

# Viewpoint

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## Do low wages and seasonal work make golf course maintenance a haven for losers?

Budget restraints limit the number of employees retained on an annual basis where golf courses do not have a year-round playing or growing season. Most superintendents have less than half their work force in annual or permanent status, but these persons form the reliable nucleus in which are invested untold amounts of training and selling to produce an invaluable asset.

Come the growing season this nucleus is normally assigned tasks requiring considerable expertise — such as mowing fairways, roughs, greens, tees, banks, and approaches; spraying; and fertilizing. Part-time help must be found to supplement a solid crew. You may hire four to six part-timers hoping that a couple from last year return when school is out. To find part-time employees is seldom an easy task. Times can get so desperate that any warm body will be accepted. The comprehensive and in-depth interview process which will produce the type candidate required is quickly discarded. High turnover rate and problem employees are usually those hired through the "desperate, no-interview process."

There are several sources for obtaining the seasonal worker, of which one seems to be the most desirable. This is the college or senior high student who knows the game of golf. Former caddies have also worked very well. Newspaper "help wanted" ads, school and college employment referral offices, state employment offices, Council on Aging job referral office, and social and church activities are some of the avenues used for securing seasonal employment.

The question is: Can the superintendent find good seasonal help at low wages from any source? Answer: It is doubtful. Most budgets start the part-time summer golf maintenance worker in the range of \$2.65 to \$2.80. A quick raise is often promised if the employee is: reliable, trainable, and takes pride in his or her work. Privately owned public and private golf courses are not locked-in as are some government courses which must start at minimum wage and explain that the first raise cannot be expected until a year later.

Cincinnati is further restricted by its residence rule of living in the city to work for the city. When you hire a \$2.65 hourly wage person, that's exactly what you're normally going to receive in work production. After a little training they will head for another golf course for higher pay. Several of our higher caliber seasonals have elected to be unemployed for over 15 weeks to meet requirements for CETA (federally funded) employment. Now they are making \$5.05 per hour and entitled to sick pay, vacations,

retirement benefits, and hospital plans.

Low wages can cause definite morale problems on the crew due to a wide spread in salary ranges, the feeling that they are doing harder work than those being paid higher wages, and that they work overtime at straight time.

Students hired from other than local schools normally do not work the entire season, but leave in mid-August. This should be determined prior to hiring. Vacations, competition in sporting events, and other personal desires can suddenly appear if these absences are not determined prior to hiring or early in the season.

Some of the problems caused by seasonal workers can seemingly result in greater headaches than if they had never been hired. Common problems encountered have been: improperly placed and cut cups resulting in player complaints; old cups resulting in sinkers and risers; a scalded or wilted green from poor syringing; fertilizer burns from various brilliant maneuvers; broken and wrecked equipment; failure to properly move tee markers; poorly trimmed areas; sand traps that would make you sea sick or ruts from improper raking; scalped areas from poor mowing practices; forgotten ballwashers and debris. These are but a few that can make the youngest superintendent old quickly and drive the mature superintendent into the ulcer department.

The amount of time required for immediate supervision seems to be excessive, but with part-time employees there cannot be enough checks and rechecks. Superintendents dream of the crew that can be instructed on the how and what to do and then with confidence know that the task will be completed with desired results. This dream will never come true as long as there are seasonal employees expected to exist on starvation wages. Then again, what golf course or club would exist if a permanent crew were maintained year-round? If seasonal employees were paid hourly wages comparable to the annual crew then it would almost be as though you had a full crew year-round, except for 3 or 4 months. There may be a few that can afford this luxury, but for the majority the part-time employee at low wages is a way of life that has to be accepted as one of the drawbacks to the turf management profession.

There are some management practices which could lessen the effect:

- Do not hire under the warm body concept. Find reliable sources of manpower, seeking out and developing seasonal employees during winter months.
- Use student help with interests in

agriculture, turf, or landscape, selling your program as valuable experience and a stepping stone to their future. Program at least one turf intern as part of your budget.

- Structure your budget to permit a higher starting hourly wage for those with knowledge of the game of golf or interests in a turf or landscape career.

- Establish lower hourly wages for those without experience, strangers to golf, and no interests. Provide incentive to achieve, and a plan so they may see some future. Develop each to their fullest capability.

- Insure that there is an atmosphere of pride in your annual crew and that your entire complex presents pride. Any new employee will immediately sense a good team organization, a clean, well-managed maintenance area, and top-level management. They will want to become a part of such an organization.

- A complete training program presenting each employee with exposure to every facet of work for seasonal employees. Isolation to one or two jobs will develop a stagnant employee. This you can ill-afford.

- Treat your seasonal employees no differently than you do your annual crew. They too, need your approval, praise and attention.

Most superintendents come into the turf industry for either love of the game or desire to work with turf and in the outdoors. Quickly they find that playing golf seldom occurs and that a very small percentage of their time is devoted to turf and the outdoors. A large percentage — near 75 percent — is spent in managing people, work priorities, and equipment. Managing seasonal employees is a built-in job requirement that will never change.