energy level, truthfulness and the ability to answer SAT-type questions, as well as how candidates think through easy and complex problems.

"This test separates the four closest applicants," he says. "This assessment provides me with questions I can further delve into with each interviewee, i.e., behavioral situations, and focus on their strengths and weaknesses. It does a much better job than I can do."

Gosselin enjoys finding someone for a leadership position, such as an assistant superintendent, superintendent or mechanic, to make his operation better.

"It seems like we hire one or two leadership positions a year," he says. "We generally look for someone with diversified experience — someone who has worked at private clubs and public courses and has worked with small, medium and large budgets."

When interviewing for assistant superintendents, Wilkinson asks technical questions such as, "What's the difference between sulfur-coated urea and ammonium nitrate?"

"I want them to understand the physics of the soil and the product they are putting down," he says. "They should be able to respond to people in the field. If they are asked



Photo: Indian Creek Golf Course

Matt Conrad is part of the maintenance staff at Indian Creek Golf Course in Texas.

what they are putting down, fertilizer shouldn't be the answer. It needs to be more specific than that.

"The golden rule with assistants is that I will hire attitude over skills any day," he adds. "I can train skills, but I can't train attitude, which is very important."

Wilkinson says sometimes he will pay a mechanic or a technician more than an assistant superintendent because a mechanic needs to be a good engine mechanic, a good welder and a good troubleshooter.

Lessons learned

Loke recommends other superintendents don't just hire anybody who walks through the door even if they're desperate. He also recommends not hiring someone for \$9 when he is accustomed to \$15.

One red flag Gosselin looks for is the person who's not willing to learn or thinks he knows everything.

"I like people who always question themselves and us," Gosselin says. "Those who claim to know it all tend to make mistakes,

and mistakes cost money and reputation."

Gosselin says it's better to have more people on staff to reduce overtime because it makes more sense financially. He also suggests not chintzing on a good superintendent's salary.

"Don't save \$5,000 or \$10,000 on salary," he says. "Get the good superintendent. It saves money in the long run because they make fewer mistakes. I would rather pay \$20,000 more for a good superintendent and take that money out of his budget, than to pay less for a superintendent who isn't as good and have that \$20,000 in the maintenance budget.

"I would rather have an ambitious, assertive and confident superintendent for three years and have him leave than have someone who does enough just to get by and is here for 20 years," he adds.

Loke says the labor pool in his area is shrinking.

"There were unique years in which we had ample bodies because there was less competition," he says. "We opened in 1993, and throughout the past 10 years, strip malls have been popping up and have taken much of

our resources. We can't compete against fast food restaurants that pay more and provide uniforms. We used to have 40 applicants per one opening, now we're down to five applicants per one opening."

Loke also likes a diverse work force.

"I have found that having a blend of age groups and sexes provides a chemistry that is very positive because there's a unique support system," he says. "For example, college boys don't like to be outperformed by older people and females."

One of the red flags Wilkinson sees when interviewing candidates is if they tell him they like to work outside and like to play golf.

"I won't hire them if they say that because that means they just want to take advantage of the golfing privileges workers have," he says. "It's a crapshoot. You can make bad hires. Some people I thought would rule the world and then they end up not making six weeks with us." GCN

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At Indian Creek Golf Course in Carrollton, Texas, superintendent Walt Wilkinson lets job candidates for the maintenance staff know they will be doing something different every day.

Photo: Indian Creek Golf Course