Crew size is the kind of issue that's maybe “too close for comfort” — or at least too close to get the attention it deserves.

It's so obviously important that perhaps we look right past it.

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT knows at least two successful contractors who understand the importance and competitive value of getting their crew sizes right. They've agreed to share with you what they've learned over the years about the ideal crew size.

Jerry Gaeta, The Good Earth, Inc.

Jerry Gaeta is president of The Good Earth, Inc., Mount Pleasant, SC, a $3 million company with 62 full-time employees that provides lawn, design/build and landscaping irrigation services, plus a turf program covering sports fields. Gaeta also serves as a management consultant to the Green Industry under the aegis of Charles Vander Kooi, a Littleton, CO-based management consultant to the Green Industry and related industries.

As part of his consulting duties, Gaeta gives seminars and does public speaking — often on crew size, a subject he is passionate about.

Landscape Management:
Why are you so interested in crew size?
Gaeta: Because labor is nearly the whole thing we sell, and with the lack of experience in the workforce today, typical crew leaders cannot handle more than two or three people efficiently.

Labor is the primary thing that costs us money in this industry. Many
Most landscape companies believe a three-man crew is ideal for commercial or larger sites.

people in our industry focus too much on materials, whereas our company focuses on labor. Labor is the key factor that makes you competitive or non-competitive. With so much unskilled labor today, you're much better off having the most efficient crew size and rewarding those people a little bit more so they don't have to "babysit the deadweight" so much.

If we need larger crews on a particular job site, we'll put two crews together with a responsibility level. The objective is for the foreman to remain within eyeshot of the laborers, aware of where they are at any time so that he can get more efficiency out of them.

Keeping that in mind, we've been running with 20 fewer employees since the summer. Our productivity has gone up, which means our labor costs have come down.

It's customary for landscapers in this region to do everything by 12-month contract. As labor costs climbed over the last six or eight months, we had to increase our productivity if we wanted to make money on our fixed contracts. That meant we had to reduce our crew size by one or two persons.

LM: How do you measure productivity?
Gaeta: By comparing the estimated man-hours on a job vs. actual hours. We also do time and motion studies during the year to validate our assumptions.

LM: What do you call the right crew size for a particular kind of work?
Gaeta: We try to have the right number of people that our foremen can handle, which is normally three. When a foreman has four or five people, two aren't producing much, and the foreman spends most of his time babysitting.

I have people here who can efficiently handle five or six people. We look at the volume of work the job site requires and try to do that work with the most efficient crew size possible. At a larger job, we stick with a three-man crew.

LM: What's the right crew size for your residential lawn maintenance work?
Gaeta: We do a lot of lawn maintenance work. About 70% of my business is maintenance under fixed contracts, and our crew size for maintenance is two to three people. Some special projects have four-man crews, and these are managed by our most experienced foremen.

LM: How about a basic commercial property traveling crew that does things like bed work and irrigation?
Gaeta: We have an irrigation service technician who's a one-man show. We don't have a detail crew because all the detail work is typically done by the crew on the job site. We do have an "enhancement" crew that plants our annuals and does our mulching. In the past, we found that having a detail crew sometimes made the regular crew lazy.

We break out the "big mow" crew at certain times of the year or for certain projects to do some of the cutting with a big mower and keep the other guys moving quicker.

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Crew Size

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LM: Does the issue of crew size have anything to do with the problem of labor availability these days?
Gaeta: Absolutely. Once you understand that you’re selling labor hours that are hard to find in the marketplace and productivity is your competitive edge, you’ll automatically begin to focus on a smaller crew size.

LM: Do you find that your crew configuration makes any difference?
Gaeta: We typically have a foreman, who we call a supervisor; a lead person, who’s a foreman in training and who can serve as a backup foreman; and a laborer.

LM: What kind of equipment do your crews use, and how do your crews get to jobs?
Gaeta: We run in a regular van/pickup truck which sometimes has an open trailer behind it. We’re looking at getting a large cutting machine this year to reduce labor some more.

LM: Do you ever change your basic crew?
Gaeta: We try not to, but it happens during the winter sometimes when our schedule is lighter and we have to shift people around for things like hard pruning. We try to keep the basic crew together — we may pull a float man off another crew — but we’ve found that shifting crews around causes bedlam. This is especially the case in the maintenance business, where the object is for the people on the crews to know the job site and go in knowing exactly what to do.

LM: Do you find that the cohesiveness of a crew can get messed up if you keep shifting crews around?
Gaeta: Exactly right. We have a very good foreman who’s been with us for a long time — and he used to be the training ground. This frustrated him because he would train some-

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Time and motion studies — should you be doing them?

When asked whether or not time and motion studies are important in his company, Tony Bass of Bass Custom Landscapes replied with an enthusiastic “yes.” In fact, he says efficiency is impossible without them.

Bass: I concentrate on time and motion studies a lot. Many people in our industry talk about the “morning circus” — the situation that occurs when people do everything except getting into the truck and heading out to the first job. You can’t possibly run an efficient operation if you have the “morning circus” going on. I did a time and motion study in our company a few years ago, and it turned out we, in fact, did have the “morning circus” going on. My study revealed that the problem was the 180 feet from our time clock to the truck parked farthest away on our yard. After some observation, I realized that no one was walking a straight line to the truck. Now, as a solution to this problem, we have one employee who comes in early and lines the trucks up just outside the office doors. As a result, the trip from the time clock to the truck cab is now 15 steps, and our managers find it easy to keep an eye on everyone. This study led to crews to arrive an average of six minutes earlier per day at their first job. Clearly, time and motion studies are also useful in establishing your correct crew size.

LM: Where did you learn to do time and motion studies?
Bass: [laughs] I started doing them in the early days to keep from starving to death! I have an agricultural engineering degree from the University of Georgia, and that’s where I learned to perform time and motion studies. (Our readers can also learn to do those by taking courses at local community colleges, or looking for professional organization seminars.)
CREW SIZE

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body and then that person would
leave. But if you're switching
people around, you have to tell
them exactly what to do every
time you're on a job site. That
slows things down, and could
cause problems for the client.

LM: Do you find that your crew
members like to work with the
same people for a long time?
Gaeta: Yes. We like to keep the
basic makeup of the team the
same.

LM: Do you ever form SWAT
tools to do things like hydroseed-
ing?
Gaeta: We subcontract out our
hydroseeding, but we do have
some special service crews in the
maintenance business. We have
one crew that does our annual
planting and mulching, and they
can be that SWAT team as nec-
essary.

LM: Do you feel you have finally
found your right crew size?
Gaeta: I'm not sure you ever find
that. I feel that our crew size is
working properly now for the
job sizes we have, but given some
of the work we're starting to
chase, we may have to increase
our crew size here and there. For
example, you may have to in-
crease your crew size if you have
a larger job that has to be com-
pleted within a short period of
time. An extra person can occa-
sionally help with detail/bed
work on big jobs with short time
frames. But I don't think we'll
ever go over four people per
crew, even though we do have
some foremen who can handle
larger crews.

Pressures also work in the
other direction. On some jobs,
we'll try to get our three-man
crews down to two people via
natural attrition. Our costs for
things like labor, gasoline and
health insurance have started to
go up, and given that I can't raise
my prices much, I'll try certain
(mostly residential) jobs with
crews of two. It's difficult to raise
prices in this industry, especially
on service, so crew size is the first
thing I look at when fighting cost
increases.

LM: Has your crew size con-
tributed to your success? How do
you measure that?
Gaeta: Yes, it has. I measure suc-
cess in two ways: first, I've been
in business 26 years, and second,
we're still holding onto our good
long-time accounts.

Two more signs of our success
are that we've been getting mini-
mal increases in our contract
prices, and we've signed a lot of re-
newals for maintenance contracts.
The fact that I've been keeping the
price in line and the quality high
tells me that I'm succeeding.

Tony Bass, Bass Custom
Landscapes

Another landscaper with a pas-
sion for getting crew size right is
Tony Bass, owner/president of
Bass Custom Landscapes,
Bonaire, GA. His company has
been in business since 1987,
commands revenues of $2.5 mil-
lion a year and has a peak-season
workforce of 55 people providing
landscape, design/build and lawn
maintenance services to commer-
cial and residential customers.

Spending for employee training —
1% to 2% of total sales

Avoiding the spending trap
No matter what crew size you use,
your employees will be more effi-
cient, effective and careful with con tin-
uous training. Landscape Management's
Best Practices Panel recommended a variety
of training dollar ranges from .5% to as much
as 10% of total sales, but it doesn't have
to be expensive. In fact, training may
have a higher cost in time than actual
dollars.

Resources to the rescue
Where can you get good training resources? Do-it-your-
self is a good start, but there are so many thorough, inexpen-
sive and worthwhile resources available, including:

- Associations — National and regional as-
sociations have video programs, training
guides and "tailgate" programs on equip-
ment use and technical topics.
- Local associations — They offer reason-
ably priced one-day programs on specific
topics.
- Suppliers — Many dealers, distributors or
manufacturers provide on-site training,
training days, videos, product manuals and
other resources for free.
- Conferences — Get in the loop at state or
regional turf, horticultural or association ed-
ucational conferences.
- Outdoor demos — Grab a
good opportunity to review and
try out safety and operating features.
- Group training programs — Experts may
hold their own seminars or ongoing pro-
grams offering specialty or multi-language
training.
- Company training — Bring in your own
professors or experts to make sure everyone
has a solid technical foundation.
Tony Bass’s Isuzu cab-forward trucks only seat three, so that’s how many crew members arrive together at a job site.

**LM:** Is crew size something you’ve paid attention to over the years?

**Bass:** It certainly is. There’s lots of low-skilled labor out there, but it’s hard to attract that labor, so it makes sense to have the right crew size. It’s your way of using productivity to fight against labor and cost increases. With wages starting to go up in our industry and customers remaining intolerant of price increases, we have to make sure we’re operating at maximum efficiency.

**LM:** What are your ideal crew sizes?

**Bass:** We have two-person crews for residential lawn maintenance and three-person crews for commercial lawn maintenance. We generally use three-person crews on our landscape construction jobs as well. For really big jobs, we’ll put two crews together...

**LM:** Rather than increase the size of one crew?

**Bass:** Exactly. Seldom do we work with four- or five-man crews.

**LM:** How do you arrive at your crew sizes?

**Bass:** [laughs] A lot of it has to do with the size of the cab of the truck! We mostly use Isuzu cab-forward trucks, the so-called “Super Lawn Truck System,” and they seat three. We insist that our people seat themselves properly in the cab and put their seat belts on. That means you can only get three people into the cab.

Some companies have configured their trucks differently. There are dual cab trucks that can seat six or seven — something we will consider in the future for large commercial projects because of the shortage of available drivers.

And we’ve begun to run some numbers because of the prospect of landing some large projects — properties of more than 25 acres to take care of in one day. We find that the most a three-man crew can cover in one day is 18 to 20 acres, so if we have properties of more than 20 acres in size, and if it’s important to get the job done quickly, we’ll consider a larger truck/larger crew.

**LM:** You said “run some numbers.” What you mean by that?

**Bass:** We look at the average wage of our crew. In most cases, our three-man crew has a crew supervisor, who’s also the driver of the truck earning, say, $9 an hour. Then, we have what we call our “number two” man, someone who could probably run the crew but is being held back by something (usually the lack of a driver’s license, English language skills or leadership skills). This person is usually going to earn about $7 an hour. The third person is usually a rookie earning about $6 an hour. The average wage of that crew is $7.33 an hour. Let’s say we’re going out to a big property, perhaps 40 acres in size. Our numbers tell us that at our production rates, we can take care of that 40 acres reasonably quickly and profitably if we had six people on that job.

**LM:** You said, “Our numbers tell us...” Do you keep management information?

**Bass:** Yes. When we attempt to take care of a new property, we’ll physically measure all of the critical components of that landscaped area — the square footage of the lawn, the square footage of the beds, the number of shrubs (categorized as small, medium or large), the linear feet of edging, the number of zones of irrigation to be inspected on a regular basis, the square footage of weed eating and the estimated amount of time needed to blow off debris.

**LM:** And do you store all of this information somewhere?

**Bass:** You got it. We use these items on our estimate worksheet in Microsoft Excel. We create the estimate in an Excel spreadsheet, and, after we interpret the information, we plug the combined numbers into CLIP software to monitor the budget for the job per visit or per year. CLIP is a software program we use to help route and schedule and calculate job costing on our lawn maintenance jobs.

**LM:** You do that so that when you’re facing a really big job, you’re in a position to base your decisions about crew size on historical information from your own company.

You’re not just flying by the seat of your pants.

**Bass:** That’s right. We’re not just driving through the property saying, “I think it’s going to take ‘x’ number of days.” You have to have concrete information with the physical data that’s out there.

We spend a great deal of time on estimating to make sure make sure we don’t make mistakes on our bids.

**LM:** And that careful estimation probably tells you a lot about the crew sizes you’re going to need. Has the effort you’ve put into determining your proper crew sizes paid off?

**Bass:** We are a successful company, and we’re constantly looking to acquire new business. Right now, we’re doing just that. I compare our profitability to ALCA standards, so I know that we are above average.

The effort we’ve put toward figuring out our ideal crew size has definitely paid off. I would say that the tendency toward incorrect crew sizing constantly threatens us, though. If somebody in our business today thinks they can add an unnecessary person to a crew and still survive, they’re seriously mistaken. The margins we operate on in the Green Industry don’t permit us the luxury of putting even a little more labor on a job than is necessary to get the job done efficiently or to an acceptable level of quality.