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JUNE 2023

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Lawn & Landscape

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Complete
Best Places
To Work
rankings,
PAGE 27

Best Places To Work

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Lawn & Landscape

A GIE Media publication
Volume 44, Number 6



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More than a BBQ

I'm sure there is some deep, philosophical definition of the word "culture." But when it comes to company culture, it can also be defined simply as "fun stuff my company does." Sure, the overall morale of an organization is built on transparency and the mutual respect between everyone who makes up the organization, but the stuff on the fringes matters to a lot of people.

That's a common theme in the three companies we profiled this month who scored at the top of our Best Places to Work rankings.

As part of the survey, everyone is asked to list a few unique employee benefits or programs offered by their organization. Of course, there were the usual company barbecues and trips to local sporting events or amusement parks, but some listed here I thought were a little different or may resonate more with employees:

- A few companies scored points based on resources spent to promote exercise and fitness for employees. A gym is located in one company's facility, while

another company organizes different fitness challenges like a walk for wellness, where all employees participate by walking 30 minutes a day and are entered into a drawing to win a prize.

- A pet-friendly workplace, with a company dog regularly in attendance for stress relief.
- A handful of companies have game tables and activities like ping-pong available for staff and the admin team to enjoy on their break.
- Celebrating random holidays like National Pizza Day or hosting an ice cream social just for fun.
- I've heard of a few companies who can do this — free weekends at a company lake property for employees and their families for exceptional performance. This includes jet skis and boats for all employees and their families for 20 days each summer, with meals provided.
- A tool and equipment rental program for weekend projects or free use of company equipment for home projects.
- Bringing in any apparel employees



Brian Horn
Editor, Lawn & Landscape

want logoed, and the company will cover the cost of embroidery.

- Many companies have different charitable efforts they participate in as well. One company allows employees to opt-in to a program and contribute \$2-5 per pay to local charities they support. 100% of donations are matched by the company.

So, whether it's a catered lunch or something more involved, maybe there is something different you can be doing to create a Best Places to Work environment.
— *Brian Horn*



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Focus on functionality

Mecalac debuts new line of six compact loaders to North American market.

Patrick Brehmer believes too many manufacturers think in terms of machines — he says Mecalac thinks instead of the jobsite.

Brehmer, the company's head of design and product management, told green industry media so much at their recent press event in Golden, Colorado. Mecalac North America unveiled its brand-new line of compact loaders to the North American market at the event.

In addition to the six new machines — the MCL2, MCL4, MCL4+, MCL6, MCL8 and MCL8+ — the company also showcased some of its other products like wheeled excavators and swing loaders. But Brehmer says this focus on functionality is what led to creating all of these machines.

"When most people just see machines on jobsites, we see functions," he says. "We see digging, we see loading, we see transporting material. We always imagine how those functions work together."

COMPACT LOADERS. As Brehmer understands it, there's mostly three main appeals to machines like common skid-steer loaders and articulated loaders. For skid-steer loaders, operators can boast about the machine's better space management and versatility, but they're often sacrificing ergonomics. The articulated loader users are proud of their machine's power, but those machines might be much harder to transport or occupy too much space on smaller jobsites.

"Today, you have the choice and you have nothing all at the same time," Brehmer says. "Our proposal was, 'How can we do something in one product that can combine space management, versatility and ergonomics?'"

The MCL machines are compact enough for landscaping jobsites, as they only range

from just over three feet wide to just over four. They also weigh between 3,836 and 6,282 pounds, depending on the model, and have a clearance radius of less than four feet. The lower height is only improved when operators use the machines with a folded canopy — the MCLs are still operable when the canopy is folded.

Each MCL in the series has an option for auxiliary hydraulic lines on the boom and at the rear of the machine as well as 12V 3 pole plugs, further enhancing versatility by allowing the ability to use hydraulic attachments on either end of the machine. The MCL series maximizes attachment possibilities with 7.9 gpm flow on the MCL2 and MCL4 models and 15.9 gpm flow on the MCL6 and MCL8 models.

The "plus" on the MCL4+ and MCL6+ stands for short boom, which offers a better tipping load, whereas the other four models come with a long — standard — boom which maximizes tipping height. The MCL2, MCL4 and MCL4+ all feature a 25-horsepower engine, while the MCL6, MCL8 and the MCL6+ are 49hp.

The machines can travel up to 12-18 miles per hour depending on the model, but M-Drive and Speed Control allows operators to more precisely control the RPM via hand throttle and speed via foot pedal. The Speed Control function comes standard on the MCL6 and MCL8 and is an option for MCL2 and MCL4 models.

The machines feature job versatility through Mecalac's quick-coupling technology,



Product Specialist Geoffrey Andrews stands in front of a Mecalac MCL. The company unveiled its new compact loaders in Colorado.

gy, which can quickly attach augers, mowers or loader buckets to the machines. For snow removal, operators can pair snow blades on the front and salt spreaders on the back.

Mecalac also allowed media to take a closer look and try out some of their other equipment on the Global Machinery site.

CRAWLER SKID-EXCAVATORS. Brehmer says research has shown a significant market interest in mini excavators and compact track loaders, estimating that one in two machines purchased in America is one of those two machines. He believes they've replaced those two machines with one concept in the MCR.

Mecalac showcased its line of crawler skid-excavators — the MCR Series. Comprised of three models, the 6MCR, 8MCR and 10MCR, Mecalac's line of compact skid excavators provide the 360-degree rotation of an excavator and travel speeds two times faster than any small excavator.

The MCR Series features a hydrostatic transmission, and a dedicated pump drives the motor. All three machines can travel up

to 6.2 miles per hour. The MCRs also feature a quick coupler, CONNECT, which operators can use to switch between attachments without leaving the cab.

WHEELED EXCAVATORS. This series of wheeled excavators consists of three models (the 7MWR, 9MWR and 11MWR).

Each of the three models in the MWR series offers speed in a compact footprint. The smallest of the three, the 7MWR, offers variable speed between zero and 19 mph. Two of the larger models, the 9MWR and 11MWR, provide contractors standard travel speeds between zero and 12 mph with an option for enhanced speed up to 22 mph on the 9MWR and up to 19mph on the 11MWR.

Meanwhile, the company says the MWR series machines have a center of gravity that is 20% lower than competitive models. The

machines feature four-wheel steering and a turn radius 2.5 times more compact than a traditional wheeled excavator.

A 75-horsepower (55.4-kilowatt) engine is standard on each model. The smallest model is able to lift 3 metric tons at ten feet (3 meters) through 360 degrees.

SWING LOADERS AND SITE DUMPERS. The AS750, AS850 and AS1000 models recently joined the previously released swing loaders, the AS600, AS900tele, AS1600 and AS210.

Mecalac's swing loaders feature a rigid chassis and three steering modes – 2-wheel, 4-wheel and 4-wheel crab — that allow for tighter turns than a standard articulated loader. The machines feature a Mecalac swivel boom, and the company estimates



Mecalac showcased other products like its MCR Series.

a complete rotation in a footprint that is 20% smaller than a conventional loader.

Mecalac also showcased its TA3SH Site Dumper, which features a payload capacity of over 6,600 pounds. The machines are also compact, as they measure roughly 13 feet long and just over six feet wide.

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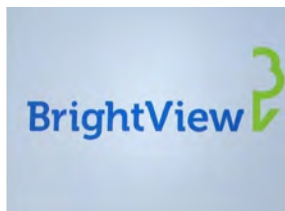
BrightView announces CEO transition

Andrew Masterman stepped down from his role at the company, while Jim Abrahamson serves as interim president and CEO.

ANDREW MASTERMAN stepped down from his role as president, CEO and member of the board of directors at BrightView, effective May 31, 2023. Jim Abrahamson, who has served on BrightView's board since 2015, will serve as interim president and CEO until a successor is in place. Master-

man will serve as an advisor for one month to ensure a smooth transition. The company's board of directors has initiated a search for a successor in partnership with a leading executive search firm.

"On behalf of the board and entire BrightView team, I want to thank Andrew for the contributions he has made to the company," says Paul Raether, chairman of BrightView's board of directors. "Today, BrightView is the leading commercial landscape design and services company with a recognized brand and high-quality team. Its market-leading position provides a solid foundation for future growth and creates a unique opportunity to enhance service for customers."



Masterman joined BrightView in 2016 and led the company's initial public offering in 2018. Under his leadership, BrightView demonstrated growth through a series of strategic acquisitions, modernized its technology and finance infrastructure, professionalized the sales organization, expanded omni-channel marketing capabilities and achieved the best safety record in the company's history.

"It has been an honor to serve as BrightView's CEO and I'm proud of what the team has accomplished during my tenure. Together, we've built a top-tier organization with an expansive national footprint," Masterman says. "I look forward to working with Jim to ensure a smooth transition

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- Curby Hughes, Owner, Curby's Landscape 

and will continue to watch BrightView's progress and future success."

"We have full confidence in Jim's ability to continue to execute on BrightView's strategy while we search for a new CEO to lead the company into its next phase and unlock value. Jim brings extensive knowledge of BrightView and the industry, as well as over 30 years of management experience in senior leadership and board of director roles with leading, large public and private companies in dynamic environments," Raether adds.

"I'm honored to step in as interim CEO of BrightView, a company that I know very well and respect deeply," says Abrahamson. "I look forward to working closely with our talented management team to continue to execute and build on our strategy and to ensure continuous performance improvement for our shareholders while we deliver the best service in the industry to our valued clients."

MiniTrencher acquires SiBore Drill

SiBore Drill is a portable horizontal auger that digs underneath concrete without damaging the surface.

MINITRENCHER has acquired SiBore Drill.

Expanding on its portable trenchers, SiBore Drill is a portable horizontal auger that digs underneath concrete, asphalt or any other hard material without worrying about breaking the surface.

The SiBore Drill uses a waterless-boring method so there's no mud to deal with and little clean up. The tool can be paired with MiniTrencher's GeoRipper handheld trencher for fast, safe production.

With a starting weight of 54 pounds, the SiBore Drill is compact enough to be transported in the trunk of a car or bed of a small pickup. Powered by a Honda multi-position, 4 cycle engine or a Makita 40V MAX XGT battery-powered motor the auger chews through soil quickly and efficiently.

SiBore Drill has two models: SB215 comes standard with 4-inch and 6-inch diameter earth drilling bits and SB216 comes standard with a 1-inch drilling bit for fiber optic and other electrical/wire needs. Earth drilling bits come in ranges from 2 inches to 8 inches and 48-inch and 72-inch extensions are available as an accessory purchase.

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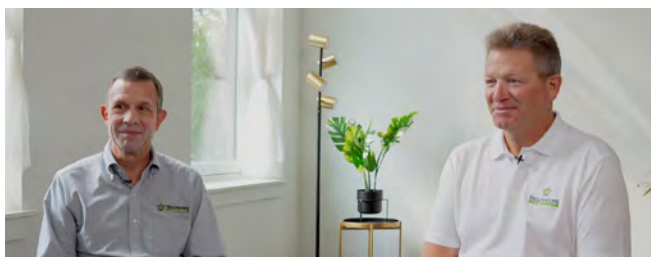
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Yellowstone Landscape promotes new CEO, CFO



Harry Lamberton, left; Tim Portland, right

Current CEO Tim Portland will remain with the company in new role as executive chairman.

YELLOWSTONE LANDSCAPE promoted Harry Lamberton to the role of chief executive officer and Timothy Sherman to the role of chief financial officer. Current CEO Tim Portland will remain with the company in his new role as executive chairman.

More than two years ago, the company's board of directors began planning for the next generation of the executive team.

"For most of the last decade, I was the

sole pilot of our airplane," Portland says. "For the last 16 months, I've been the senior pilot and the lead pilot, but Harry's been the co-pilot and doing more and more to help fly the plane. And Tim Sherman's been checking in on us to see how we are doing."

Prior to joining Yellowstone as president, Lamberton served in numerous with Waste Management. Sherman previously served as vice president of finance at Yellowstone.

"I spent the last 30 years in the waste business and there are a lot of similarities," Lamberton says. "What's really important about our business is how field based it is

and making sure that our branches are in a position where they can adapt and react to the marketplace."

Lamberton adds a benefit of the change is Portland staying with the company.

"One of the most appealing things we've got about moving forward is having Tim continued to be engaged," Lamberton says. "The partnership that we've had and the way that we've been working over the last 16 months will continue."

Yellowstone ranked No. 4 on Lawn & Landscape's 2023 Top 100 list with \$539 million in 2022 revenue.



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Mariani Landscape acquires Southview Design

Both companies ranked on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 list last year.

MARIANI LANDSCAPE has acquired Minnesota-based landscaping firm Southview Design. Both companies ranked on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 list this year (Mariani at 11, Southview at 78).

Founded in 1978 and headquartered in St. Paul, Southview offers services like design/build, enhancements, maintenance services and snow/ice management. The

company has completed over 8,500 residential landscaping projects.

Southview Design is the 12th company to join Mariani. These companies include:

- Berghoff Design Group / BDG Maintenance – Phoenix, Ariz.
- Designs By Sundown – Littleton, Colo.
- Hoffman Landscapes – Wilton, Conn.
- NatureWorks Landscape Services – Walpole, Mass.
- Rocco Fiore & Sons – Libertyville, Ill.
- R.P. Marzilli & Company – Medway, Massachusetts
- Woodlawns Landscape Company – Mundelein, Ill.
- Ed Castro Landscape – Roswell, Ga.
- Glengate – Wilton, Conn.
- Borst Landscape & Design – Allendale, New Jersey

“Southview Design’s reputation of excellence speaks for itself,” says Frank Mariani, Mariani Landscape chairman. “Their first-

rate service and unsurpassed expertise has been recognized across the industry, but their values of respect and appreciation for their customers and partners is what sets them apart. I’m honored to have them join our growing family of green industry leaders.”

With roughly 275 associates, Southview’s firm provides services to both residential and commercial clients, including residential estate management, single family residential, HOA’s, retail, office, commercial, industrial and professional offices.

“This opportunity to align with the best of the best in our industry is truly an honor and a privilege,” says Chris Clifton, Southview CEO.

“I could not be more excited for Southview’s associates, partners and clients. This partnership gives us access to the best minds and resources across the nation, and the opportunity to truly change the face of the green industry for years to come.”

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Arbor Masters merges with Jennings Tree & Lawn Care in Kansas City

The merger brings Arbor Masters' headcount to a total of 168 employees across five states.

KANSAS CITY-BASED tree care services provider Arbor Masters has merged with Kansas City arborist company Jennings Tree & Lawn Care.

The merger is Arbor Masters' most recent

expansion following their purchase of Advantage Tree Services, an Arbor Masters Company in Iowa bringing its services to six U.S. states.

With locations in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas and Iowa, Arbor Masters has provided tree and plant health care services for more than 65 years.

A Kansas City family-owned company, Jennings Tree & Lawn Care — soon to be Jennings TLC: An Arbor Masters Company — has been providing professional tree care, lawn care and organic removal services for more than 75 years.

Arbor Masters Founder and CEO Ron Keith says Jennings Tree & Lawn Care's history of plant care in Kansas City and Arbor Masters' experienced arborist team and business expertise created a perfect match for the two companies.

"Jennings shares our commitment to taking care of trees and plants right here in our

own backyard," Keith says. "Just like trees trust us, their customers trust them. We are excited to carry on their legacy of providing reliable and expert arbor services from our ISA-certified arborist team."

Victors & Joan Jennings founded Jennings Tree & Lawn Care in 1950. Their two daughters, Vicki and Julie, have carried on the tradition of Jennings Tree & Lawn Care.

After the merger, Julie and Vicki will continue to service their clients with the staff and support of Arbor Master and key Jennings Tree & Lawn Care professionals.

"With Arbor Masters' support and resources, we are able to focus more on customer service and consultation, essential tree care work, and relationship building with our lifelong clients around the city," Vicki and Julie Jennings say.

The merger brings Arbor Masters' headcount to a total of 168 employees across five states.



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United Land Services acquires Greenway Lawn, Sanford Tree

Since September 2020, United has completed 16 acquisitions.

UNITED LAND SERVICES, a commercial and residential landscape services platform backed by Centre Partners and LP First Capital, has acquired Greenway Lawn & Landscape and Sanford Tree Service.

As a result of a well-executed organic and acquisition-driven growth strategy, United has rapidly scaled its platform and earned No. 20 on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 list last year. Revenues have grown by nearly

five times since Centre and LPFC formed the initial platform in September 2020. Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

Since September 2020, United has completed 16 add-on acquisitions, grown to over 1,200 employees, and established over 20 branches across several metropolitan areas in the Southeast. In addition, United has built a robust acquisition pipeline and currently has several acquisitions under letter of intent.

Founded in 2014 and headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida, Greenway provides landscape maintenance, enhancement, and tree care services primarily to commercial customers, including homeowners' associations, multifamily property managers and local municipalities. Greenway's executive leadership team, Sasa Popovic and JD Nixon, will continue to provide branch oversight.

"We are excited to join the United team to

further accelerate our growth and expand our service offerings throughout the state. United has built a tremendous reputation in the marketplace while embodying a strong culture of partnership," Popovic says. "We are keen to leverage the robust infrastructure, tools and best practices that United will bring to Greenway, broadening opportunities for our customers and employees."

"United's acquisition of Greenway is another step in our long-term strategy of building density in attractive geographic markets while strengthening our ability to continue to offer high-quality landscaping services for our customers. With deep-rooted customer relationships, a disciplined operating approach, and best-in-class customer service reputation, the United platform is very well-positioned for organic and acquisition growth going forward," says Bob Blandford, United founder and CEO.

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Tendit Group acquires Legends Landscape Management in Phoenix

Founded in 2002 by Curt Peterson, Legends Landscape Management is a full-service landscape management company.

TENDIT GROUP, a portfolio company of Osceola Capital, has acquired Phoenix-based Legends Landscape Management, which provides commercial landscape services. The acquisition significantly expands Tendit Group's footprint and service offering in Arizona.

Founded in 2002 by Curt Peterson, Legends Landscape Management is a full-service landscape management company that specializes in landscape maintenance, irrigation system management, plant health, tree and weed manage-

ment. Legend's customer base includes property management companies, municipalities, homeowner associations and apartment complexes.

"We are excited to partner with Legends and build on the exceptional momentum they have achieved thus far," says Tendit CEO Alejandra Harvey Oliver. "Curt and Mike Peterson have built a superb organization, and we look forward to supporting them during this next phase of growth."

"The acquisition of Legends Landscape is a perfect fit with Tendit's growth strategy — partnering with the premier service provider in each of our core exterior facility service categories in each of our target states within the Mountain West," says Partner Patrick Watkins. "Growing our presence in Arizona has been a top priority for Tendit, and we are excited to add the landscaping service offering to our existing Arizona operations and offer a more robust suite of services to our Arizona customers."

"The acquisition of Legends Landscape is a perfect fit with Tendit's growth strategy."

— Partner Patrick Watkins



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Echo announces new president, CEO

Harold Redman brings over 30 years of outdoor power equipment experience to the role.

ECHO INCORPORATED has appointed Harold Redman as its new president and CEO effective April 3. Redman brings more than 30 years of outdoor power equipment experience and a proven track record of executive and organizational leadership, strategic green industry vision and product innovation to Echo.

Redman began his career with General Power Equipment, a division of True Value Hardware. He then joined Simplicity Manufacturing for nine years before his tenure at Briggs & Stratton, where he served as President of the Home Power Products business for four years and President of the Turf & Consumer Products business from 2010 to 2022.

"Echo is a well-respected company with a reputation of offering great products and customer care, and I'm honored to lead a company rich in innovation and legacy. As our industry continues to change with new technologies, I look forward to working with this exceptional team of talented and passionate Echo employees to bring new products and services to the green industry," Redman says. Redman succeeds Tim Dorsey, who is



Harold Redman

retiring after 27 years from Echo serving in various roles, most recently as president for the last nine years. Dorsey will continue to serve as a Global Operating Officer of Yamabiko and a board member for Echo and Yamabiko Europe.

"While I'm excited to move to the next chapter, I also have a heavy heart as my time at Echo has been the most rewarding of my career and I cannot express my gratitude enough.

However, it's safe to say that Echo is in great hands with Harold, who is a driven, humble leader that demonstrates strong leadership through a hands-on management style and engagement with employees and customers," Dorsey says. **L&L**

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TRAVELS WITH JIM follows Jim Huston around the country as he visits with landscapers and helps them understand their numbers to make smarter decisions.

IT'S ALL ABOUT ACCURACY

→ **COST ESTIMATING IS ALL** about estimating your costs accurately. Running a profitable green industry business is all about managing your risk successfully. Somewhere and somehow, the two need to intersect. My three-fold mantra for running a profitable business is: price it right, produce it right, produce enough of it. Accomplish these three things consistently and you'll probably be successful.

Costs come in two forms. First, there are direct costs. These comprise the materials, field labor and burden, trucks and equipment, subcontractor and miscellaneous costs (permits, fees, dumpsters, etc.) that can be directly attributed to a specific job or service. Second are the indirect costs (referred to as general and administrative — G&A — overhead costs) that cannot be directly attributed to a specific job or service. For instance, how do you charge your clients for your electric bill, office manager or rent? Direct costs (except for the number of man-hours needed) are fairly easy to identify and allocate to a job or service. It's estimating the G&A overhead costs that confuse many contractors.

HOW IT PLAYS OUT IN THE FIELD. Harry had purchased and set up a green industry software program. With it he could bid his jobs and track them to see if they were profitable. Like many such software packages, its developers recommended using familiar percentages applied to direct costs in order to allocate G&A overhead costs to bids. Net profit is then added to the totals for each. The familiar percentages added were as follows:

Material costs + 10% + Net profit

Trucks and equipment costs + 25% + Net profit

Subcontractor costs + 5% + Net profit

Field labor with burden + 35% to 95% + Net profit

After using the new software for six months, Harry had me come to his office to review and validate the formulas for G&A overhead and net profit that he was using. We discovered that he had seriously underpriced his work.

ANALYSIS. G&A overhead costs are usually allocated to jobs and services by adding one, two or four percentages applied to the four categories of direct costs (materials, field labor with burden, trucks and equipment and subcontractor costs). This is a faulty mathematical assumption for at least two reasons. First, no one has ever validated (shown that they are correct) any of these percentages, especially the 10%, 25% and 5% applied to materials, trucks and equipment, and subcontractor costs, respectively. Since the percentage applied to field labor is derived from a formula using these three percentages, it is also suspect. Second, as implied by specific percentages and mathematical formulas applied to direct costs, there simply is no such direct correlation as to the amount of G&A overhead caused by direct costs.

For instance, commercial maintenance estimators often double (multiply some direct costs by 200%) field labor + labor burden + materials cost to arrive at a price to charge the client. This may happen to work for certain jobs, but it certainly won't work for enhancements or installation work. Percentages multiplied by direct costs simply aren't accurate when it comes to allocating G&A overhead costs to jobs being bid. Let's discuss the percentages.

THE 10% MARKUP. One problem with the 10% figure is what it includes such as filling out purchase orders, receiving and stocking materials, paying vendor invoices, job costing materials cost in jobs, and so forth. It is an accounting nightmare. Perhaps someone, sometime and somewhere has taken the time to do a cost study on this, but I have never met them.

I'll discuss the 5% and 25% G&A overhead markups on subcontractor and truck and equipment costs, respectively, in my next article. Until then, suffice it to say that these markups are as fictitious as the one on materials. I'll also explain Harry's bidding solution and how to work around these markups in a bid if you are using a software program that allocates G&A overhead costs by multiplying direct costs by percentage markups. Meanwhile, if you know of anyone — especially the promoters of software programs using a percentage-based G&A overhead recovery system — who can validate (or says they can validate) any such percentages being used to recover G&A overhead costs, please have them contact this magazine or me. I'd love to hear their explanation and see their data doing so. I contend that it does not exist. **L&L**

UNDERSTAND THAT COSTS COME IN TWO FORMS.

These include your direct costs and your G&A costs.

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WORDS OF WILSON features a rotating panel of consultants from Bruce Wilson & Company, a landscape consulting firm.

WIN THE FUTURE

→ **SUCCESSFUL COMPANIES VALUE EMPLOYEES** and put people first. The concept is deceptively simple. Yet, in practice, it's a complex balancing act that requires organizations to meet the changing needs and expectations of a new workforce paradigm. From Baby Boomers to Generations X, Y and Z, each demographic has its own attitudes about work and what they find fulfilling. It's not easy creating a company culture that works for everyone, but it can be done.

FIVE THINGS HIGH-PERFORMING CULTURES HAVE IN COMMON:

- 1. A clear and relatable mission.** vision and values statement that connects the company's purpose to employee engagement and give all employees something to believe in and work toward.
- 2. A well-defined path for career growth.** If you want employees to produce results for your company, they have to have a way to create their own future, not just do a job. This is especially important for younger generations who are free agents, jumping from job to job for 25 cents an hour more to see what they like. If you only give them a job and they do not see a future, be prepared for them to go somewhere else.
- 3. A recruiting strategy.** Top companies hire for cultural fit and create value-aligned teams. People generally like being around people with similar values, just like successful people like being around other successful people. When employees and teams have good chemistry, cooperate, share and work well together, productivity not only improves at the project level, but it's a key driver of profitability and customer satisfaction.
- 4. A plan to recover from bad hiring decisions.** When companies hire people that don't share the same values and the relationship can't be salvaged, they need to learn what went wrong to avoid repeating the situation, cut their losses quickly and eliminate employees that do not fit rather than allow the problem to fester.
- 5. A walk-the-talk commitment** to reinforce positive behavior and lead by example. Behavior affects reputation, relationships and the bottom line. Successful companies that focus on behaviors that complement a forward-thinking culture deliver better financial results.

FOUR BEHAVIORS THAT ARE ESSENTIAL TO COMPETING IN THE DIGITAL AGE:

- 1. Sense of urgency.** The speed at which a company solves problems is extremely important in a hyper-competitive service environment. No longer do big companies have the edge over small companies. Amazon has created a "fast beats slow" expectation for fulfillment and customers no longer want to wait. If they want an answer to a question, they Google it. This is especially true in residential work where the company that responds first, gets the job.

- 2. Sense of purpose.** People who have purpose at work are more productive. When companies do a good job making employees feel connected to the bigger picture, it results in higher engagement and better outcomes. Employees must understand and believe in what they are doing and how they are contributing to the greater good and the role they play in driving success. If companies don't help their employees find purpose in the job they do, they will leave for a company that will. A sense of purpose overcomes problems and prevents burnout. Purpose goes hand-in-hand with a sense of urgency.

- 3. Promote from within.** Providing opportunities for employees to grow will help companies attract and retain talent and keep top performers from leaving. When combined with colleague-to-colleague mentoring, a "train your replacement" mindset and upskilling, internal mobility empowers employees to take ownership of their careers. Workforce agility is an essential part of a culture of continuous learning, which is necessary for a company to improve its competitiveness in the marketplace.

- 4. Continuous learning.** Peter Senge, author of the Fifth Discipline, wrote that "learning faster than the competition is the only lasting competitive advantage." If implemented correctly, a continuous learning culture can develop internal future leaders and inspire innovation. When employees at every level are committed to relentless improvement, it's the most powerful way for employees across every generation to increase the effectiveness of the entire organization and produce a sustainable flow of value. **L&L**

↓

BY FOCUSING ON PURPOSE, EDUCATION, and other positive behaviors, companies can improve culture and attract the right employees.

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CREAM OF THE CROP features a rotating panel from the Harvest Group, a landscape business consulting company.

BEST TIME TO SELL

→ **EVERYONE WANTS TO SELL** their business for maximum value, but the timing of a sale will be a trade-off between the owner's readiness, the business' readiness and the prime selling time in the market. From the seller's perspective, there are opportunities to transfer a business in almost every type of economy, but planning for a successful sale is becoming increasingly important. Most small- to medium-sized businesses will begin this process with a five-year lead time.

Ideally, owners timing is based on personal motivations, desired retirement date and wealth and estate plan goals instead of illness or other life-changing events. Similarly, the best time to sell the business is when it has achieved maximum value with room to expand. Smart sellers will be positioned to take advantage of their best exit timing by following the trends in their industry.

PRIVATE CAPITAL MARKETS TRENDS. Based on current information* collected and reported for the private capital markets (all deals reported, not just for landscaping and green industry companies), the market peaked in terms of valuations and numbers of deals in December of 2021. We now appear to be early in the deal recession (buyer's market) part of the cycle. In the overall economy, banks and other capital providers have and continue to tighten lending criteria and investment activity. The largest acquirers focus on consolidation and integration of their core businesses and are not as aggressive in their acquisition plans. For acquirers with cash, this is a buyer's market (with valuations tending down.)

Trends confirmed by data collected for transactions in the second half of 2022 include:

- The overall number of transactions is down. This is not surprising since 2021 was an extraordinary year in numbers of transactions, so any reduction would be expected.
- Transaction multiples have remained flat but the numbers of companies successfully completing a transaction have been reduced. This is evidence of a movement towards a buyers' market.
- There is increased focus and competition for top quality companies.
- The data shows that buyers are demanding that sellers share the risk through deferred and contingent consideration structures. Challenges in the exit market such as labor, rising interest rates and supply chain issues are expected to continue through 2023.

Private business transfers in the U.S. tend to run in ten-year cycles. ** While COVID-19 may have impacted the actual calendar years of the cycle, after the peak at the end of 2021, we have been in a period of "almost recession" which would normally followed by a period of "deal recession." This tends to last for two to three years with the next period of five to six years being (the middle years) of the cycle being the prime time to sell a business. After those eight years or so, economic uncertainty begins to occur, deals are harder to initiate and close and waiting to get deals done is risky.

ASSESS AND PLAN TO MAXIMIZE VALUE. Though no one knows what the market will be in terms of timing, owners benefit by being prepared and flexible to take advantage of opportunities. Using a buyer's lens to view the company will focus strategic planning and annual business plans. We've identified the characteristics buyers seek. Smart landscape business owners are planning their personal and business exit strategies now to build their company's transferable value. They are also keeping in touch with how the market is faring. **L&L**

*Based on information provided by both ACG about private equity transactions as well as survey data provided by DealWare/AM&AA M&A Market Update

**Robert T. Slee, Private Capital Markets, Second Edition.

SELLER QUALITY CHARACTERISTIC	DEMONSTRATED BY SELLER/ADVISOR
1. Upside growth potential	Prepare a Pro-forma forecast of the company's plan to capture future growth (5 year minimum) with Net Income.
2. Revenue consistency	Measure, quantify and potentially upgrade financial systems.
3. EBITDA Margin %	Know the EBITDA and identify potential efficiencies.
4. Revenue growth last 12 months	Know, track, and quantify sources of potential growth. (Include new products, new markets).
5. Recurring revenue	Create a separate revenue line for different lines of business, create the plan to increase recurring revenue.
6. Management team strength	Quantify the management team strengths, identify gaps and plans for improvement.
7. Brand/reputation	Develop online brand awareness. Consider independent measures such as NPI or others.
8. Low customer concentration	Quantify existing state of concentration, create a reduction plan.
9. Owner willing to stay for post-closing transition	Start succession plan to create overlap before owner ready to exit. Create incentives to retain & reward key contributors.
10. Location	Quantify the importance of the seller's location, develop digital as well as physical presence.
11. Intellectual property/patents	Quantify trade secrets, key capabilities and potential IP assets.
12. Risk reduction	Assess potential threats and create contingency plans. Update insurance coverage.

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Tina Kizer

Office Manager, Milosi

AS A MOM OF AN ONLY CHILD that will soon be graduating from high school and spreading her wings in college, I find myself wondering how I would grade myself on the work/life balance over the years. I have been with Milosi for 21 years and with all the many changes and growth, my position has compounded and at times, I felt stretched thin across different departments.

My parents taught us four kids what hard work meant at a very early age and sometimes it is hard to “turn it off” and unplug. This caused a ripple effect at home with my husband and daughter with the need to be “all the things” for all the people and feeling like there wasn’t enough time in the day to get all the things done. I recently pondered on the question, “What would I tell my younger self?”

1. Learn to say “no”

Learning how to say no can be one of the hardest soft skills to put into practice. But it’s an important part of setting boundaries.

It can be helpful to recognize that saying “no” to things that are less of a priority frees up time and energy to say “yes” and attend to other things that are important to you.

Tina Kizer is an active member of the National Association of Landscape Professionals Women in Landscape Network (powered by Envu) which provides a forum for industry professionals to support each other’s professional growth. The Network is free to all industry professionals.

WOMEN IN LANDSCAPING is a column brought to you in partnership with the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

2. Prioritize your health

Recognizing the importance of maintaining your physical health, emotional well-being and mental fitness means daily meditation, movement and exercise, social connection, gratitude practice and committing to using paid time off.

This has been hard for me to do. I wish I had made self-care a priority over the years. It is easy to fall into the routine of motherhood and trying to be the best at work and to forget that being the best version of ourselves is just as important for our family as it is for our own mental health.

3. Practice self-compassion

One of the most important ways to achieve a sense of work/life balance is to let go of perfectionism.

It’s important to recognize that life isn’t always easy. Everyone struggles, and you aren’t always going to get it “right.” Recognizing this truth allows you to create a shift toward a more compassionate growth-and-learning approach to work and life. This can help to support a sense of balance.

4. Invest in relationships

Make sure to spend your time nurturing relationships that matter to you. Block out time for your family and friends so that our “cup is filled.” It is important, especially for mothers, to know that they are not in this adventure alone and that they have friends that they can share the good and bad with. I call mine the “5 a.m. friends.” I know I can count on them any time, any day and that is important on this crazy ride of life.

Laughter is always good medicine. I have always told my daughter to find her tribe and love them hard. Find people that you can be your true self with and live in a no judgement zone.

5. Ask for help

High achieving professionals are often guilty of taking everything on themselves. They don’t want to “bother” anyone by asking for help.

Sometimes this is tied to identity. “I’m supposed to be the one who has it all together,” or feelings of obligation “Who else will do it if I don’t?”

Instead, consider that asking for help gives other people the gift of giving — and being part of a solution and support system. **L&L**

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Best Places *To* Work

2023

Shaping the Future of the Green Industry



The green industry is at a turning point. With increased consumer demands, advanced technology becoming more available, a surge in financial investment from private equity, and mergers and acquisitions occurring at a rapid pace, it is more important than ever for green industry companies to be hiring and retaining the best talent available. And that all starts with creating an organization that fosters growth, a positive culture, and trust — making it a best place to work.

We are proud to be a part of this year's Best Places to Work program, because we at WorkWave are committed to joining together with you to build the future of green. In a time where quality labor is hard to come by, you are building a company to be proud of, and one that we are proud to highlight as you build teams that will help you find success.

Over the past few years, we have brought together the service industry's best and brightest companies so that we can maximize the top talent and resources to bring you the green industry's leading technology and service solutions. RealGreen by WorkWave, our flagship green industry solution, helps companies like yours achieve greater efficiencies, provide an optimal customer experience, and help you build a profitable company — all things that help contribute to building a great place for your employees to work. It has been the top choice for lawn and landscape professionals for decades, and one of our top priorities when it comes to investing in innovation. We recently launched RealGreen Lite, a green solution for small businesses, as well as launched new and updated features including digital forms and signatures, enhancing lawn maintenance capabilities from estimates to labor tracking, and automating upsells and campaigns with condition codes.

At WorkWave, we are continuing to invest in technology and solutions that help you grow your business, service your customers and maximize your money. We have been your partner for over 40 years, and we look forward to continuing our partnership well into the future.

Congratulations to all of this year's honorees. You should be proud of the business you are building and your contribution to this amazing industry!

All the best,
David F. Giannetto
CEO of WorkWave



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BRAVE NEW WORLD

Behind a completely new vision, Frederico Outdoor Living is winning over clients and employees alike.

STORY | JIMMY MILLER
PHOTOGRAPHY | KATE JEPPSON

AFTER YEARS OF CONSULTING FOR COMPANIES, Adam Frederico decided to own one of his own. All it took was a phone call home to find his next opportunity.

Of course, that's a simplified overview — since buying the company two years ago, Frederico has completely rebuilt the team and reshaped the brand. It certainly has not always been easy, but the big changes have lifted Frederico Outdoor Living as one of Lawn & Landscape's Best Places to Work.

The idea to buy his father's company came on a call home for the holidays. While

Frederico lived in Chicago at the time, he called his family back in Utah, where his father, Russell Frederico, still owned the company he founded in 1980.

The company culture was always strong. One employee, Paul Ward, can certainly attest to that. Ward is now the landscaping division leader, and he noticed a difference with Frederico in charge.

"The energy was very positive. It was a breath of fresh air. It wasn't that (Russ Frederico, Adam's father) was old and stuck in his ways," Ward says. "The company still has its morals and values, but people are starting to move in a direction that is more high energy."

STARTING FRESH. Frederico acknowledges that there's always at least a little bit of tension between buyer and seller when the new guy comes in making changes. The father-son dynamic furthered that friction, especially when it came down to what was important for each party involved.

For instance, Frederico readily admits he didn't know much about horticulture before prepping to step into the company. He remembers his father saying things like "this is going to be really difficult if you don't know plants." But Frederico signed up for plant identification classes and visited his local nurseries before moving back to Utah. He anticipated some of this uneasiness — that's why he approached his prep work meticulously.

"For 40 years, running a business,

Company benefits include anything from a high-matching 401K to help for mental health services.

and suddenly someone else comes in and makes changes, I'd be a little squeamish, too," Frederico says.

As for Frederico, it was incredibly important that he had autonomy to make those changes. He felt he had a strong business background after earning a bachelor's degree in business management from Brigham Young University and a master's degree in the same field from the University of Chicago. That's not to mention the time he spent as a product analyst or business consultant to firms of all types of sizes and reputations.

So, he set off and made some big changes, all in the name of building a stronger company culture. Frederico says he wanted his employees to feel empowered in co-creating the vision.

"It's important to me, especially being an outsider in the industry, to be the first one to raise their hand and say, 'I don't know what I'm doing, but I have some ideas,'" Frederico says, adding that this level of honesty helps all his employees feel comfortable making suggestions, no matter how long they've been at the company. "The only way



Adam
Frederico



ABOUT THE RANKINGS

Lawn & Landscape partnered with the Best Companies Group to find out who are the Best Landscape and Lawn Care Companies To Work For. Best Companies Group surveyed employees on the following areas: leadership; corporate culture and communications; role satisfaction; work environment; relationship with supervisor; training, development and resource; pay and benefits and overall engagement. The companies below met the score requirements to be on the list.

RANK	COMPANY LISTING	US/CA EMPLOYEES
1	Frederico Outdoor Living	18
2	Mullin	149
3	LawnSavers Plant Health Care Inc.	21
4	RedTree Landscape Systems, LLC.	79
5	Go Green Lawn and Pest LLC	32
6	Gras Lawn	58
7	TLC Landscaping Design + Pools	145
8	The Pattie Group, Inc.	55
9	Reinhart Landscaping & Snow	79
10	Hidden Lane Residential Landscapes	24
11	Western Landscape, Inc.	35
12	Blades of Green	119
13	Don's Lawn	33
14	Chalet Landscape	80
15	Green Summit Landscape Management	132
16	Garden Design Inc.	79
17	Amazing Blades Landscaping	27
18	GOLD Landscape	85
19	WillowGrove Landscape	30
20	Classic Nursery & Landscape Company	37
21	Green Garden Group	58
22	Monarch Landscape Management	153
23	Para Space Landscaping	137
24	Fisk Lawnsapes	36
25	Heath Outdoor LLC	50
26	Piscataqua Landscaping & Tree Service	114
27	Coloradoscapes	59

to achieve that vision is to find people who are excited to add to that vision.”

Ward says it’s been great to see a new perspective on the green industry. Given Frederico’s experience outside of the industry, it was actually a selling point that Frederico didn’t come from horticulture. Ward says he felt Frederico offered some new viewpoints that helped reshape the way the company operates.

“I felt like, ‘this will be exciting to learn some new skills, and taking a corporate world type of view and applying it to a construction world that maybe doesn’t cross paths ever,’” Ward says. “He comes from the background of consulting and developing companies... (We have learned) how to build your business while working in the business.”

That doesn’t mean getting to that point was easy. After the first four months at the company, Frederico let go of every previous employee on the team except for the office manager. Whether it was their fit with the budding company culture or it was related to their performance, Frederico just felt the team needed a fresh start.

Frederico bought the company during the winter, so they had time to implement that fresh start in the offseason.

“By laying off everybody for either performance or culture reasons, I was able to bring in people who were excited about the changes and find people who were wanting to build a culture that actually had posted core values, that had metrics and goals, and that had a vision for the future,” he says.

There were some challenges despite starting the staff change in the offseason: For one, Frederico bought the company in January 2021 — amidst COVID-19. Plus, he got some pushback on talk of cultural changes from his employees. That was a large part of why he felt he needed new faces in the field.

“It’s really difficult when you see your former boss, his youngest son comes in and suddenly says he’s making changes,” Frederico says. “I just kind of found that if there wasn’t a desire to adapt and morph and there wasn’t excitement for the vision, it was going to be really, really hard to execute the vision.”

Employees tended to stay once Frederico rolled out the new-and-improved compensation and benefits plans. Plus, Frederico merged with a notable homebuilders company in Utah last year; with that company came additional human resources work that contributed to the better overall offerings for potential employees.

That includes anything from a high-matching 401K to anonymous help for mental health services. The company also now has more purchasing power than ever before after building relationships with banks, so that has helped them get brand-new equipment and trucks when needed. Frederico says the companies still operate independently, but the mutually beneficial merger helped them offer more resources.

MORE THAN NEW FACES. Frederico says resetting his team was just one of three major changes they made as they reshaped the company. He also wanted to rebrand the company, removing “Landscape Management” from the end of the title and instead adding “Outdoor Living.” He also worked quickly to swap out a 40-year-old logo with his own.

“To me, the name was commentating something that was very run-of-the-mill,” he says. “No knock to anyone with landscape management in their name, but to me, it was more maintenance heavy.”

That rebrand coincided with the third and most recent change at the new-look Frederico Outdoor Living: the team opted to oust its maintenance division entirely.

That decision didn’t come from nowhere: open forum discussions with his teams and data suggesting their gross margin numbers were down led Frederico to making that final call.

“We looked at just the amount of time that was spent in order to generate the maintenance revenue, and ultimately, one of our key tenants is focus,” he says. “If you have a lot of priorities, you have no priority. We didn’t want to be a competitor to other landscape maintenance companies in the area. We wanted to do more of what we knew we could do super, super well.”

Dustin Rock, the operations manager, has been with Frederico Outdoor Living for nearly a full year. He joined in June of 2022, and after a summer of working out in the field with the maintenance team, he was one of the major voices in stopping that service.

Though he wasn’t originally in the horticulture field, Rock says he’s a self-proclaimed “lawn nut,” so going out and working with his crews came naturally. And of course, he



Whether it be cornhole or darts, the Frederico team tries to keep it light amidst busy work cycles.

grew close with his employees, but ultimately, he felt it was best from a business standpoint to focus on landscape design.

Even still, the transition went really smoothly. Rock approached the team about a month before the end of last season and let them know this was the plan. However, he helped several of those employees keep lots of clients Frederico previously had in the maintenance division, effectively helping them start their own maintenance company.

“They were actually really excited at the prospect of getting to run their own business,” Rock says. “Plus, we still wanted to make sure our clients were in good hands, too.”

With an already strong company culture, Rock says the client handoff was great.

“Some guys even stayed on through winter to help with our snow work,” Rock says. “Everyone understood why we were doing it.”

HAVING SOME FUN. It’s not always work-related talk at Frederico; Rock says the employees and the clients alike have enjoyed some fun with the company.

Take last year’s first-ever client appreciation event. Rock says Frederico invited any customers who did a bigger project to join the company at a high-end golf course for a more formal dinner. They also hosted



After taking over the company, Frederico let go of most of the staff, replacing them with employees who believed in the new company vision.

some primary vendors and suppliers and did awards like best customer.

“We didn’t know what to expect, but almost everybody we invited showed up,” Rock says. “It ended up being just awesome.”

They ended up giving out cornhole boards for clients who redid their backyards. Anyone who added a firepit received a s’mores packet. Rock says many clients won’t hear back from their landscapers once the work is done, but not at Frederico Outdoor Living.

“We’ve wanted to set ourselves apart in how we treat our customers,” he adds. “We care about them even after the job ends.”

The company hosts fun events for the team, too. Whether it be laser tag and arcade games or it’s breakfast burritos and free throw competitions, the Frederico team tries to keep it light amidst busy work cycles.

“I feel like there’s a million landscape companies out there,” Rock says. “To me, you can go work for a lot of them. A lot of them don’t have a culture that makes people want to stay.”

SEATS AT THE TABLE. Frederico says lots of new benefits have kept his employees engaged. But what he feels has really made a difference is the company’s flat organizational structure. This encourages employees to feel like their voice is heard, he says, as there are very few levels of middle management.

Sure, there is accountability, but there’s no direct reporting structure for most employees or org chart instructing each employee to talk with a direct superior.

“Even with small companies, you can sometimes feel distanced with a leadership team or the owner,” Frederico says. “What we’re trying to do — and we’re far from perfect — to me, seats at the table means we provide many opportunities for 360 feedback, for adding ideas to the team in operations.”

Ward and Rock both say part of the reason employees are so comfortable being honest with Frederico is his humility.



Everyone attends Monday morning meetings where they bring up what’s going well and what’s not.

SMALL EMPLOYER CATEGORY (15 - 49 US/CA EMPLOYEES)		
Rank	Company Listing	US/CA Employees
1	Frederico Outdoor Living	18
2	LawnSavers Plant Health Care	21
3	Go Green Lawn and Pest	32
4	Hidden Lane Residential Landscapes	24
5	Western Landscape	35
6	Don's Lawn	33
7	Amazing Blades Landscaping	27
8	WillowGrove Landscape	30
9	Classic Nursery & Landscape Company	37
10	Fisk Lawnsapes	36

Ward says the company has stressed to its employees that the reason they’re trying to expand is not to just put more money in the owner’s pockets .

Rock, who’s also not from the horticulture field, adds that he has worked for employers in the past who were all about trying to get rich and didn’t care about the employees. It was telling to Rock that Frederico was one of the last ones at the company to get a new truck for himself as the company grew.

Even when Rock dealt with some health issues, he privately wondered if Frederico would let him go. He didn’t – in fact, Frederico encouraged Rock to get healthy and spend some days at home to rest.



“To me, that had just earned my loyalty. I’ll work with him as long as I can,” Rock says.

Face-to-face time with one another is important. Frederico says the whole team attends their all-hands-on-deck Monday morning meetings — it’s where everyone brings up what’s going well and what’s not. Just recently, Frederico says a newer employee asked about how a project plan could use better communication. “It was a great discussion because it looks like the communication is kind of the telephone game,” he says. “Someone said something from sales to operations to the crew lead and it got distorted all the way down to him.

“That’s a great way for things to not fester,” Frederico adds. “Some team members are more shy than others. The door is always open. We want people to contribute to the culture. All ideas are valid. It doesn’t matter who is right; it matters what is right.” **L&L**

The author is associate editor with Lawn & Landscape.

BY JIMMY MILLER

PAY IT FORWARD

From clients to its own employees, Mullin is working hard to provide the “white glove” experience.



WHEN HURRICANE IDA devastated some areas of Louisiana a few years back, Mullin in St. Rose jumped into action.

It wasn't lost on Mycah Schexnayder that her company was helping the community despite their office being destroyed by the storm. Schexnayder, now in finance & administration for Mullin, says the winds ripped off portions of their own roof.

But there was the company, raising \$80,000 and helping feed families in the area anyway. They converted their front parking lot into several food and dry goods donation stations. People who had been without power for a week could get catered food, and some didn't even need to get out of their cars to do it.

"I think we showed it's not all about making money — it's about helping people, too, and giving back," Schexnayder says. "We were under tough times. We had crews out cleaning up. But to put our stuff on hold for a couple days, that really stands out to me."

This generosity goes beyond times of extreme turmoil. Schexnayder adds that the team adopts a few families for Christmas and buys every single gift on their lists. Company President Chase Mullin says he's been fortunate in his own personal life, so he's tried to pay it forward individually.

"As far as the company's concerned, I've really carried that same mentality over to the business," Mullin says. "I think anything you pay, you're paid back at least tenfold, if nothing else than in a good night's sleep or a good feeling."

Whether it's benefiting the community, the clients or their own employees, the company's people are behind their standing as one of Lawn & Landscape's Best Places to Work.

"Anybody can cut grass and anyone can do what we do," says Nubia Gutierrez, Mullin's director of human resources. "That has been something that Chase has led the organization by. What is it that we can do to make ourselves unique? What is it that we can be the choice of employment? I truly do believe it has been the people that have made that happen."

WORK HARD, PLAY HARD. Taking care of those people has helped Mullin retain

those employees. Gutierrez started with Mullin seven years ago when the team had roughly 35 employees. But the company wanted to kickstart its human resources group — Gutierrez says that once companies reach a 50-employee threshold, that's when an HR department is needed to monitor different labor laws.

Well, now the company hovers around 150 employees in the field, and Gutierrez says she guesses the team will soon grow to over 180. The company built its own facility in 2017, and now the company is doing everything it can to ensure employees are comfortable there.

Take the company's brand-new culture patio, which Schexnayder says the company christened with their first barbecue in May. Mullin brought in duck sausage and some adult beverages. He says this was the first time they got to use their new furniture, shade sails and outdoor fans.

"There's always something going on here," Schexnayder says. "We're always trying to create ways for us to be co-workers but also friends."

This goes beyond events on the company's site, too. The company offers cabbage ball and sand volleyball teams, plus Gutierrez says she helps assemble more unique programs like this spring's crawfish boil. It was there where she jokes that she "couldn't tell you how many pounds" of crawfish they cooked for over 300 people. All employees were invited to bring their families, where those with younger kids enjoyed bounce houses, clowns and balloons.

Gutierrez says they also rented out a whole theater to watch the Super Mario movie in April, following up last year's viewing party of the Buzz Lightyear movie. Gutierrez says everything was on the company's dime — after all, a family trip to the movie theater might usually cost upwards of \$80 or more. That's not the case for company events, where drinks, popcorn and tickets are all paid off. Plus, Gutierrez says some families walked away with extra prizes if they sat in the seat where something was placed beneath.

These family-oriented events aren't just planned by happenstance — it's the

company's intention to treat employees' families right. This Halloween will be another example of that, as Gutierrez says they'll turn a rented-out carnival area with rides into a trick-or-treat spot.

"The team members are great, but their families are the ones we're trying to affect," Gutierrez says. "It's impacting them. It's telling them, 'My mommy and daddy works for a good company.'"

Of course, it helps them retain employees, too. Mullin remembers attending a conference where the speaker shared that workers with a best friend in the office were much, much more likely to stay in the long run.

"We'll all just hang out. We'll just be together, not just talking about a specific project or an invoicing issue," Mullin says. "It makes the workplace much less stressful and a more enjoyable place to be."

THE WAY FORWARD. Mullin says that another part of that retention has come down to establishing clearer career ladders. They always had met with standout employees to communicate their unwritten career paths, but now they can show someone during the onboarding process how they can earn promotions.

Gutierrez says her HR department has

helped establish clearer career paths for employees. Of course, things have always been good — Gutierrez adds that there are employees who have been with the company since it first started. But Mullin says he wanted new hires to know what their way forward would be.

"Everybody understands the opportunity they have with Mullin," he says. "Our goal and belief is that it will help them shift their minds from a job to a career."

Mullin says they hope to have every single field-level person eventually try and earn a role as a crew leader at a minimum. And while they have a clear printout of a career ladder to distribute, Mullin adds that it's flexible.

"Our belief is that it's not always defined," he says. "It can change from person to person, but we like to at least show them a general pathway."

Finding new employees comes down to everybody being ready to recruit, Mullin included. Of course, they have a recruiter on staff, and they openly celebrate new hires, promotions and bonuses, but it's everybody's job to bring in the right people.

"I've spent a fair amount of my time recruiting," he says. "I'll recruit down to the field level sometimes depending on where I am. It really is all hands-on-deck effort."



Emphasizing culture has led to better recruiting for the company.



“

It's the things that everybody knows we should do, but we tend to forget. I think that as a company scales, it's ingraining those things in the culture from the top down so that same mentality and mindset remains.”

— Chase Mullin, founder and CEO, Mullin

LARGE EMPLOYER CATEGORY (100+ US/CA EMPLOYEES)

Rank	Company Listing	US/CA Employees
1	Mullin	149
2	TLC Landscaping Design + Pools	145
3	Blades of Green	119
4	Green Summit Landscape Management	132
5	Monarch Landscape Management	153
6	Para Space Landscaping	137
7	Piscataqua Landscaping & Tree Service	114

CLIENT EXPERIENCE. Mullin recalls being on a fishing trip several years back with other landscapers in the area. One of the landscapers mentioned that he wanted to be the McDonald's of landscaping – quick and reliable service was the name of the game, with strong brand recognition.

Mullin wanted to craft his own vision – he respected the comparison but wanted to carve one out on his own. Instead, he believes Mullin is the Ruth's Chris Steak House of landscaping. This means he wants to serve clients the way makers of affordable but nice luxury cars or luxury hotels treat their clients.

Gutierrez has a different term for it: She says they're trying to offer the “white glove” experience. One specific person at Mullin stays with the same project the whole way through, meaning they're available to answer any questions they might have as they remodel their backyards.

Gutierrez admits that the company isn't for everyone, but they are for the clients who want to rest assured the project is getting done the right way.

“We're not the lowest in terms of pricing,” she says, “but we give them the experience of sitting back and relaxing.”

Mullin adds that it can be stressful for clients to have landscapers trotting onto a property for backyard renovations, or it can be annoying when clients don't hear back from their landscapers about when they'd be around for maintenance. So, he believes in strong communication with the customers.

“It's kind of overcommunicating,” he says. “It's overservicing the customers.”

Overservicing clients also means that the customers get great value in what they buy; the company trains its employees to bring up trash cans or carry newspapers to the front door. They greet people as they walk by or turn off blowers as clients pass. And if a client lives out of town, it can be a matter of sending them pictures and timeline updates so they rest assured the work is getting done.

“It's the things that everybody knows we should do, but we tend to forget,” Mullin says. “I think that as a company scales, it's ingraining those things in the culture from the top down so that same mentality and mindset remains.” **L&L**

From recreational sports leagues to family movie nights and crawfish boils, Mullin is prioritizing its employees.

The author is associate editor with Lawn & Landscape magazine.



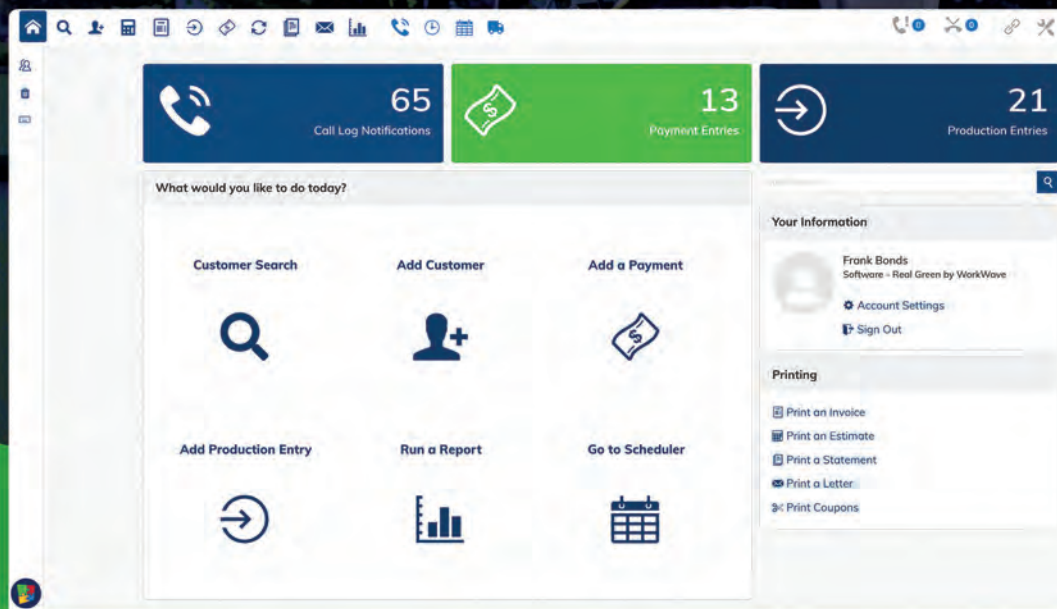


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BY KIM LUX

FOREST FOR THE TREES

At RedTree Landscape Systems, employees are motivated by more than just a paycheck as the company strives to put people first.

PETE AND DAVE LUCADANO, owners of RedTree Landscape Systems, are no strangers to the green industry. Having both been in the business for nearly 40 years, they've learned a thing or two from their multiple business ventures.

"We started as kids in high school and started our first business," says Pete Lucadano. "We built up the company and then in 2004 we partnered with a publicly traded equity firm. I worked for them for quite some time and then eventually as that company changed their leadership time after time, the world they had us living in became too corporate and not centered on the client or employees at all."

Over time, both brothers went on to leave the company they started, which has since gone under. Six years ago, they started RedTree knowing that this time, things would be different and their "people first" motto would stay at the heart of all they do.

"It was those experiences that helped us shape what we wanted RedTree to be," Pete says. "It gave us examples of things we needed to do right and things we did not want to repeat."

ASSISTING WITH THE UNEXPECTED.

Serving the Tampa Bay area with 120 employees, RedTree is dedicated to every person on its staff, and it shows through the company's growth. Revenue reached almost \$8.2 million in 2022.

Pete says anyone can talk the talk when it comes to prioritizing employees, something he saw firsthand after selling his former business.

"The term 'people-centered' is so over-used," he says. "A lot of people say that but having worked in that publicly traded company where they said all those things, but they behaved the exact opposite of that behind the scenes. They had all the nice promotional materials, but what's really important is the grassroots, behind-the-scenes involvement and focusing on our people and our team first."

Whether it's coordinating after-school childcare or eldercare for an employee in need, transportation assistance to appointments or providing financial literacy resources and counseling support, RedTree knows it's about more than cashing in a paycheck.

"There's a whole level of needs that people have that go beyond the basic, sterile employee/employer relationship," Pete says. "These folks have family needs. We try to maintain a very open mindset toward assisting and aiding our employees. We try to have a platform where we can do that."

Client Care Specialist Benjamin Garland says his RedTree family was there for him during the hardest time in his life.

"In 2019, my fiancée died in her sleep. She had epilepsy and wasn't feeling well,"



RedTree Landscape Systems started six years ago and the company has worked hard to retain dedicated employees and recruit new ones who share in its core values.

he says. “They helped pay for her cremation and the cost of that. They didn’t have to do that. They also helped counsel me through it. It was a part of my life that really could’ve went haywire, but they kept inspiring me.”

Pete says RedTree is always willing to lend a hand if it’s possible.

“If an employee has vehicle problems, we’ll assist in getting the car towed to our shop and we’ll allow them to work on and repair our vehicles in our equipment shop. It saves them money and lets them use all our tools and air compressors and those things,” he says.

But RedTree isn’t just there for its employees during the tough times. Pete says the company is big on celebrations as well and holds quite a few employee appreciation events throughout the year.

“We’re big on celebrations and celebrating their commitment to the company,” he says. “We try to do different things. One Friday they’ll come in and we’ll have a big ice cream truck set up making them all custom ice creams. We tell them to bring their families by, too. It’s the little things.”

Senior Landscape Designer, Kevin Smith, says the culture at RedTree is palpable and the energized mentality is something everyone feeds off.

“The culture is the best I’ve ever been involved in,” he says. “Everybody comes to work and they’re happy. A lot of it has to do with how we’re treated by the owners. They are really receptive on people making suggestions anywhere from ground guys to upper management — that’s just huge.”

SEEKING OUT ASSESSMENTS. Having leadership throughout the company strive for an open-door policy and make such an effort to listen to everyone at every level is one of the most appreciated things at RedTree.

“There’s things that us guys who aren’t out in the field day-to-day anymore don’t see,” Smith says. “You can lose track of that. You have to be able to listen to the ground guys who are out there and if they have a suggestion on how to make something better, you definitely need to listen to them.”

Pete says constant communication from top to bottom has always been a priority and a way to get the most out of RedTree’s employees.

“Beyond that, we wanted to have a very personal approach with our people and empower our leaders,” he says. “Empowerment of leadership is the things that’s most often missed... ours

“

**I’ve worked
for companies
where you pull
over to the
side to take a
drink of water
and the next
thing you
know you have
an account
manager
watching you
and you’re just
not trusted.
That’s not the
situation at
RedTree.”**

— Benjamin Garland,
Client Care Specialist

is down to the supervisor level. We involve our supervisors on everything from job planning to people planning. They help craft and pick their crews, they help decide pay rates and they help decide bonuses and merit increases.

“It allows them to take ownership and pride in how the company’s run, and on our end, it allows us to have supervisors who are truly invested in the crew they roll out the gates with every day,” Pete adds.

Garland, who has been in the industry for over 35 years, says he really appreciates the open dialogue at RedTree. He adds it helps foster a united front as well when employees know their voices are being heard.

“I’ve worked for companies where you pull over to the side to take a drink of water, and the next thing you know, you have an account manager watching you and you’re just not trusted,” he says. “That’s not the situation at RedTree. That trust level makes for a better workplace and makes for a better work ethic in our employees.”

Pete says this high level of communication starts from the very beginning — the interview process.

“No one is hired at this company, at any level, without a personal interview with the owners,” he says. “I really want to develop an understanding of people as individuals.”

Garland adds he’s learned from the Lucadano brothers over the years, and this has helped him serve his crews better.

“I try to approach the guys with kindness and love because that’s how Dave and Pete have taught me,” he says. “They are literally my role models and mentors.”

Pete says he believes it’s that insistence to check in and have regular conversations with everyone at all levels of the company that contributes to a business’ success or failure.

“Without that team, especially in the green industry, the equipment will just sit, and the trucks will stay parked,” he says. “You can have all the resources in the world, but if you don’t have people that are very good at what they do and have the right attitude, mindset and commitment to the company, it doesn’t matter.”

PROVIDING THE RIGHT TOOLS. Investing in good, quality equipment is another reason RedTree earns employees’ loyalty.

In fact, Smith says it was a driving factor for him when he chose to join the team.

“They were really my style,” he says. “I’ve always been big on quality and keeping equipment up and trucks up and keeping

Brothers and co-owners of RedTree Landscape Systems, Dave, right, and Pete Lucadano, have spent years building up green industry companies together.



that image alive. There's a lot of landscape companies that fall short with that."

Garland agrees, saying before RedTree, he witnessed companies giving their crews subpar equipment and expecting miraculous work.

"I've worked for companies who had stuff held together with duct tape and glue," he says. "They'd never fix anything. RedTree is constantly putting money back into the business."

Pete admits the company spends a lot on upgrading to the newest equipment and even maintaining older equipment.

"Each day we are meeting with our supervisors morning and evening to hear how the equipment performed, what needs to be taken offline and fixed, and all that," he says.

Pete adds the reason behind the investment is to ensure employees have what they need to make their jobs easier and more enjoyable.

"Equipment support is a huge factor in the green industry in terms of employee satisfaction," he says. "When you're working out in 100-degree heat on long days and you have equipment that won't run and you need certain tools and don't have them, and then go in at the end of the day and tell your employer and nothing changes — that's demoralizing."

INSPIRING POSITIVE INTERACTIONS.

Just as Pete says he hoped when starting RedTree, the support of employees has translated into satisfied customers, who appreciate the company's workforce and positive interactions with them.

"The key to growth in the green industry is happy clients," he says. "Profits will come if you do all the right things first. If you do right by your people and invest in your equipment to give your people the tools to succeed, the profits will come. It's like 'Field of Dreams.' You have to build it and then they will come. It's not the other way around."

One of those happy clients is Tish Dobson, the district manager of Vesta Property Services.

Dobson says there's been countless times she's called RedTree for assistance outside of their routine property maintenance and they've always been eager to help.

"I could have a tree go down or you name it, and they were there to help me," she says. "The professionalism is amazing

from the crews all the way on up. They're very respectful, very resourceful and very responsive."

Dobson, who manages dozens of HOAs and communities, says RedTree is great because they treat each client as an individual and seek to provide a specialized service.

"They roll out the red carpet for all of their communities," she says. "They understand the needs of every community and they work with you and within your budget."

"They modify each contract so they're unique to each community — it's not a boilerplate contract," Dobson adds. "Every community is not the same, so all the agreements have to be built around the uniqueness of them all."

Still, Dobson says some of her favorite interactions with the RedTree team have been off the clock, like when they volunteer to parade Santa around the communities during the holiday season.

She explains it all started when the firetruck she rented one year canceled last minute.

"We were two weeks out from Santa driving down the boulevard waving to kids and now I don't have a firetruck," she recalls.

Dobson says she called Pete in a panic thinking RedTree could escort Santa in a truck or something. But lo and behold, the brothers actually had a firetruck of their own they could use for the festivities.

The best part? Dobson says the RedTree team volunteered for free.

"I know what fuel costs to run a firetruck," she adds. "Since then, all the other communities want that, too. All these years,

RedTree has been parading Santa around."

The annual event is a big deal for employees, too, who gladly volunteer their time to help out.

"Their community spirit is unmatched," Garland says of RedTree. "We have the privilege of doing those Christmas hayrides and parades with Santa...I enjoy doing that stuff and look forward to it all year. To see the kids have so much fun is amazing." **L&L**

The author is assistant editor with Lawn & Landscape magazine.

MEDIUM EMPLOYER CATEGORY (50 - 99 US/CA EMPLOYEES)

Rank	Company Listing	US/CA Employees
1	RedTree Landscape Systems	79
2	Gras Lawn	58
3	The Pattie Group	55
4	Reinhart Landscaping & Snow	79
5	Chalet Landscape	80
6	Garden Design	79
7	GOLD Landscape	85
8	Green Garden Group	58
9	Heath Outdoor LLC	50
10	Coloradoscapes	59

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DIGITAL EVOLUTION

The 2023 Lawn & Landscape Technology Conference sessions will cover how technology is transforming the industry.

AT THE SHOW

Kevin Surace's presentation, "Digital transformation" will take place Wednesday, Aug. 9, at 4 p.m.

It's safe to say that Kevin Surace has a wide range of skills. On one end, he worked on developing the first cellular data smartphone and on the other end, he is an accomplished music director, conductor, producer, and percussionist, with more than 1,000 performances. He'll use both skills when he serves as the keynote at the Lawn & Landscape Technology Conference. We caught up with him to get a preview of his presentation and his thoughts on the future of technology. We also spoke with Josh Wise, who will be presenting on equipping lawn care crews with body cameras. The event takes place Aug. 9-11 in Las Vegas. Visit bit.ly/lawntech2023 for more information.

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▶ WHAT CAN ATTENDEES EXPECT FROM YOUR PRESENTATION?

Attendees can expect to learn a lot about the current state of artificial intelligence (AI,) including ChatGPT, and how it will impact their business now and in the future — also the technology behind AI today and how it works. When you leave you will know a lot more about this "black box" and be thinking of how it will make your teams more productive. I will try and provide the basis for all this explaining AI and machine learning, talking about disruption and looking forward 5-10 years on what your business will look like in the future.

▶ WHAT ARE SOME EMERGING TRENDS LANDSCAPERS SHOULD BE AWARE OF?

Nearly all office tasks are being automated today at an astonishing rate. From sales to customer support to scheduling to accounting. Robotics is getting much better in actual field operations but will lag behind software only solutions for a long time.

▶ DO YOU THINK ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS DEVELOPING TOO FAST?

AI has been developing since the 50s. The first natural language chat bot "ELIZA" was developed at MIT starting in 1964.

Even then, its creators were surprised at how fast people interacting with it attributed human like characteristics to it. So now, it's developing quite slowly to those of us who have been involved for decades. But for the general public, not realizing AI has already been all around them for years, ChatGPT seems like a miracle. But it's not. It is however a leap in the size of its data set. And it turns out it can generate quite fascinating results because of that. Not always accurate. But truly impressive nonetheless.



Kevin Surace

▶ CAN A COMPANY BECOME TOO DEPENDENT ON TECHNOLOGY?

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Josh Wise's presentation,
"You can't afford not to record"
will take place Wednesday,
Aug. 9, at 2 p.m.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Technicians wearing cameras is a gamechanger at GrassRoots Turf.

By Kim Lux

At GrassRoots Turf the footage is fundamental for ensuring a high-quality level of service is brought to each and every job. This is done primarily through all spray technicians, at each of the company's franchise locations, wearing body cameras while on the job.

CEO Josh Wise says it all started in 2020 when he initially had the idea to have technicians wear cameras and record their time on site. He recalls the CFO, his mother Sharon Wise, was against it initially as the upfront costs were not cheap.

"I told her, 'I need \$15,000 to buy some

cameras for the guys.' And she said no. I kept just telling her to trust me," he says.

Now, Wise says the recordings have been a godsend for GrassRoots. He adds the cameras are the same ones worn by police officers around the country.

RECORDING IN PROGRESS. Wise notes the technology behind the cameras is simple. When technicians step out of the service



Josh Wise

truck, they tap the camera once to start recording. They go about the treatment and just before they leave the jobsite, they tap the camera again to end the recording — which is immediately saved to the camera.

"Being that these cameras are what a lot of police departments wear, they are constantly recording but they are re-recording over themselves until you signify you want to keep this information," Wise says. "It films every single thing they do on the property from walking the yard to clearing the debris in the yard and making sure it's ready for an application."

Wise adds it's been extremely beneficial

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to have the footage on hand and keeps speculation from customers at bay. Something that's been increasing ever since doorbell cameras have become more popular.

"If gates are locked, it's evidence that we were at the home and unable to do the treatment. On the other hand, if the gate is open when we get here, we can film that fact and film the technician closing it when they leave the property," he says.

At the end of every shift, Wise says technicians take off their chest-mounted body cameras and place them on a docking station to charge up for the next day.

"Overnight, all the footage uploads into the third-party software," Wise says. "Once the videos are recorded on the camera you can't delete them off. Because it was built for the police — it's very, very protected."

Wise notes GrassRoots pays for unlimited storage for the software site they upload the recordings to.

REAL-TIME INSURANCE POLICY. Despite recording all treatments technicians perform, Wise says the company does not immediately send the footage to customers.

"We do not send the footage to the customer unless the customer calls and asks us questions or thinks something wasn't done right or that there was a problem," he says. "If then, we'll pull that camera footage, review it and then send it to the customer. We'll let them see what happened out at the property."

Wise says having that evidence against allegations is the biggest benefit of the cameras.

"That's one of the things that's really beneficial to having the cameras — it records against all those conversations. It protects the employee from any accusations that they didn't do their job right," he says.

It's even helped GrassRoots part ways from some more difficult clients.

"There was one situation where a techni-



cian went out to a property and the homeowner accused us of breaking the latch on their gate. When the tech got there, on their body camera, you can see the latch was already broke, and it took the technician a couple of minutes to even get the gate open. There was a rock in front of it holding it closed," he says. "I sent the video to

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the homeowner and told him I had video evidence that the gate was already broken.

"I told him I closed the account and wished him well," Wise adds. "I'm not going to have a customer who's accusing us of things."

Questions about the level of service or how much progress is being made on a

property can also be handled by looking back in the archives.

"I had a customer last spring and they told me they didn't see any improvement in their lawn from the last year when we started working with them...I went to the footage from their first application and took a screenshot," he says. "And then I went to

their most recent application and made a side-by-side photo to send to the homeowner...they said, 'Wow I hadn't realized my yard was as bad as it was.' I saved an account that way."

Before the cameras, when a customer called to complain it was a lose-lose situation. Wise says because it forced them to take sides.

"If a customer called in and said the technician didn't treat the backyard but I talk to the technician and he tells me he treated the backyard, I have two options. I either tell the customer, 'Well they said they did it.' So, I'm telling the customer I don't believe them. Or I send the technician back out to the property to re-treat it, but then I'm not only admitting to the customer, you just caught us not treating your backyard but I'm also undermining the technician. There's no way to win that," he says.

GOING TO THE GAME TAPE. Not only have the cameras helped combat customer complaints, Wise adds it's been essential in getting the most out of employees, too.

"My service managers will look at the footage. It's helpful with the newer employees so we can watch their spray patterns and make sure they're getting the edges of the lawns really good. Instead of having to have someone out there on the property watching and critiquing, we can do it from the footage and fast-forward through five or six yards they've treated," he says. "We can also sit down with them and show them that video footage. We can show some things they can do differently or things they might've missed. It's about teaching, coaching, training and making them better."

Wise recalls when GrassRoots first introduced the body cameras there was a little pushback from some of the older, veteran employees, but he immediately told them it was for their best interest and protection.

"I had a few people who spoke up and said, 'You're just wanting to spy on us.' And I told them, 'If I have to spy on you, I won't have you working here,'" Wise says. "If they aren't doing the job right then I'm not going to put a camera on them to catch them doing something, I'm just going to let them go."



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Wise says he's not too worried about catching employees doing something wrong, but the cameras can help raise awareness of some issues.

"If you have a bad employee, that person is not going to be turning their camera on and off at every stop. That's your first red flag that something isn't right with that person," he says.

But it's not all bad, Wise notes there's a lot of laughs that come out of the recordings. He's seen technicians encounter everything from dogs to fire ants and other unique instances.

"We've made some really great bloopers for our Christmas Party every year," he says.

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. While the cameras have been great, Wise acknowledges there have been some challenges along the way, which is normal.

"You're going to have issues with any-



thing related to technology," he says. "Anyone in the lawn care industry who has cellphones or tablets out in the field knows there are days when things aren't working — and the cameras are just one more piece of technology."

The most common problem is the cameras not being docked right at the end of the day, which means they don't charge,

All technicians at GrassRoots Turf wear chest-mounted body cameras that record every service.

and the footage isn't uploading. He adds that the usual battery life for the

cameras is 12 hours, and the recordings will stay on the camera until it's connected and uploaded.

"We keep a couple of spare cameras just in case somebody's acting up or not doing what it's supposed to, they can quickly grab a new camera and get back into the field," Wise says.

Wise says a few hiccups are worth it though, and GrassRoots plans to keep the cameras rolling.

"There's just several things you get out of this that really make it a win," he says. "It's been a really good investment for us, and I would encourage other companies to do it. I just think it elevates the industry as a whole." **L&L**

The author is assistant editor with Lawn & Landscape magazine.

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DEER DETERRENT

There are a number of ways to keep the animals from damaging your customers' properties.

By Gregg Wartgow

DEER ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR ABILITY TO RUN AND JUMP. But to a growing number of property owners, it's a deer's tendency to loiter around nibbling on plants that is earning it a whole new reputation.

"Many of our properties that never had problems are starting to," says Steve Walker, landscape management operations manager at The Pattie Group in Novelty, Ohio. "I'm talking about the more built-up areas, too. In fact, the more country-esque you get, the fewer deer problems you probably have because the deer have more to eat."

It's in those established areas where deer pressure is becoming a problem that landscape companies are having to proactively address.

"The whole concept of deer and wildlife control is something that comes up more often than not when meeting with residential clients in particular," says Patrick Popehn, director of operations at Rock Solid Landscape & Irrigation in Andover, Minn. Rock Solid primarily does landscape replacements in established neighborhoods. That's where they are seeing more deer foraging resulting in damage to gardens and flower beds.

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Spray-on deer deterrents can be a cost-effective solution that minimally impacts a homeowner's landscape.



There are a few explanations for what appears to be a consistent uptick in deer pressure. First is that the overall deer population remains strong. Second is the continued expansion of the suburbs into what had been wide-open agriculture land. The addition of homes, landscaping and plants is what actually draws deer in. Deer see an interesting, new food source in an area where they feel relatively safe.

"Aside from automobiles, there's aren't a lot of predators for the deer to worry about in these types of areas," says Sean McNamara, owner of Great Oak, producer of DeerPro deer repellents. "And now there is plenty of food with all of this beautiful landscaping to help the deer survive."

The ability for deer to find other food sources also plays a role, and nature plays a big role in that.

"Deer like to carbo-load on acorns to build up their fat reserves for winter," McNamara explains. "Like anything with nature, things go in cycles. Some years there are a lot of acorns, and some years there are hardly any. Those are the years when deer get more desperate for food during the winter. To help predict if deer are going to be a big problem, landscape contractors can start keeping an eye on nut-bearing trees like oaks. Start looking at acorn mass toward the end of summer and into the fall."

PLANNING FOR DEER PRESSURE. If deer get desperate enough, there probably isn't a landscaping plant they will refuse to eat. That said, there are several that aren't their favorite and may deter them from the landscape. Examples of repugnant perennials include lavender and daffodil.

On the flipside, there is a long list of plants that deer tend to really enjoy. According to McNamara, that list includes rhododendrons, arborvitae, hemlock, pine and azaleas. Popehn says you can add hosta and clematis to the list. Walker has been surprised to see deer begin chomping on hydrangeas. For a complete list of plants that deer do and don't like, a landscape company could check with its closest university extension office.

When taking all of this into consideration, it's pretty difficult to design a landscape with only what is thought to be deer-repulsing material. Furthermore, as Popehn points out, deer aren't necessarily a problem year after year. Do you really want to avoid an extensive list of beautiful plants just in case deer become desperate and want to turn your backyard into an all you can eat buffet?

"You also need to think about some of the potential trade-offs," Popehn adds. "You might plant something that's supposed to be more deer-friendly, but that might invite pressure from other pests like birds or bees.

Finding that middle ground that works for the client can be really tricky."

McNamara can attest to that dilemma. "For 30 years up here in Connecticut, people planted a lot of boxwood to deter deer," McNamara says. "Eventually we started seeing problems like boxwood blight, leafminer and psyllids that were just exploding. You get rid of one problem but create another."

One landscape design technique is to fortify the deer-enticing plants to restrict access. For example, Popehn says you could plant an arborvitae, and then construct a small decorative fence around it. Thorny plants like roses could also be planted in the area to create a barrier. Landscape designers could also consider strategically placed retaining walls that make it harder for deer to access plants, while also adding some additional character to the landscape.

During the winter months, you can wrap trees and shrubs to protect them. "I really like burlap," Popehn says, adding that the prevention of winter burn is an important benefit of its own. Plus, deer aren't going to take the time to try and chew through the burlap wrap. Similarly, Walker says The Pattie Group likes to use netting.

In some instances, Popehn says you just have to take a step back and question if using a certain plant in a certain instance is even sensible. For instance, if the client

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wants three arborvitae in their front yard, are they also open to having a fairly long run of fence to keep deer away?

“When we’re having these conversations with customers, we always like to say that if deer are really that big of an issue, we may need to find a different plant solution,” Popehn says.

In many instances, the most sensible solution is simply giving the customer the landscape and plants they love and then coming up with effective strategies to help protect those plants.

COST-EFFECTIVE PLANT PROTECTION. As pointed out, fencing is a common landscaping addition to help protect plants. But that adds cost and may be something the client doesn’t really want. Furthermore, as McNamara points out, fencing may need to be at least 10 feet high to keep deer out. The homeowner could run into issues with local zoning codes on a fence that tall.

Another suggested deterrent is to lay woven fencing on the ground to make it difficult for deer to meander through the area. Again, that probably isn’t something most homeowners will be eager to embrace. The same can be said of predator decoys. “Some of these things can be tough to pull off when what we’re after is aesthetics,” Walker says.

Just like with protecting against insects, there are plenty of application products out there designed to deter deer. Like with anything, some work better than others. McNamara says spraying will prove to be the most cost-effective solution with the least disruption to the landscape.

According to McNamara, a landscape company should look for proven, professional-grade products that aren’t available to the everyday homeowner. DeerPro Winter, for example, can be sprayed directly onto plants in the fall to provide winterlong protection. “It’s a fungicide with a strong taste deterrent,” McNamara explains. Then plants like arborvitae and rhododendron are generally safe all summer

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When we’re having these conversations with customers, we always like to say that if deer are really that big of an issue, we may need to find a different plant solution.”

— Patrick Popehn,
director of operations,
Rock Solid
Landscape & Irrigation

because deer have plenty of other food sources in the way of broadleaf weeds and deciduous shrubs.

During the spring and summer months, DeerPro has a separate product that can be used to protect things like hosta and daylilies. “This is both a taste and smell deterrent that most contractors will want to apply from April through August or even September,” McNamara says. This product is designed to smell at a low level but for a longer duration. While it’s strong enough to turn away deer that are attempting to nibble on the plants, McNamara says a human being hanging out on the patio won’t be bothered by it.

The Pattie Group has experimented with several application products over the years. During the summer months, they’ve always used different deer-deterrent sprays, typically applied with a hand-held pump sprayer directly to the plant.

According to Walker, some can really stink, which makes for an unpleasant job for the applicator. Crews have also tried using granular products that are sprinkled in flower beds. Walker says those worked OK but gave off quite an odor that some customers didn’t appreciate. Granular products can also lose their efficacy if a heavy rain washes them away.

Now Pattie Group crews are using coyote urine to deter deer. Thus far, after a season and a half, it appears to be working quite well.

“It comes in a tube,” Walker says. “We fill up some small plastic jars and hang them around the property on tree limbs. Deer get a whiff of that and don’t want to stick around. We need to reapply it about once a month. Then, as an added measure, we’re still applying a deer repellent directly to the plants during the growing season.”

An added measure here or there certainly doesn’t hurt, especially considering how much landscape damage some hungry deer can inflict. By having a good plan to deter and protect, property owners can have their cake and eat it, too — as well as their favorite evergreens, perennials and other plants that deer might like. **L&L**

The author is assistant editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine.

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Gold AND Green

The Greenery is celebrating its 50th anniversary and 20 years as 100% employee-owned.

By Kim Lux

After 50 years in business, The Greenery, based in Hilton Head, South Carolina, has a lot to celebrate. The company earned \$92 million in revenue in 2022 and ranked No. 28 on this year's Top 100 List.

This year also marks another important milestone — the 20th anniversary of becoming 100% employee-owned.

Current president and CEO Lee Edwards says it was following a vacation to the island that his parents fell in love with Hilton Head and wished to relocate.

"They were looking to do something different. They came back from vacation a couple weeks later and said, 'We need to find a way to move there,'" he recalls. "Somehow, somebody mentioned this little landscape business for sale and my dad didn't even know anything about landscaping. But they went and talked to them, and he started looking at it from the numbers and from a business standpoint. Then they went to talk to the head foreman.

"When they bought the company, it had six employees and two pickups," he adds. "They said as long as Leon, the crew foreman, agrees to stay on, they'd buy the company."

And with that, The Greenery was born.

WELCOMING THE NEXT GENERATION. Fast forward 50 years and that landscaping company has expanded to more than 1,000 employees across multiple branches spanning from Greenville, South Carolina, to Daytona, Florida.



Edwards says his path through the green industry has been a unique one — noting that originally, he wasn't planning on joining the family business. Growing up, he'd work on a crew during the summer but didn't plan on returning once he went away to college. He remembers a pivotal moment that changed his mind.

"I ended up in Colorado one winter after college," he says. "When the summer rolled around, I stuck around and got a job at a landscape company. I knew how to run all the equipment and spoke fluent Spanish. By the end of the season, I was running half the company for the guy and there was talk about us becoming partners."



The Greenery, based in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, has been in business since 1973 — and now has a dozen locations.

But Edwards says he didn't want to work for just anybody.

"I called my dad and told him I wanted to give it a shot," he says. "I think my dad had secretly hoped that it's what I would do."

In 1999, Edwards opened his own separate branch of The Greenery a little closer to home in Charleston.

"I was running my company in Charleston and doing well and then my dad got cancer," Edwards says. "That sort of accelerated his timetable on retirement. He started rethinking his life and his priorities — and that's when he created the ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Program)."

"I took over as president of the company

in 2007, and that's the same year we became 100% employee-owned," he adds. "We had started the process in 2003."

INVESTED EMPLOYEES. Edwards says the purpose behind the ESOP goes back to a fundamental business philosophy of his late father's.

"I think one of the most important lessons I've ever learned from my dad is he always said, 'Hire good people. Get out of the way. Let them do their job. And reward them well,'" Edwards says. "He really believed that and took it to heart, and I do, too."

"His thinking was he built up this really successful company after all these years,

but it wasn't just him who did it — it was all these great employees who'd been here so long," he adds. They dedicated their whole careers to this company and building it. This was a way to give back to them."

CFO Ben Campsey says it was The Greenery's ESOP that pulled him away from a lucrative career in the hotel finance industry.

"An ESOP gives a company its instant why," he says. "For most companies, why we do what we do is the hardest thing to define... we provide beautiful landscaping, but we also build retirements and a good lifestyle for the people that produce our product."

From the get-go, Campsey says he's seen the good in the ESOP countless times.



"Someone was in my office a few months ago and this person started with very humble beginnings 25 years ago and has worked his way up," Campsey says. "He told me, 'I think I'm going to be able to retire a millionaire.' Who would've thought this guy coming in to mow lawns would've been able to do that. It's stories like that, as a 50-year company, that builds the culture of who we are."

Janet DiNicola, chief technology officer, says she's witnessed these kinds of stories as well over her tenure with the company.

"What's great about being an employee owner is it's not something you have to sign up for; it's automatically granted after you make it through the initial waiting period," she says. "We're not in an industry that generally promotes pensions or 401Ks. Some of these guys after being here over 15 years have developed quite a little nest egg... they didn't save it themselves. It's just the money that is given to them."

While Edwards says there haven't been too many challenges associated with the ESOP, he notes that educating employees on the benefits of it has been a hurdle.

"A lot of the employees were very appreciative but a lot of them didn't understand it, or understand how it worked," he says. "When someone gets a stock certificate the first time, it's not really worth that much. But over time, as the value goes up and people earn more stock each year, it really grows exponentially after they're here awhile."

Campsey says that the more time an employee spends with the company, the more



Lee Edwards, CEO and president, says The Greenery being 100% employee-owned not only differentiates them in the market, but also contributes to the company's success.

they pay attention to their ESOP shares.

"Every year we do our big stock reveal and we put some education around that," he says. "We use pomp and circumstance to make it feel really official and we hand out cards and certificates to make it a big deal."

Outside of the annual reveal, Campsey says The Greenery tries find unique ways to promote the ESOP.

"Our biggest challenge is, 'What are the means we use to communicate this?'" he explains. "We're in a decentralized environment and companies like ours have industry-wide high turnover. So how are we finding ways to communicate the benefits? That's where I find it the hardest."

"We have a website we post videos on, a text messaging application where we can push information out to their phones and we have posters with QR codes that educate on ESOPs," Campsey adds.

Edwards says he feels the ESOP allows The Greenery to get the most out of their employees, therefore impressing clients and influencing their growth.

"It's a symbiotic relationship," he says. "You treat the company well and it becomes more valuable. If it becomes more valuable, you earn more stock for your retirement... They can influence that stock unlike a 401K

or an IRA... If you take care of your client, take care of your equipment, work safely and provide great service — our company becomes more valuable. If the company is more valuable, then the employees are the winners because they're the ones earning more stock every year."

ENCOURAGED TO EXPLORE. Outside of the ESOP, employees enjoy other advantages of being 100% employee owned.

DiNicola says one valuable benefit is the ability to experiment and learn about the latest, most cutting-edge technology within the industry.

She adds The Greenery has prioritized technology in recent years as a way to differentiate themselves in their market and nationally. In 2019, DiNicola says the company moved away from typical Excel spreadsheets and invested in software designed specifically for landscaping.

"If you're owned by a private equity company it's all about making that dollar," she says. "Lots of times in the beginning, robotics or any new technology doesn't make you too much money in the beginning because there is such a learning curve. I don't think a lot of those companies will be the ones investing or trying things out like this."

Robotic mowers have been another new frontier for the business. However, DiNicola recognizes it can be hard for some smaller companies, and even ones the size of The Greenery, to find opportunities to test out the new technology.

“Right now, it’s still really hard to get our hands on a lot of technology,” she says. “There’s a big difference between who is going after robotic mowers and who isn’t.”

SEEING GREEN. With the milestone anniversary upon them, leaders at The Greenery agree that steady, thoughtful growth is the vision moving forward.

“One of our biggest objectives is to become a \$100 million company,” DiNicola says.

While the majority of this growth will be organic, Edwards says the company is interested in making more acquisitions in the future.

“We’ve continued to grow steadily,” he says. “The last few years we’ve expanded out of our traditional footprint. We made an acquisition in Florida and opened another branch in Daytona. Those were exciting moves.”

However, Edwards stresses those acquisitions will be dependent on finding the right fit, which he says is no small task.

“A lot of companies when they make an acquisition, they are mainly buying contracts,” Edwards says. “With us, it’s all about the right cultural fit. We don’t want to just buy a bunch of contracts or revenue. It’s the relationships, the people, the safety program — all of it. We looked at one company I really liked until I saw their safety program and it was terrible. I thought if they don’t care enough to have a decent safety program and take care of their employees, it’s not the kind of company we want to be associated with.”

Edwards adds all this prospective growth will be inspired by the company’s employees as it always has been.

“I’ve always said we’re a growth-oriented company. Not because we want to go up the Lawn & Landscape Top 100 list, but because the way you hold onto people in our industry is you provide a future for them,” he says. “Whether it’s the No. 2 guy on the maintenance crew, a kid right out of college with a horticulture degree or a highly experienced regional manager, they want to take that next step. We provide an opportunity for everyone.”

“We haven’t changed our philosophy,” Edwards adds. “We not interested in bringing on any other ownership and we plan to stay 100% employee-owned.” **L&L**

The author is assistant editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine.



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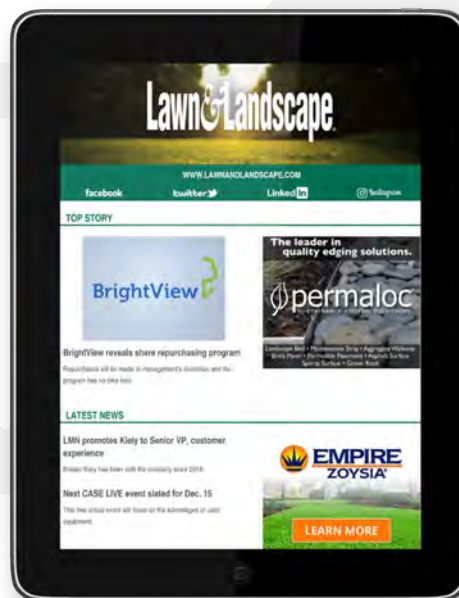


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RAISE THE BAR
WITH JUSTIN WHITE
CEO OF K&D LANDSCAPING
✉ JWHITE@GIEMEDIA.COM

RAISE THE BAR is a monthly column by Justin White, CEO of K&D Landscaping, written to help improve professionalism in the green industry.

FREEDOM AND DISCIPLINE

→ **WHAT DO SOME OF THE BEST ATHLETES** and top performers have in common? They show great discipline in their work and day-to-day life. I truly believe that discipline and healthy habits can create an unstoppable team. As I researched where discipline comes from and how to develop it in my company, I stumbled upon a simple statement from Author Michael Abrashoff: "Freedom creates discipline." It may sound counterintuitive at first, but I firmly believe that freedom creates discipline. Let's dive into why this is the case and how it applies to your business and life in general.

When we think of discipline, we often imagine strict rules and routines that leave no room for creativity or spontaneity. However, true discipline is not about restriction but about the ability to make conscious choices and take responsibility for our actions. It requires a deep understanding of our goals, values and priorities, with a willingness to make sacrifices and stay committed to our vision.

Freedom, on the other hand, is often associated with lack of structure or accountability. However, true freedom is not about doing whatever we want, whenever we want. It is about having the power to choose our own path and pursue our own interests, without being limited by external constraints or expectations.

So how do these two seemingly opposite concepts come together? The key is understanding that freedom and discipline are not mutually exclusive but rather two sides of the same coin. In fact, the more freedom we have, the more disciplined we need to be in order to use it effectively and achieve success.

Think about it this way: If you have no rules or boundaries, you are likely to waste your time and energy on unimportant tasks, procrastinate or get sidetracked by distractions. On the other hand, if you have a clear vision and a set of goals, you can use your freedom to explore different options, experiment with new ideas and take calculated risks that will help you achieve your objectives.

In the context of business, this means that the most successful companies are those that give their employees the freedom to think and act creatively while also providing them with a clear framework of expectations and goals. When employees feel empowered to make their own decisions and take ownership of their work, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated and productive. At the same time, when there is a shared understanding of what needs to be achieved and how to measure success, everyone can work toward a common purpose and hold themselves accountable for their performance.

This approach also applies to our personal lives. When we have the freedom to choose how we spend our time and pursue our passions, we are more likely to feel fulfilled and satisfied. However, this privilege comes with the responsibility to manage our time and resources wisely so that we can achieve our goals and maintain a healthy balance between work, family and leisure.

Freedom creates discipline by providing us with the space and resources to explore our potential and pursue our aspirations, while also requiring us to be accountable for our choices and actions. Whether in business or in life, the key is to strike a balance between these two concepts so that we can achieve our goals and live our lives to the fullest. At the end of the day, happiness often comes from us fulfilling our true potential. As a landscape business owner, I have learned that giving my team the freedom to express their creativity and take ownership of their work has led to better results and a more positive work environment. I encourage you to think about how you can apply this principle to your own life to experience the benefits for yourself. **L&L**

↓
WHEN IT COMES TO FREEDOM AND DISCIPLINE,
it's a balancing act. Both need to be encouraged within your team.

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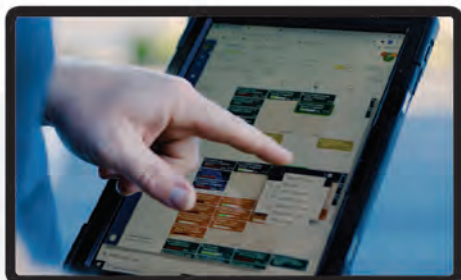
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We're devoted to providing the tools and resources necessary for your success. We believe that by sharing our collective expertise and contributing to the growth and profitability of landscape businesses, we can all benefit and continue to drive the green industry forward.

Here's to growing this great profession together!

Mark Tipton, CEO

Mark Tipton is the CEO of Aspire Software, which he co-founded with his partner Kevin Kehoe in 2013. Mark is based in St. Louis, Missouri.



The power of real-time job data and reporting, as well as immediate customer and field communication, enables you to deliver the best customer experience possible."

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DISSECT THE DATA

As the green industry continues to rely more on technology to operate their companies, certain areas are gaining traction faster than others. This year, 15% said they are using autonomous mowers compared to 6% last year, while 84% said they use mobile technology compared to 74% last year. Another major jump was design software with 55% using this year compared to 42% last year.

One result that some may consider a surprise is a drop in the use of battery-powered equipment from 54% to 49%. Here, we show some of the numbers from the survey, while stories on the next pages also contain different data generated.

CAN CUSTOMERS PAY FOR YOUR SERVICES **ONLINE**?

YES
75%

NO
25%

DO YOU HAVE A WEBSITE?

(not counting social media pages)

YES
86%

NO
14%

WHAT WAS YOUR 2022 REVENUE?

18%
UNDER
\$200,000

4%
\$200,000-
\$299,999

6%
\$300,000-
\$499,999

8%
\$500,000-
\$699,999

9%
\$700,000 -
\$999,999

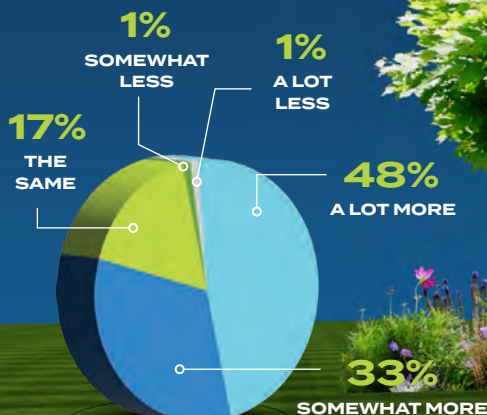
8%
\$1 - \$1.9
MILLION

14%
\$2-\$3.9
MILLION

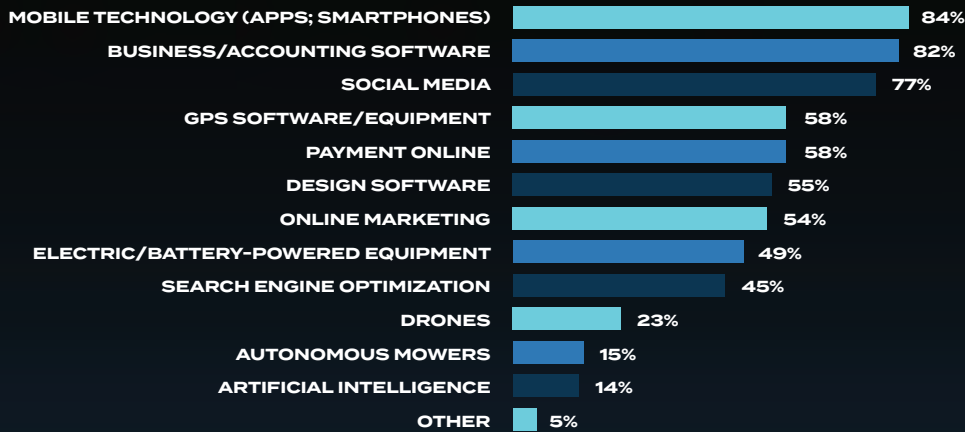
8%
\$4-\$6.9
MILLION

24%
\$7 MILLION
OR MORE

HOW MUCH DOES YOUR
COMPANY **DEPEND ON TECHNOLOGY
AND SOFTWARE** COMPARED
TO 5 YEARS AGO?



WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU USE AT YOUR COMPANY?



RANK IN ORDER THE FACTORS THAT STOP YOU FROM INVESTING IN NEW SOFTWARE WITH 1 BEING THE MAJOR FACTOR.

(These are the average scores of the rankings.)

WE DOUBT THE BENEFITS	1.99
TOO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND	2.33
TOO COSTLY	2.85
TOO DIFFICULT TO IMPLEMENT	2.85

DO YOU FEEL THE TECHNOLOGY OR SOFTWARE YOU USE AS A COMPANY MAKES YOU MORE ATTRACTIVE TO POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS?

Yes
62%No
38%

SOME FEEDBACK ON HOW TECHNOLOGY AND SOFTWARE HAS MADE COMPANIES MORE ATTRACTIVE TO POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS:

"We are able to bill out faster which, for our commercial clients, is good to keep things lined up for their budgets."

"Using digital signing programs ... have made us more accessible."

"Perceived as more sophisticated."

"Consumers are attracted to the latest and greatest, as this should produce a higher quality of more efficient results."

"Younger and/or tech-savvy buyers appreciate a technology-supported process/relationship. Even non-techie customers appreciate 3D Design."

"Most people nowadays don't want to communicate over the phone or in person. I find that having a software that allows me to communicate electronically and allowing customers to respond through the software gets me lots of business."

"Being able to show real-time, update, as well as photos/video, attached to proposed work orders has been an advantage to us."

ABOUT THIS SURVEY:

Lawn & Landscape surveyed readers in April 2023. The results are based on approximately 175 respondents. Not all percentages add up to 100 due to rounding.

Illustration by Sinelab



SUPERIOR SAVINGS

When it comes to technology, a return on investment can mean more than making money.

By Kim Lux

LAWN & LANDSCAPE spoke to some industry professionals from across the country about how they are integrating software and technology into their companies by using artificial intelligence, budgeting software, GPS monitoring and more.

WILLIAM HASELBAUER, *president of Bio Lawn*

WHILE GOOD CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP management, or CRM, software might be top of mind when it comes to influential technology in the green industry, Haselbauer says investing in online education platforms has also been critical.

"We have our Bio Lawn University on there and it houses everything from the organization chart to policies to processes and more," he says.

With 30 employees, Haselbauer says it's easier to train than ever before and allows learning to extend past the onboarding process.

"It has every service we do and a presentation or educational module for each one. You can track and see what (employees) have done or haven't done," he says. "If a technician makes a mistake out in the field, you can reassign a module."

Another asset of the online training tool is it allows Bio Lawn to increase its recruiting reach with ease.

One benefit of utilizing technology is having concise reports and photos to combat allegations from customers.

"We are not afraid to hire people without experience," he adds.

Haselbauer says that while the technology is still relatively new to the company, they are already seeing improvements throughout the staff and other benefits.

"It's the first year we've been using it, so we're still in the infancy of its capabilities," he says. "We haven't ever measured mistakes or anything in the past to see if they have gone down, but there's a general feel that our technicians are better equipped to perform the job. And that shows from our production numbers being up significantly."

That's not the only tech making waves at Bio Lawn. Haselbauer says the company is starting to utilize ChatGPT, an AI-based chatbot, for some customer communication and marketing efforts.

As a veteran of the industry, Haselbauer recognizes his understanding of turf is much more refined than that of the average homeowner. Therefore, it's helping them provide clear, concise information for the layman.

"I can write a paragraph back to a customer and it makes sense to me because I understand turf. But you can run that through ChatGPT, and it can clean it up and simplify it for someone to understand," he says.

Haselbauer says he expects more green industry companies to begin using the technology, and even email-AI, more and more.

"It's going to be a very powerful tool for any business but especially service businesses like ours," he says.

For now, Haselbauer says only management will be utilizing ChatGPT. As like with all AI, there needs to be a human element behind the writing and someone to monitor it.

"You do have to understand the content or otherwise you could get into some trouble," he says. "Just because they write it doesn't mean it's right."

TOM HOUGNON

COO of Landscapes Unlimited

WHEN HOUGNON CAME TO THE Minnesota-based company just over a year ago, he says incorporating more technology was a priority to him.

"I'm a process person...when I looked at our use of technology, it was a little on the weaker side," he admits. "One of my goals coming in was to build up and capitalize on current technology and plan for the future."

Hougnon explains the company, which has 150 employees during peak season and did about \$16 million in revenue in 2022, was already using an industry-specific business management software.

"When I came in, we were using maybe 35% of it and mainly just its basic functions," he recalls. "We weren't utilizing the whole system — the job costing and the other tools that could really help manage the business."

So now, job costing is the focus at the company, and they have the ability to perform it faster with the software.

"We're seeing results quicker," he says. "We were always job costing; it just wasn't as timely as we would've liked. We're utilizing the tools we already have invested in to maximize our efficiencies and production."

But when it comes to getting a return on investment out of technology, Hougnon says saving time can be as important as saving money.

"Anytime you can save your team hours and save on drive time, that technology will save us a lot of money," he says.

One way Landscapes Unlimited is saving time and money is with GPS and routing software.

"We can create such dense routes, particularly for our irrigation company" Hougnon says. "We have 3,000 irrigation customers to do start-up visits for the summer... we went from starting up four zones a day to nine or 10... it's also taken the seven to eight weeks of start-ups down to five to six weeks. That's significant savings."

Having crews do routine inspections every morning of their trucks and trailers, and having those inspections logged virtually, has also been a big deal, Hougnon adds.

"Our fleet maintenance staff is then getting real-time updates every day and we're able to get in front of issues that could cost us more money down the road with our fleet," he says. "Rather than just sticking post-it notes on someone's desk, it's all being documented."

The inspections are also helping to cut down on other incidents, therefore improving safety.

"I can't put a dollar amount on how much it's saved us, but it's made us a much safer company and safer companies make more money," Hougnon says.

Hougnon adds with technology being such a mainstay in today's society, there should be no reason for pushback when it comes to getting employees on board.

"Tablets and smartphones have been around for almost 15 years now," he says. "Virtually everyone has a smartphone...there's no barrier. Mobile technology is a part of everybody's lives, and that's taken away any excuses not to utilize technology."

WHO ON YOUR STAFF HAS A COMPANY SMART PHONE OR TABLET?

PLEASE CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY.

98%

OWNER

82%

MANAGEMENT

68%

FOREMEN

56%

ADMINISTRATIVE
STAFF
(HR, OFFICE
MANAGERS, ETC.)

54%

SALES
TEAM

53%

ACCOUNT
MANAGERS

43%

CREW MEMBERS



ALEX MUNNS

president of Colonial Gardens
Landscape Co.

MUNNS SAYS HE WAS USING one industry-specific software when he decided to switch to another to better meet his needs.

Munns says it was the budgeting program the new software offers that motivated him to make the move.

"It's been a gamechanger. It opened my eyes to a lot of things I thought we were charging for, and it guided us to being more profitable and making sure we cover all of our costs, in every job, from start to finish," he says.

The software is so detailed that Munns says it allowed him to get a better picture of Colonial Garden's financials and make adjustments to improve profits. The company, which employs 15, reached just over \$1.1 millions in revenue in 2022.

"To me, it dialed in on things I was hoping I was doing but wasn't really sure," he says. "In the past, we just had a wage rate that we felt comfortable with, but we never had a way to really prove it without doing a regular budget in QuickBooks or something like that, which would've been very time consuming.

"It covers everything I need it to do," he adds. "It holds people accountable including myself. So that's one big piece of the puzzle."

And in terms of accountability, Munns says GPS technology is another must-have.

"That's helpful beyond what everybody thinks... If a crew finishes up and I've been trying to get a hold of another crew, but they can't hear the phone ringing or something, I can send the other crew to join them, he says. "We use it for that all the time."

Munns says it's also helpful in showing customers when and where his crews have been.

"There's been a few instances where a client is trying to pull one over on us and say our truck wasn't there," he says. "Having the ability to print out a report and show on the map that our trucks were in front of their house for two hours has been very helpful in overcoming some issues with certain customers."

Overall, Munns says as his business continues to grow, he'll be relying on technology more and more as there's only so many hours in the day.

"I'm hands-on and I wear a lot of hats," he says. "The ability to use the technology as we grew was incredibly helpful in being places I couldn't be physically and seeing what was going on with my company day-to-day. As you grow, you can't be everywhere. I have the ability to see what everyone else is doing."

MIKE MCCARRON

CEO of Image Works Landscape Management

MCCARRON RECOGNIZES the technology being utilized on the front lines of any company will be completely different than that in the executive's suite.

By prioritizing the field-level, Image Works has been able to not only grow the business to \$2 million but also cut down on some common burdens.

"At the lower level, the employees and the foremen get blamed for a lot of stuff," he says. "So, we use technology at a very high level for all the photos. We document everything before, during and after."

McCarron notes that when a crew first arrives on site, a foreman is going around and taking photos of the entire property — regardless of if they are only working in one area. More photos are also taken as the work progresses and then again right before crews load up and leave.

"All of the photos are time and date stamped," McCarron says. "That way down the road, you can email those photos with the invoice."

"You get blamed for a lot of stuff unless you have photos," he adds. "It protects your team and the integrity of your team. The technology keeps the crew out of trouble in that regard."

While the photos are helping cut down on accusations from customers, McCarron says it's also helping save time — and therefore money.

"The account manager doesn't have to drive all the way to the jobsite and back because he can just look at the photos online," he says. "So, the account managers aren't racking up nearly the amount of miles they were before. It's not a replacement for boots on the ground, but it is helpful."

In addition to improving efficiency, McCarron says he likes to measure ROI in other intangible terms.

"Success is measured upon financial value, but sometimes it's about understanding and confusion control," he says. "Even if you barely broke even on the investment, but your staff is way happier and productive, then is it always about how much money you'll save?"

McCarron says some of the best investments are ones that improve things for the company's staff of 25, regardless of the bottom-line benefits.

"There's some pieces of software where it's not about making money," he says. "It's worth a lot more than the dollar value. There's no way to gauge that 'happy meter' but companies need to start looking more in that direction."

Additionally, McCarron says with technology, there's no silver bullet or quick fix that's going to automatically take your company to the next level.

"Everyone is always looking for that golden nugget or that one thing that will magically change their whole business," he says. "Everyone is caught up on that...we have to use several pieces of software and try different things. You have to put together bits and pieces that work best for everyone... a one-and-done solution doesn't exist."

DO YOU HAVE A
CHIEF TECHNOLOGY
OFFICER, OR
SOMETHING SIMILAR
ON STAFF?

YES

26%

NO

74%

The author is assistant editor with Lawn & Landscape magazine.



CHANGE 'PLUS' PROGRESS

Grassmaster Plus saved valuable time, money and resources by fully adopting the software they were already paying for.

By Kim Lux



Taking things to the next level in terms of technology has saved Grassmaster Plus a great deal of money in terms of labor and overtime.

C OVID-19 caused chaos for everyone, including Grace DiBenedetto, who, after being laid off from a tech company, thought she'd just be answering the phone at her father's lawn care company for a few months before moving on.

Now, nearly three years later, Grace, officer administrator, and her dad, Nick DiBenedetto, president, are embracing technology together at Grassmaster Plus to make the Massachusetts company run more efficiently and more profitable.

"2020 was the first full year Grace was in there at Grass Master Plus and we were doing \$1.2 million. That whole year she integrated technology, and in 2021, we did \$1.475 million," Nick says.

Grace says this drive to advance the company through technology started almost immediately after coming onboard.

"Early on I started noticing things that were really frustrating to me — a lot of wasted time and wasted resources," she says. "I'd come home at night and drive my dad crazy asking, 'Why are we doing this?'"

Grace recalls being overwhelmed by the number of whiteboards, clipboards and paperwork just cluttering the Grassmaster office. But, the company did have software already established that could make life easier for its employees and customers.

"We had the software in place; it just wasn't being utilized," Grace says. "It was like opening up the shed, seeing all these dusty tools, taking them out and sharpening them, learning about them and practicing and then implementing.

"I was shocked when I was digging more into the software and found all the resources," she continues. "I thought I was missing something. Before I brought the information to the team, I was calling the software company three or four times to make sure we had access to all this and didn't have to pay extra or anything."

Once Grace started bringing these additional features to the company's day-to-day operations, the payoff was seen almost instantly.

"It's unbelievable — I don't even know how they were functioning before," Grace adds. "It just seems like everything was taking 10 times longer than it needed to, to get any kind of information or data."

FIRST THINGS FIRST. Before Grassmaster Plus could reap the benefits of its software, employees had to be taught an entirely new way of recording, inputting and tracking key data.

Instead of handwriting reports and notes at each jobsite, and then manually making call-ahead phone calls at the end of each shift, everything was being digitalized. Now, all they had to do was log into the app and they could find the data at their fingertips.

"It wasn't easy — obviously," Grace says of the shift over to digital. "But one of the ways we did it was taking it really slow. Nothing happened overnight. It was days, weeks and month of slowly changing it over."

Before taking the new software features to the team, Grace says she and Nick had several long, hard conversations trying to anticipate all the personal roadblocks some employees would face.

"In our heads we already knew who was going to struggle, so we catered and tailored the training toward them specifically," she says. "That's a big benefit of being a small company is that we were able to customize the training for each individual employee."

Grace adds she made sure to be 100% familiar with the software herself before training began.

"It took a lot of time and training to get started. Every day I was doing little demos with myself to ensure I knew how things worked," she says. "That way we could teach it and get it implemented."

Once the new features were introduced, Grace notes there was a bit of a generation gap between who picked up on the changes quickly and who took a little more time to get a handle on things.

"It was cool to see during this how different people learn," she says. "With some of our younger technicians, we told them what app to download on their iPhone, gave them their username and password, showed them how to clock themselves in and let them go.

"The younger employees picked up on it right away and they were excited about it," Grace adds. "But with some of the older employees, it was almost like you had to do more coaching than anything. There was a lot more training involved and honestly a lot more trial and error. We'd go to them with what we thought was the proper training that'd be sufficient enough and they still weren't grasping it."

When this happened, Grace says she and the team would regroup together, brainstorm and find alternative teaching methods.

"We wound up sending them very specific videos of me performing the tasks we were asking them to implement," she says.

Throughout all this training, Grace says they kept emphasizing how important this software would be in saving employees' time and making their jobs easier on them.

"We really honed in and focused on showing them how it will really improve things for not only the company and its customers, but it'll also improve their work as well," she says. "I think that was super key and really pushed everything over the edge to get it to work. It was about telling them, 'This is how it's going to benefit you. This is how it's going to make your life easier, and this is how it'll make your day-to-day tasks more efficient.'"

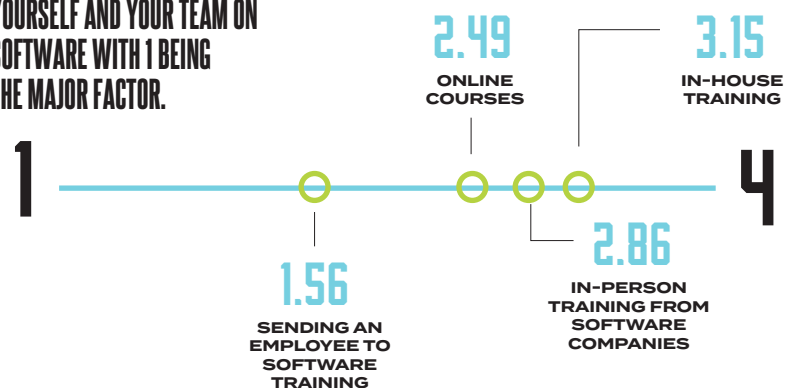
COMING AROUND TO COMPLIANCE. But even with constant reassurance of that message, some employees struggled to buy in to the changes. Grace says there was one frustrating phrase that kept cropping up — "This is the way we've always done it."

"The main reasoning was simply just the leaders we had in place were of the older generation and were kind of stuck in their ways saying this is how they'd been doing it for 20 years and they just weren't digging into the software and using what they needed to in order to get by," she says.

And while most everyone came around eventually, there were a few who had to be let go as they were unwilling to embrace the technical advancements.

"Unfortunately, there were some people who had to be moved on from the company," Grace says. "Growth is pain. We knew that going into this."

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However, seeing this did serve as motivation for others who were struggling to take the training more seriously and commit to the software.

“One person had to be moved on and I think that was a little bit of a wake-up call for another employee that was putting up a wall with us,” she says. “But now we’ve seen over the last few months and seasons that wall has definitely come down a lot more.”

For Grace, an additional hurdle she had to face was being the boss’s daughter and the one implementing these changes.

“I was told ‘This is not how it’s done,’ and ‘This is how we’ve always done it,’ all of that stuff was said to me,” Grace says. “Obviously, there’s good and bad about being the owner’s daughter... I had people who wouldn’t even talk to me and go straight to my dad even though it was me implementing it, training and trying to talk it through. They would just bypass me and go straight to him. Dealing with that was kind of tricky.”

But Nick’s commitment to his daughter and the improvements she was making never wavered, saying he always encouraged employees who came to him to seek solutions with Grace directly.

BOUNDLESS BENEFITS. All the hard work to get employees on board with the changes paid off. Nick says they are already seeing plenty of profit — including a 7% savings in labor.

This is primarily because of a switch over to automated phone calls for mandated call-ahead notices.

“I was observing that our technicians were making all of those calls at the end of the day,” Grace says. “They manually dialed every single customer...I immediately took over that and wanted to remove

that from the technician’s list of tasks for the day. It was taking a lot of time and I kept thinking there has to be another way.

“I dug into our software and was able to send out an automated recording that we could send out to all of the customers in just three clicks,” she adds. “You could see the relief in the technicians’ faces.”

Grace calculates that this automation has saved Grassmaster Plus about 4.5 hours of overtime daily, which equates to thousands of dollars over the year.

The savings don’t stop there, thanks to good data.

“With the data we have now, we can immediately pull reports,” Grace says. “We can pull tracking reports, production numbers and inventory. All of that wasn’t being utilized

before, and that’s really the base of any company.”

Going paperless has been huge, and the business has been able to track and stay on top of inventory like never before.

“Because we were having technicians handwrite things, things weren’t being tracked and those papers were being lost, thrown out or not followed up on,” Grace explains. “It was a lot of time, effort and money being wasted. Having someone collect all of those handwritten reports and enter them into excel sheets would’ve been a whole employee’s day.

“Now that we’ve transitioned everything into the software, after every single stop at every customer’s house a technician goes to in a day, they’re typing in that inventory. They’re also being tracked and timed. We know they spent 25 minutes here and that’s right in the software in real-time.”

The geofencing and tracking reports have also been great in disputing cus-

tomers complaints and show exactly where technicians were and when, Grace says, adding 2022 was one of their best years with inventory.

“We stayed on budget and the remaining inventory we (had) left at the end of the year will be the smallest we’ve ever had, all because we’re able to keep on it, watch it and monitor things.”

3 PILLARS OF PROSPERITY. Nick says any business success should be a “Triple Win” — meaning it benefits the business, the employees and the customers.

And that’s exactly what this push toward technology has been for Grassmaster Plus.

“It was all about how this would benefit the customer, the company and the employees,” Grace says. “Those three pillars were always the main point behind everything I was looking into.”

It’s not just the company and employees benefiting, but now customers are getting better, more concise and more professional information from them, Grace says. And more communication is being done via email and online rather than leaving paper on someone’s doorstep.

“We’re retaining more customers this way,” Grace says. “Our cancel rate has decreased over the last two years. Our customers are also getting better information and it’s faster and more in their hands. There’s now a customer portal where they can login and make their own payments, see past data and history of when we’re on their properties. Their questions are being answered for them right there online while they’re sitting on their couch on their iPad.”

While the change may have been tough at times, Grace says she feels employees are more energized now after going through it.

“Our employees are feeling more productive at the end of the day,” she says. “Everyone likes to track their own progress and have goals. We’re putting the power in their hands.” **L&L**

The author is an assistant editor with Lawn & Landscape.





The right tools to power growth

Property Works was founded in 2007 by Tony and Jason Batallan, two brothers born and raised in southern Florida. The Batallan Group has acquired landscape, general maintenance, and janitorial companies in the Florida market and onboarded them to Aspire to integrate these endeavors.

Dana Shaw began working with the Batallan brothers in 2016 while he was an implementation manager with Aspire Software. After building a strong relationship with Property Works while at Aspire and later as an independent consultant, Dana joined Property Works in 2020 as a full-time manager in operational strategy, overseeing the systems the company uses to manage its business.



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