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OCTOBER 2023

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2023 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT

Unpredictable weather, the supply chain, and of course, labor, were some of the major challenges landscapers faced.

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Lawn & Landscape

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Volume 44, Number 10



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Bright ideas in the Lone Star state

I'm currently still digging out from a few days in Dallas, Texas, where I attended the National Association of Landscape Professional's Elevate event. It's always great to network with people from the industry, even if it's just to catch up for a few minutes. Aside from the networking and show floor, the event is loaded with education sessions. Here are a few takeaways:

Keynote speaker Liz Bohanon told her story of living out of her car, traveling the country to sell sandals she designed. But she had a couple of points that really resonated with me.

One was to let co-workers know they shouldn't edit themselves as far as sharing feedback and ideas in meetings. Most people default to that setting to avoid embarrassing themselves with what they think might be a dumb idea.

You need to over-communicate that meetings are a space to share all ideas without judgement. And as a leader, if you start feeling judgmental, be curious and start asking questions.

This will get you out of the mindset of making judgmental statements. Like TV's

Ted Lasso said, be curious, not judgmental.

Another good point she made was to dream big — but allow yourself to dream small as well, because dreaming big can be overwhelming. Maybe within the big dream, there is a little dream you can really focus on and reach.

Jennifer Jorge, COO at King Green, presented on promoting from within. She advised the audience to avoid promoting from within based on tenure alone. Just because they have been at the company for a number of years in a position doesn't mean they will excel in a promoted role.

One quality Jorge says a promoted employee should have is knowledge of how to use technology. That includes even the minute details of how to format a document properly.

Jorge also says promoted employees will still need onboarding in their new role. Sometimes it's assumed the employee knows how to do their new job, but a promotion can be like starting a new job.

On a panel about developing an org chart, panelists discussed the lessons they have learned. Chase Mullin, owner of Mullin Landscapes said that just because



Brian Horn
Editor, Lawn & Landscape

someone moves up the org chart doesn't mean they can't move back down. It's important to have open communication between the promoted employee and the manager to have an honest conversation if the new role isn't working out.

Like I said last month, try and get out to a few events in the next few months to better yourself, even if it's only a few new ideas. — *Brian Horn*

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BrightView names Dale Asplund as new CEO, president

Asplund took over at the industry's highest-earning company on Oct. 1.

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS at BrightView Holdings appointed Dale A. Asplund, 55, as president and CEO effective Oct. 1, 2023.

In conjunction with his appointment as CEO, Asplund will also join the BrightView board as a director as of that date.

In addition, BrightView's affiliate of One Rock Capital Partners, a private equity firm, has made a \$500 million investment in the company in the form of convertible preferred stock.

Asplund's appointment follows a thorough search process, conducted by the board over the last number of months in consultation with a leading search firm.

Asplund succeeds interim president and CEO Jim Abrahamson. Abrahamson, who has served as a BrightView independent director since 2015, will remain as a member of the board.

Asplund brings 25 years of extensive operational, service provider, and publicly traded company expertise to BrightView from United Rentals.

Most recently, as executive vice president and chief operating officer, a position he was appointed to in 2019, Asplund served on the executive leadership team with company-wide responsibility for operations and employee safety. Asplund, who joined United Rentals in 1998, has held strategic leadership roles encompassing business services, shared services, supply chain, fleet management and information technology. Earlier in his

career, Asplund worked for United Waste Systems.

"We are excited to welcome Dale to the BrightView team. Dale is an outstanding leader whose proven operational excellence and exceptional strategic capabilities make him an ideal choice for our next CEO," says Paul E. Raether, chairman of the board of directors. "As BrightView continues its transformational journey, the board looks forward to working with Dale to deliver long-term growth and value for shareholders and is grateful to Jim for leading the Company through this transition period and his continued involvement in BrightView."

"I am excited to lead this great company and talented team into its next phase of growth and performance," Asplund says.

"BrightView has firmly established itself as the industry leader in commercial landscaping. I look forward to collaborating with the board, senior management, and dedicated team members to build upon their success. Underscoring my confidence in the company's future, in the coming weeks, I plan to make a personal investment of approximately \$5 million in BrightView shares."

The Asplund announcement follows the company's recent fiscal third quarter earnings report. Project Accelerate, the company's cost containment initiative, has been materially expanded and is transitioning into the implementation phase — now identified as Project Liberty, with the intent of driving continued growth in revenue, profitability and margin expansion.

According to BrightView's press release, as part of its strategic initiatives, BrightView has received an investment from One Rock in the form of \$500 million newly-issued shares of convertible preferred stock. BrightView will use 90% of the proceeds from the investment to pay down debt, helping to significantly de-lever the company's balance sheet to 3.1x net debt to LTM Adjusted EBITDA and position it for growth under Asplund's new leadership.

Remaining funds from the new investment, coupled with increased free cash flow due to lower interest expense, are expected to provide BrightView with the flexibility to pursue acquisitions of complementary landscape businesses and other accretive initiatives. BrightView's existing shareholders are not selling any shares in connection with the transaction.

"We believe this investment from One Rock is a strong vote of confidence in BrightView's strategy and continued efforts to increase growth and profitability," Raether says. "We look forward to partnering with One Rock and leveraging their operational expertise, including extensive experience in the landscaping industry, as we continue to drive BrightView's future success."

Following receipt of HSR approval and certain other requirements, the preferred stock will be convertible into shares of BrightView common stock at a conversion price of \$9.44 per share and will vote together with the company's common stock on all matters brought to shareholders on an as-converted basis. The preferred stock has a 7% annual dividend, compounded quarterly, which is payable in cash or in kind at BrightView's option.

In connection with this transaction, One Rock operating partner Kurtis Barker and One Rock partner Joshua Goldman have been appointed as new directors to BrightView's board.



Dale Asplund

SavATree bolsters executive team; adds COO, CGO

SavATree's COO Don Becker retires after 36 years of service. Ben Stevie will assume the role.

SAVATREE, ANNOUNCED THE ADDITION OF KEY MEMBERS to its executive team. Ben Stevie has been appointed Chief Operating Officer (COO), succeeding current COO Don Becker, while Phil DeGisi assumes the role of Chief Growth Officer (CGO). These appointments come as SavATree accelerates national growth and lays the groundwork for expanding internationally.

"The addition of Ben and Phil to our executive team marks a significant milestone for SavATree," says SavATree CEO Carmine Schiavone. "Their extensive experience building at-scale, top-quality customer experiences will help propel SavATree on into the next phase of growth and expansion. As we step into the future under their leadership, I also wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to Don for his remarkable 36 years of service to our organization. His contributions have been invaluable, and his legacy will continue to inspire us all."

Becker will retire this year, after close to four decades at SavATree. He came onboard with SavATree in 1987 and helped SavATree become the first multi-state tree care company in the U.S. to earn accreditation by the Tree Care Industry Association. Becker was instrumental in expanding SavATree into the 30 states it now operates in and hiring many of the team members that have helped SavATree become a leader in the green industry. Becker will stay on through the end of the year, ensuring a smooth transition of responsibilities. As Becker transitions to spending more time with his family, he will also continue as an advisor to the company, allowing SavATree to continue leveraging his expertise.

Succeeding Becker is Stevie, an executive with a strong track record in scaling operations and service delivery, and a deep expertise in field services. Prior to joining SavATree, Stevie spent 18 years with General Electric. Stevie received his MBA from Xavier University and has his undergraduate degree in Business from Northern Kentucky University.

DeGisi joins SavATree after six years at residential real estate firm Orchard, where he was a co-founder and president. Previously, DeGisi held marketing leadership roles across brands including Amazon subsidiary Quidsi, Walmart.com, and CommonBond. DeGisi holds an MBA from the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth and a Bachelor of Economics from Vassar College.

In addition to these appointments, SavATree continues to invest in its Mergers & Partnerships platform. Most recently, Kyle Johnson has joined as VP of Integration, working closely with Kirk Crecco, SVP of Mergers and Partnerships. The team is focused on partnering with talent in the arboriculture and professional lawn industries. Johnson brings six years of experience leading integration at Rentokil North America, where he integrated an average of 15 partners annually. Crecco, celebrating his one-year anniversary with SavATree, has already led over a dozen notable partnerships, including mergers with Aspen Tree Service, Preaus Landscape of Tulsa, Barrett's Tree Service and Boise Tree.

"(Don's) contributions have been invaluable, and his legacy will continue to inspire us all."

— SavATree CEO Carmine Schiavone

Briggs & Stratton appoints Liotine as CEO

Joe Liotine joins Briggs & Stratton after serving 18 years in senior roles at Whirlpool Corporation.

BRIGGS & STRATTON appointed Joe Liotine as CEO in August.

Liotine joins Briggs & Stratton after serving 18 years in senior roles at Whirlpool Corporation, most recently as president and COO, where he led the Global KitchenAid business, had global responsibility for product development, R&D, sourcing and IT and was instrumental in building world-class operations and driving growth.

Prior to his role as COO, Liotine was president of Whirlpool's North American business, SVP Product and Brand Marketing, general manager Canada operations, sales general manager and senior strategy director.

"I am delighted to be joining Briggs & Stratton and look forward to working closely with the talented Briggs' team to provide market leading products and services to our customers and to drive the continued growth and success of Briggs & Stratton," Liotine says. "Briggs & Stratton has over 110 years of experience, is trusted by millions of people around the world and is backed by the largest service network in the industry. It is ideally placed to take advantage of the multiple market opportunities and I am delighted to be leading this great business at this exciting time."

According to media reports, it was announced last month that former CEO, Steve Andrews, stepped down for personal reasons.

Landscape Workshop acquires Martin Landscape

This adds two locations servicing the low country region of South Carolina and coastal Georgia to Landscape Workshop.

LANDSCAPE WORKSHOP recently completed the acquisition of Martin Landscape, adding two locations servicing the low country region of South Carolina and coastal Georgia.

Wade Martin founded Martin Landscape in 2004, starting with one truck and a push lawn mower. Today, Martin Landscape has grown into one of the top landscaping companies in the area and is known for their commercial landscape services.

“Our organization has developed a strong reputation with clients through our skilled team delivering exceptional landscape services. We sought out a



partner that values our employees’ and offers growth opportunities. Landscape Workshop emerged as the perfect choice, providing superior service and career opportunities,” says Wade Martin.

Martin will join Landscape Workshop, assuming the role of general manager. He will be accountable for facilitating the transition for Martin’s customers and employees.

“With the acquisition of Martin Landscape, one of South Carolina’s most prominent landscape companies, we are now able to offer our services to an even wider range of clients in the Southeastern

United States. I grew up in South Carolina and am proud to bring LW to my home state. We extend a warm welcome to all Martin team members as they join our LW family,” says J.T. Price, CEO of Landscape Workshop.

Landscape Workshop is a full-service grounds management firm, delivering professional service and expert maintenance for commercial outdoor spaces since 1984.

Serving 18 Southeastern markets, Landscape Workshop operates in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and the Florida panhandle. Landscape Workshop is backed by Carousel Capital and McKinney Capital.

Fairway acquires GroGreen in Texas

GroGreen marks the 15th company to join Fairway since 2022 and the third in Texas.

FAIRWAY HAS ADDED GroGreen, which is headquartered in Plano, Texas.

“Texas is an important market for us, with Dallas being a critical hub within the state,” says Fairway CEO Greg Harbison. “Adding a business with the operational excellence and passionate commitment to exceptional customer service provides a home run for us as we grow our service companies in the Dallas metroplex. Founder Gary LaScalea and General Manager Darrel Nail share our values as well as people and customer-first culture. It was a natural fit.”

LaScalea was a Lawn & Landscape Leadership Award winner in 2001 and offered some “tips from the top” in an issue 10 years later.

“Everything for us is about relationships, so our first concern was for our

people — the women and men who made GroGreen and represent the quality of service we all believe in,” he says. “I spent a considerable amount of time getting to know the Fairway team and discovered that they are zealous and totally exemplary in reflecting GroGreen’s journey and mission for the future.”

“We wanted to join a company that values their employees and has exceptional customer service as we do,” adds Darrel Nail, a vice president and general manager at GroGreen. “After meeting Fairway, we realized right away, that they possess the same values and would be a great fit with our strategic plans for the future.”

GroGreen marks the fifteenth company to join Fairway since 2022 and the third in Texas.

“Everything for us is about relationships, so our first concern was for our people — the women and men who made GroGreen and represent the quality of service we all believe in.”

— Fairway CEO
Greg Harbison

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Shoreline Equity Partners acquires American Landscaping Partners

Headquartered in Nashville, ALP provides commercial and residential landscaping and chemical application services.

SHORELINE EQUITY PARTNERS, a lower middle market private equity firm, has acquired American Landscaping Partners.

Headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, ALP provides commercial and residential landscaping and chemical application services. Under the leadership of the CEO, Stefan Banks, the business has completed six acquisitions and has grown to more than 500 employees servicing customers throughout Tennessee, Florida, Pennsylvania and Ohio.

In partnership with Shoreline, ALP will continue to execute on an aggressive growth plan via organic initiatives and acquisitions. The new partnership with Shoreline provides the company with expertise in the facility and residential services sector and offers access to additional capital needed to partner with other leading landscaping providers across the U.S. The management team continues to maintain an ownership position in the business and will continue to lead the Company going forward.

"Stefan and the broader ALP team have built an exceptional company, and we are beyond excited to partner with them to grow the business through add-on acquisitions," says Mike Hand, a managing partner at Shoreline. "It was clear from our first conversation that ALP would be a great fit for Shoreline due to the quality of the business and its people. We are so appreciative they chose us as partners and we look forward to collectively executing on an ambitious growth vision for ALP over the years to come."

"The team at ALP has built an exceptional brand and reputation as the go-to landscaping service provider for its customers. We are very much looking forward to helping ALP embark on its next phase of growth," says Ian Garland, principal at Shoreline.

"We are thrilled about our partnership with Mike, Ian and the wonderful Shoreline team. It was incredibly important that we found a partner that aligned with our core values. As we continue to execute on our growth strategy while remaining committed to service, we wanted a partner with experience in doing just that," says CEO Stefan Banks. "Through building a relationship with Shoreline, we knew they understood where we are today and where we are looking to go in the future."

"The team at ALP has built an exceptional brand and reputation as the go-to landscaping service provider for its customers."

**— Ian Garland,
principal at Shoreline**

Former banker signs as first Joshua Tree Experts franchisee

Carlos Lozano will bring the tree maintenance, plant health, lawn care and pest control franchise to Orange County, N.Y.

JOSHUA TREE EXPERTS, the Pennsylvania-based home services franchise that provides tree maintenance, lawn care and pest control services, signed its first franchisee. Carlos Lozano, a former investment banker and lifetime entrepreneur, will open the franchise in Orange County, N.Y.

"I got out of the banking business four or five years ago and ended up forex trading and day trading while I figured out what I wanted to do next," Lozano says. "Joshua Tree Experts actually came out of necessity. I had some trees I needed taken care of, and it was like pulling teeth trying to get someone to come out."

Lozano briefly considered purchasing an existing private business but decided that franchising was the more appealing investment option due to the investment range and available support.

As Joshua Tree Expert's first franchisee, Lozano says he is looking forward to playing a crucial role in establishing a strong foundation with the brand as it continues to grow. As the first local owner, Lozano feels confident he will have more than enough support as he grows and sees an opportunity to grow to be a model franchisee.

"This allows me to set myself as the example and push the boundaries for other upcoming franchisees," he says. "I want people to see me and think, 'He did this, he's implementing the proven systems laid out to follow, and he's expanding.'"

As the franchise expands in Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas, Lozano will play a key role in developing his fellow franchisees as they visualize and pursue their own futures with the brand.



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Genesis Turfgrass joins United Turf Alliance

Genesis Turfgrass serves customers in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Washington DC, Virginia, West Virginia and New Jersey.

GENESIS TURFGRASS recently joined United Turf Alliance as its newest owner. Based in Glen Rock, Pa., Genesis Turfgrass serves customers in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Washington DC, Virginia, West Virginia and New Jersey.

Mike Del Biondo founded Genesis Turfgrass in November 2005. With more than 25 years of green industry experience, Del Biondo's mission was to provide products and knowledge to industry professionals. That mission has grown Genesis Turfgrass to two locations and 40 employees today. The company provides products and support to lawn and landscape services, sports complexes, athletic fields, golf courses, nurseries, sod and

“We’re confident that this new membership will serve our employees and customers well for years to come.”

— **Mike Del Biondo, Genesis Turfgrass founder and president**

organic farms, agriculture, vineyards and infield tracks.

The new partnership between Genesis Turfgrass and UTA is a logical move for both organizations as they align to better serve turfgrass professionals.

“Joining UTA is an opportunity for

Genesis to partner with similar distributors around the country,” says Genesis Turfgrass Founder and President Mike Del Biondo. “We’re confident that this new membership will serve our employees and customers well for years to come.”

The addition of Genesis Turfgrass makes the third new UTA owner this year, following the announcement of D & K Products joining UTA in June. UTA now has nine owners serving turf professionals across the country.

“Our recent momentum marks strategic growth for UTA,” says Nick Strain, CEO of UTA. “We’re deliberate about who we invite into the consortium, and it’s always exciting to find a fit like Genesis.” ■

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CHEAP WATER? I DON'T THINK SO

→ **IT'S BEEN A CRAZY YEAR FOR WEATHER.** Maui is burning up. There's too much rain on the East Coast. There's a drought in Texas and the upper Midwest, and there are somewhat normal weather patterns on the West Coast. It's either feast or famine for irrigation contractors. Demand for irrigation service work is at an all-time high while the supply of competent irrigation service technicians seems to be lower than ever. Not surprisingly, the pricing of irrigation service work reflects market conditions more than any other service provided by green industry entrepreneurs.

TODAY'S MARKET PRICING. An irrigation contractor in rural Kansas charges \$80 per man-hour portal-to-portal (PTP) or from clock in to clock out for a nine-man-hour day. His technicians need to bill \$720 per day (9 MHrs x \$80). That calculates to a curb-time rate (man-hours on-site) of \$102.86 per man-hour ($\$720.00 \div 7 \text{ MHrs}$). In addition, parts are billed with an average 30-40% margin. His technicians are paid an average of \$20 per man-hour.

An irrigation contractor in Kansas City pays his technicians an average of \$25 per man-hour and charges \$100 per man-hour. His technicians need to bill \$900 (9 MHrs x \$100) per day for labor for a nine-man-hour day. This translates to \$128.57 as a curb-time rate.

Three things should be noted here. First, in both cases, the price to the customer is four times the labor pay amount ($4 \times \$20 = \80 and $4 \times \$25 = \100). Second, the rural vs. city labor pay rate differential is \$5.00 ($\$25 - \20). Third, the rural vs. city price to the customer differential is \$20 ($\$100 - \80).

A full-service landscape contractor near San Diego pays his service techs an average of \$26 per man-hour with a daily billable goal of \$882 for a nine-man-hour day. This calculates to almost \$100 per man-hour ($\$882 \div 9 \text{ MHrs} = \98.04).

One irrigation contractor in northern New Jersey bills \$125 per man-hour for a nine-man-hour day while another nearby contractor charges \$135 per man-hour. Add about \$20 to each rate to arrive at the curb-time rate. Both pay their technicians in the vicinity of \$30 per man-hour.

Totally off of the charts is a contractor in Jackson, Wyoming, who has to pay his technician over \$50 per man-hour and charges clients \$150 per man-hour (PTP). His billable amount is roughly three times his labor pay rate. For a nine-man-hour day, this technician needs to bill \$1,350 per day for labor.

YESTERDAY'S 10-YEAR TREND. Ten years ago, irrigation service technicians were billed out around the country at an average of roughly \$55 per man-hour (PTP). This was for a nine-man-hour day. The average technician was paid approximately \$14 to \$16 per man-hour. Slowly the billable rate climbed to \$65 per man-hour as the labor pay rate increased in the vicinity of \$3 +/- \$0.50 per man-hour. As you can see, the billable price to labor pay ratio was then, as it is now, roughly 4:1.

It took a while to break through the \$65 per man-hour billable rate but it inched up toward \$70 per man-hour (PTP). Once COVID-19 spread around the country (and globe) in early 2020, pay as well as billable irrigation service rates blew past the \$65 / \$70 threshold ceiling to higher ground. As individuals sequestered at home, demand sky-rocketed for irrigation repair services. As a result, technician hourly pay increased as did the billable rates. Billable rates hit \$75...then \$85...onto \$95 per man-hour (PTP). Fast forward to today and contractors everywhere are breaking through the \$100 per man-hour barrier.

BENCHMARKS WORTH NOTING. First, there's a direct correlation between the portal-to-portal billable price that contractors charge their clients and the labor rate paid to irrigation technicians. It's approximately a 4:1 ratio. Ten years ago, technicians were paid about \$15 per man-hour. That rate then began to creep to the \$20 per man-hour amount. Not too many years ago, the \$25 per man-hour barrier was broken. Today, a really good irrigation service technician who can address any challenge that he or she faces is getting paid in the range of \$30 and above per man-hour. Pricing to customers reflects the supply/demand curve. As demand for a service that is in limited supply increases, the price for it increases. Second, labor remuneration tends to decrease as one gets farther from a major metropolitan area. Billable rates reflect this drop and decrease proportionally.

CONCLUSION. When you apply the time and materials (T&M) pricing model to the irrigation service sector of the green industry, labor pricing mostly reflects the supply/demand curve for technicians and the hourly rate paid them. Flat-rate pricing for irrigation service work also reflects this curve but to a somewhat lesser degree. Too many irrigation service providers are too slow to increase their pricing in fear of losing customers. My clients tell me that they experience little to no pushback when they raise their billable rates. Remember, if a service tech bills 1,500 to 2,000 man-hours per year, a \$5 increase per man-hour translates to a \$7,500 to \$10,000 revenue increase. More importantly, it's all additional net profit. In crazy times like these, that additional net profit might come in pretty handy. **L&L**

Q&A WITH THE EXPERT

Q + A

with
Jay Young

T&O Category Leader, Corteva Agriscience

A ROBUST PROGRAM IS KEY to creating beautiful, lush lawns and landscapes. As you look ahead to 2024, Corteva Agriscience offers an easy way to earn rebates on the products you rely on. From Oct. 1, 2023, through Dec. 31, 2023, Corteva Ultimate Rewards is offering top-notch rebates to lawn care operators on all qualifying products.

1 What are the benefits of Corteva Ultimate Rewards?

With Corteva Ultimate Rewards, the more you purchase, the greater your reward. From rebate multipliers to rate locks to a flexible ordering period, participating in Corteva Ultimate Rewards provides a simple way to save when purchasing the products you need to create exceptional results.

2 Which products qualify?

It's not about getting the job done, it's about getting the job done right and that means investing in premium products that are proven to work. Bundle two or more of any of your favorite Corteva Agriscience™ products to receive at a minimum rebate level of \$300. The deeper you buy into the portfolio, the bigger your bonus will be. Participating product categories include: pre-

emergence herbicides like Dimension® specialty herbicide, postemergence herbicides like Defen-dor® specialty herbicide, as well as insecticides and fungicides.

3 When to purchase products?

This year, Corteva Ultimate Rewards is offering an early order period with top-notch rebates on all qualifying products from Oct. 1 through Dec. 31, 2023.

4 How to secure your savings?

Taking advantage of the Corteva Ultimate Rewards program is simple:

- Visit COREultimaterewards.com, pick your distributor(s) and fill out your rebate form.
- Submit your form before Dec. 31, 2023.
- Enjoy your locked-in rebate rate through June 30, 2024.

With Corteva Ultimate Rewards, the power of more is in your hands.

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WORDS OF WILSON

WITH BRIAN BRUEGGEMANN
OPERATIONS CONSULTANT, WILSON360

 BRIAN.BRUEGGEMANN@BRUCEWILSONCOMPANY.COM

WORDS OF WILSON features a rotating panel of consultants from Bruce Wilson & Company, a landscape consulting firm. WILSON360 is the rebranded platform of Bruce Wilson & Company.

A BLUEPRINT FOR OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

→ **AS LANDSCAPE PROFESSIONALS**, we recognize the impact our work has on the communities and customers we serve, as well as creating a natural beauty within our world that everyone can enjoy. We also know that there is no silver bullet that will set us apart from our competition. To excel in our industry, it's essential to adopt basic strategies, processes and routines that will streamline operations, enhance productivity, create a safe and efficient work environment and culture for our teams; all while delivering a product or service that our customer can't live without.

Let's take a look at five practices that drive operational excellence and allow your team to grow and prosper.

CREATING EFFECTIVE ROUTINES AND PROCESSES. Simple routines and processes are the building blocks to excellence in everything you do. At all levels of your organization, break down complex projects into manageable tasks and procedures, creating a road map toward the overall goal. Each team member should understand the "why" of what they are doing and the importance of what they do and how it will affect the overall product or service delivered to the customer. A structured framework of established processes within roles, departments or divisions will minimize delays, increase efficiencies, enhance project coordination and create a win for you and your client.

EFFICIENCY THROUGH LEAN PLANNING AND THINKING. Managing your company resources is a key component in your operation. Those resources include people, equipment and material. Is your staff thinking and planning in the most efficient way possible? Are you incorporating the five "S" steps of lean thinking? Are you discussing the eight forms of waste with your operations team? Repeated discussions and actions in these three areas will lead to great daily habits from your team that will produce noticeable results.

SAFETY COMES FIRST. Safety is non-negotiable when performing any landscape task. Your employees should know the dos and don'ts and proper operating procedures for all equipment they use. They should be trained by an experienced staff member that gives them a green light before they can operate any piece of equipment on their own. This goes for proper safety procedures when working without equipment as well. A solid safety plan with timely topics that are discussed weekly with your team encourages a culture of "we put people first" and "we need to look out for each other."

CONTINUOUS TRAINING AND

DEVELOPMENT. Your team is your greatest asset. Find the right positions in which they excel and then invest in their continuous training and skill development. Keep your workforce up-to-date with the latest landscaping techniques, safety protocols and industry advancements. Encourage a culture of learning and innovation. This creates an environment in which team members can share ideas and discuss how to solve their challenges and those facing the company. As the labor force shrinks, we all need to embrace new technology and how it can help us continue to succeed.

STRATEGIC PLANNING ON ALL LEVELS.

Short- and long-term plans and goals aren't just for the company as a whole. An owner and/or executive team may create a strategic plan for the future, but it's up to the individual team members to deliver on that goal. Just like an operations task, the plan should be broken down by branch, division, department or employee and everyone needs to understand their role and what specific part they have in helping to achieve that result.

Incorporating these best practices within your company will not only create a lean, safe and efficient work force driven to produce results and deliver on customer expectations; it will help create a company culture and environment where every team member feels valued, empowered and inspired to be their best. **L&L**

↓
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CREAM OF THE CROP

WITH JUD GRIGGS

DESIGN/BUILD CONSULTANT

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

10 MAGIC QUESTIONS

→ OVER THE YEARS I have compiled a list of what I call “Magic Questions” that are most effective in determining a client’s needs and desires. Asking the right questions to uncover your client’s real needs is crucial for providing effective solutions and building strong relationships. Clients typically aren’t trying to hide this information from you; they just don’t know how to express what they want. It’s up to you as the professional to dig deep and get to the real needs of a client. This is done by asking the right questions.

My list of Magic Questions now totals 20. For the sake of brevity and space, I will give you my Top 10:

1. WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOU CURRENTLY FACING? Identifying pain points and obstacles helps you tailor your solutions to address their specific issues. The pain points may be a contractor that is not providing top quality results in their quality or service. It may be an HOA board that is constantly complaining about the current provider. It may be a designer that does not listen. Knowing the client’s pain points will allow you to create a solution that eliminates the client’s frustrations.

2. CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR IDEAL OUTCOME OR SOLUTION? This question helps you understand the client’s vision and desired results. Knowing a client’s vision will allow you to create a solution that aligns with your client’s vision for the project. If there is alignment here, the budget discussion gets a whole lot easier at contract time.

3. WHAT IS YOUR BUDGET OR RESOURCE ALLOCATION FOR THIS PROJECT? Understanding their financial constraints helps you propose feasible solutions. This question is extremely helpful on commercial projects. With office vacancies increasing as more employees are working remotely, landscape budgets are being reduced. If you become more of a partner than a vendor with your client and help them best allocate the budget dollars they do have available while still meeting the key goals, you will be a hero in their eyes.

4. WHAT PREVIOUS SOLUTIONS OR APPROACHES HAVE YOU TRIED? Learning about past experiences gives you insights into what has worked or not worked for them. Finding out where a previous contractor failed will prevent you from going down that same path. Perhaps it was a designer who didn’t listen and provided solutions that didn’t meet the client’s vision for the project.

5. WHAT TIMEFRAME ARE YOU LOOKING TO WORK WITHIN? Knowing their timeline helps you set realistic expectations and plan accordingly. Most of my clients have lead times extending out not just weeks but months. If a client is expecting their project to be completed in time for a fall wedding, but your schedule is full until the end of the year, you don’t have alignment. Instead of saying no to a great project, you can offer alternatives like a property clean-up and mulching to make the property look great for the wedding and start the major construction after the wedding.

6. HOW DO YOU MEASURE SUCCESS? Understanding their criteria for success helps you align your efforts with their expectations. Measurements might be a quality score (QC) over 90, or no call backs. Another may be finishing on time and on budget. It may be something harder to measure like creating a “fun” process with minimal disruptions. You need to find out what success is in the eyes of the client.

7. ARE THERE ANY SPECIFIC PREFERENCES OR MUST-HAVES? This question helps you uncover any non-negotiable elements to include in the proposal. It could be something as simple as including a favorite tree, or something more involved like a firepit or outdoor kitchen. Make sure it’s part of the solution you propose. I have lost projects by not including that favorite tree or group of perennials that the client asked for up front.

8. WHAT FACTORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU IN MAKING A DECISION? This question helps you understand their decision-making criteria which can guide your recommendations. Budget is the typical response to this question, but budget may just be a smokescreen. If you have captured the client’s vision in your proposal, the budget objection will disappear.

9. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE COMMUNICATION AND PROGRESS UPDATES TO BE HANDLED? This question helps you establish clear communication channels and maintain transparency. This is critical in today’s world where there are many ways of communicating. Some clients prefer texting, while others like face-to-face meetings (or Zoom calls). Others want you to pick up the phone and talk with them. Don’t take the easy way out and send a bunch of emails that don’t get read. Communication gets much easier when you do it the way a client desires.

10. WHAT DO YOU VALUE MOST IN A PARTNERSHIP OR COLLABORATION? This is the most powerful Magic Question. Understanding their values helps you build a strong working relationship. If you can get your client to open up and tell you this, you just developed a strong relationship and have become true partners with your client.

Remember, active listening is just as important as asking the right questions. Pay attention to their responses and ask follow-up questions to delve deeper into their needs and concerns. If you would like to receive the full list of “Magic Questions,” please contact me at: judson@harvestlandscapeconsulting.com. **L&L**

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Q + A

Looking for more ways to save? No need to think outside the box.

Discover the new ways to save with the same great GreenTrust® 365 program.

1 For lawn care operators who aren't familiar with the program, what's the first thing they should know about the GreenTrust 365 Program from Syngenta? GreenTrust 365 offers the greatest savings of the year between **Oct. 1 – Dec. 8, 2023**, to help lawn care operators (LCOs) maximize their budget while purchasing industry-leading products. By purchasing as little as \$5,000 during the Early Order Period (EOP), LCOs qualify for the **GreenTrust 365 yearlong rebate of up to 9%** and can take advantage of SummerPay™. This includes purchases of our latest innovations:

- Acelepryn® Xtra insecticide
- Compendium™ fungicide
- Recognition® herbicide

Once they lock in a yearlong rebate during the Early Order Period, they continue to save through Sept. 30, 2024.

2 What's the best way for LCOs to get the best bang for their buck?

LCOs can qualify for the GT Bonus Booster Rebate to earn an **additional 2% rebate on purchases made during EOP** once they qualify for the 7% yearlong rebate level. The more you spend, the more you save.

3 For returning GreenTrust 365 customers, what's new this year?

This year, we are introducing the **Double Up Bonus**. Starting at the 7% yearlong rebate level, LCOs can double their rebate during EOP on purchases of:

- Acelepryn Xtra 2.5 GA
- Acelepryn Xtra 30 oz.
- Acelepryn 0.5 GA
- Acelepryn 4 oz.
- Acelepryn 30 oz.

This means, when you achieve the 7% yearlong rebate level, you automatically earn an additional 7% rebate on these select products during EOP. (See Figure 1)



Volume pricing is also available for 15 SKUs:

- Save 10% on Acelepryn Xtra when you purchase 25 gallons of the 2.5-gallon package or 108 bottles of the 30 oz. package.
- Save 15% when you purchase 60 gallons or more of Compendium.

4 What resources does Syngenta provide LCOs to better understand and access their rebate?



Our online **rebate calculators** make planning and ordering easier and help LCOs save more by recommending the best package sizes including a pallet solution and Multipaks.



Scan for the online rebate calculators.

There are two versions of the calculators so LCOs can select the best one to meet their needs. Additionally, throughout the year, they can check their rebate status online at **GreenTrust365.com/View-Rebate**

5 What other benefits does GreenTrust 365 offer that LCOs should know about?

Figure 1

Purchases from Oct. 1 – Dec. 8, 2023	Yearlong Rebate for Oct. 1, 2023 – Sept. 30, 2024	+	GT Bonus Booster Rebate (Earned Oct. 1 – Dec. 8, 2023)	+	Acelepryn Brand Double Up Bonus Rebate (Earned Oct. 1 – Dec. 8, 2023)*	=	Potential Total Early Order Rebate
\$5,000 to < \$10,000	5%		-		-		5%
\$10,000 to < \$20,000	6%		-		-		6%
\$20,000 to < \$30,000	7%		2%		7%		16%
\$30,000 to < \$40,000	8%		2%		8%		18%
\$40,000+	9%		2%		9%		20%

Barricade Brand Rebate + Pallet Solution

LCOs can save even more on Barricade® brand herbicides during EOP with the Barricade Brand Rebate and the **Warm Season Herbicide Solution pallet**, which features Barricade 4FL and Monument® 75WG herbicide.



Multipaks

Save even more, **up to 15%**, on complementary products delivered in convenient Multipaks.

NEW for 2024 – Lawn Agronomic Programs

Our new lawn agronomic programs help plan a yearlong preventive strategy to keep customers happy and their business thriving. Our agronomic experts developed each program to help save time, increase turf quality, reduce applications and more. Find a program at GreenCastOnline.com/LawnPrograms



SummerPay

Lawn care companies can now keep their cash flow in check by **deferring payment until June 20, 2024**. With SummerPay, LCOs can make applications and invoice customers before making payments.



Product Guarantee Programs

Syngenta technical experts developed the following performance **guarantees** with leading agronomic recommendations:

- Grub, Billbug & Caterpillar Prevention Guarantee
- St. Augustinegrass Guarantee
- Barricade brand herbicide Guarantee
- Advion® Fire Ant Bait Guarantee

Free Customer Marketing Materials

Take advantage of an array of free homeowner brochures that Syngenta offers to help lawn care companies grow their

business. Learn more at GrowWithSyngenta.com

To learn more, visit GreenTrust365.com/Lawn or scan the QR code below.

*The Double Up Bonus will be applied to EOP purchases of Acelepryn Xtra 2.5 GA, Acelepryn Xtra 30 oz., Acelepryn 0.5 GA and Acelepryn 4 oz. only.

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 **GreenTrust 365**

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Robyn Schmitz

Owner/CEO,
High Prairie Outdoors

TWO WORDS: CLIENT COMPLAINT.

As leaders, we're responsible for empowering our teams to turn issues into opportunities. How we respond to upset clients can earn us a client for life.

When I founded High Prairie Outdoors in 2010, I knew we'd create a niche business for high-touch residential. Specializing in a luxury service meant we had to provide an elevated experience to build our reputation. Part of that is having a plan for handling client concerns. No matter what you specialize in, this plan provides a clear process for turning complainers into fans.

Acknowledge. As soon as a complaint is reported, acknowledge that person as soon as you're able. Timing is key. The longer a person waits, the more their frustrations grow. Respond to their call or message within an hour if possible. If your schedule is packed, inform them that you will be contacting them at a specified time to learn more.

Diffuse. Connect with the client and allow them to release their frustrations by asking for more information about how you can help. Listen without offering excuses or explanations. Remain calm no matter what demeanor anyone else has — but don't allow abuse. If someone has crossed the line into abusive behavior simply redirect using a quote like this:

"I can understand that you're frustrated and I'd like to help

you. In order to do that, we must be able to speak calmly and constructively. Are you able to do that, or should we pause the conversation until you're ready to discuss how we can help?"

Seek to understand. By showing empathy and actively listening, a frustrated client will begin to feel that you're "on their side." By asking clarifying questions, you're showing that you care. Empathize with them by letting them know you can understand their feelings. Even if you don't fully agree with their frustration, you can still provide empathy. Also, avoid making excuses which can make a client feel like you're not taking responsibility. Complaints are often opportunities, and we capitalize on them by solving client problems. Ask the power question: "What can we do to make you feel better about this situation?"

Resolve or reframe the issue. If possible, try to provide the resolution they've asked for. If the situation doesn't allow you to provide the requested resolution, try to reframe the situation. Reframing can be done in a few simple steps: repeat their complaint or issue back to them using empathy. This shows you're listening. Educate them on why their requested resolution isn't possible. Offer alternatives or help them "reframe" by viewing the situation from a positive perspective.

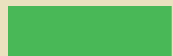
Keys to empowering teams to master client complaints. Create a "Customer Experience Contingency" allowance for your managers. Determine a dollar amount that would allow your team to rapidly resolve issues for clients without waiting for approval. Empower them to solve problems without your input.

Track use of the "Customer Experience Contingency" budget by requiring your leaders to complete a form documenting the issue, the resolution and approximate value of the resolution.

By reviewing the submissions with your team on a regular basis, it will help prevent future issues. We call this our "Issue Prevention Process." You'll also be able to understand how issues are affecting your profitability. It can indicate the need for further coaching of your team.

Following the process of acknowledging, diffusing, understanding, asking and resolving will more easily turn complaints into opportunities. Tracking complaints will help provide an indicator of how well your organization is delivering on your brand's promise. **L&L**

Schmitz 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.



2023

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT

Unpredictable weather, the supply chain, and of course, labor, were some of the major challenges landscapers faced.

S3**EXCLUSIVE
RESEARCH****S10****SOUTH****S20****NORTHEAST****S6****WEST****S16****MIDWEST**

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Todd Stucke

Senior Vice President
of Marketing, Product
Support & Strategic
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Tractor Corporation,
and Vice President,
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KICK-START INNOVATIVE THINKING FOR A STRONG 2024

No matter where you live or work in the green industry, and no matter the size of your business, you remain concerned about inflation, controlling costs in an unpredictable environment, finding or keeping qualified help, and weathering the storms (both literally and economically) season after season.

While we've all been bracing for a recession since 2022, the economy overall has been surprisingly resilient to date. But does that mean we may end up experiencing a little softness in 2024? Perhaps, but we can still look to the year ahead with optimism while also being realistically prepared for the unknown.

How? It's time to kick-start that same innovative thinking that fueled you to start your business. You need to revisit that entrepreneurial spirit and same creative thinking to keep your business thriving in uncertain times. You wouldn't be in business today if you weren't a risk-taker willing to try new things.

So, set your intentions now for a strong 2024. It might be time to add new technology so you and your team can work more efficiently, or it might be a good time to introduce new services or consider new equipment for your fleet to serve more customers or larger properties, or you may need to

get more aggressive with your marketing strategy. Whatever the case may be, taking calculated risks and staying nimble may just be the boost you need to keep you thriving in the year ahead.

At Kubota, we are doing just that. We are constantly innovating our products and processes — in fact, while manufacturing is at the heart of our business, innovation is the engine that keeps us pushing forward as we look to 2024 and well beyond. We started with an entrepreneurial spirit more

than 50 years ago, and it's that spirit that plays a pivotal role every day across our products, productivity, and our people.

For 2024, we are harnessing new technologies, automation, and innovating our business and our dealer systems to be more productive and efficient to stay well-positioned to serve your needs. We are primed to catch up nicely on our turf business inventory, building out our supply chain to put more products in Kubota dealer showrooms.

We are bringing to market more cutting-edge, award-winning mowers like the newly introduced Kubota F3710 front-mount mower, recently recognized as an industry 'Editor's Choice' and a 'Top 20' new product award for 2023. When added to the Kubota one-stop-shop fleet program, you'll have the newest equipment backed by extraordinary service in place and ready for the busy spring season.

And lastly, much like you, we are working hard to maintain a strong future workforce to serve your needs today, tomorrow and well into the future.

By getting back to the core spirit that built our businesses, we will continue to grow together in the year ahead and beyond. Best wishes for a prosperous 2024.

Sincerely,
Todd Stucke

GOOD-LOOKING NUMBERS

The industry continues to thrive even after business slowed slightly following the COVID-19 boom.

The industry saw quite a jump in revenue in 2022, according to our 2023 State of the Industry survey. Last year's research showed mean revenue was \$1.74 million, but that grew to \$2.32 million in this year's report.

The median revenue in 2021 was \$604,000 and that number moved to \$1 million in this year's report, making it the first time in recent memory that both numbers were \$1 million or greater.

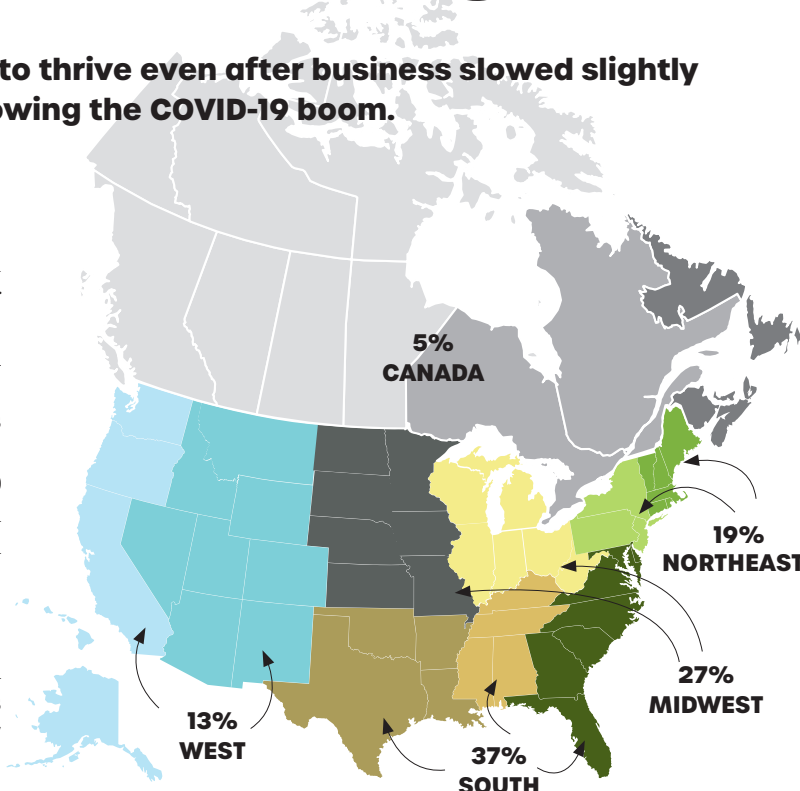
In this year's report, the number of companies reporting more than a million in revenue was 48%, compared to last year's report of 39%. Companies larger than \$7 million grew from 9% to 15%.

With the number of mergers and acquisitions the industry has seen, that's not surprising. Speaking of M&A activity, the number of people approached about selling their business has grown from 43% to 50%.

Confidence is growing for owners as well. Last year, 10% of respondents weren't confident their company would grow in revenue, while only 5% said that this year.

And it wasn't just revenue that increased. Those who said they turned a profit increased to 87%, up two points from last year's report. For the first time, we asked if you have private equity investment in your company, of which 4% confirmed they did.

— *Brian Horn*



● New England (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT)	8%
● Middle Atlantic (NJ, NY, PA)	11%
● East North Central (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI)	18%
● West North Central (IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD)	9%
● South Atlantic (DC, DE, FL, GA, MD, NC, PR/VI, SC, VA, WV)	25%
● East South Central (AL, KY, MS, TN)	5%
● West South Central (AR, LA, OK, TX)	7%
● Mountain (AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, NV, UT, WY)	4%
● Pacific (AK, AS, CA, HI, OR, WA)	9%
● Atlantic Canada (NB, NL, NS, PE)	0%
● Central Canada (ON, QC)	3%
● Western Canada (AB, BC, MB, SK)	2%

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
mean (millions)	\$2.24	\$2.19	\$2.22	\$3.28
median (millions)	\$0.76	\$1.03	\$0.92	\$2.67

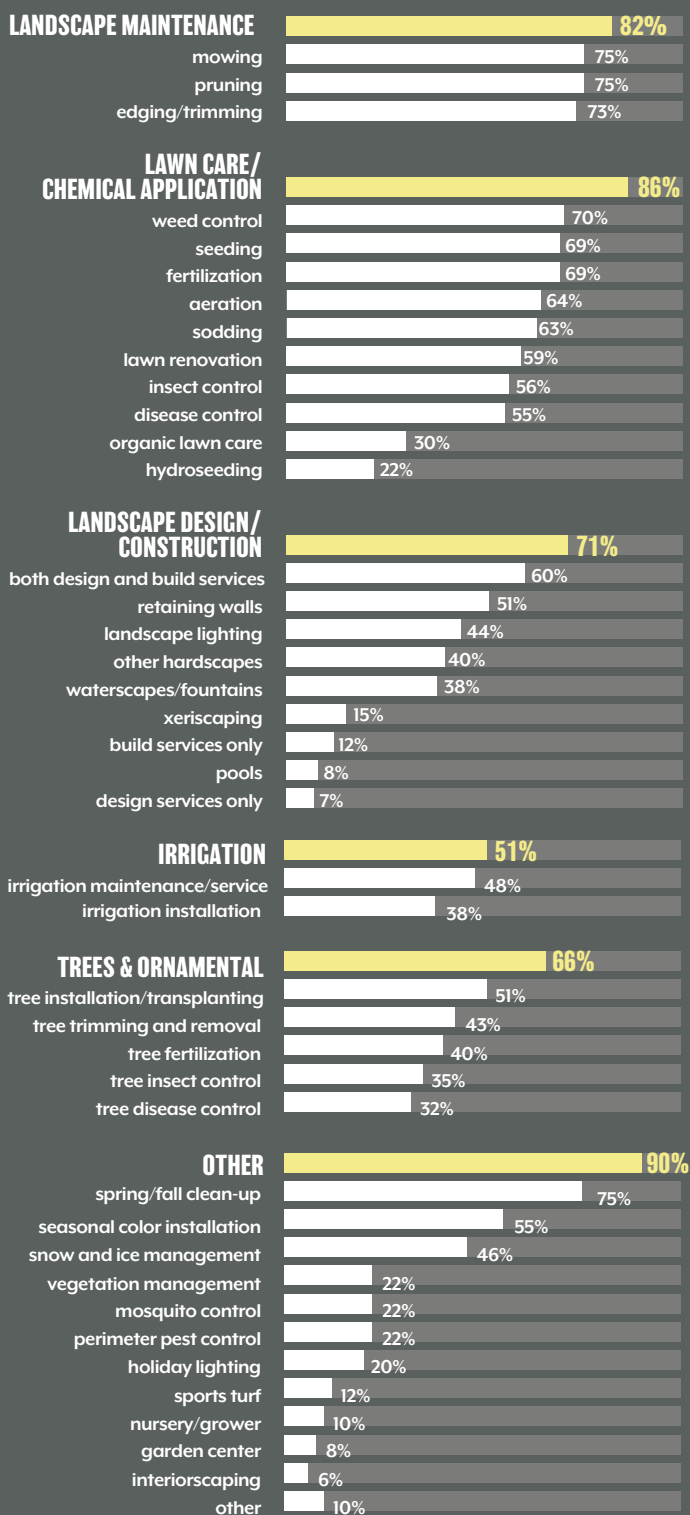
SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Data for this survey was collected from June 27 to July 14, 2023, and is based on 414 responses.

The margin of error for percentages based on 414 landscape contractors/lawn care operators is ± 4.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Mean: The average of all respondents. Median: The number in the middle where extreme outliers are removed.

Which of the following services does your location currently offer?



How many full-time, part-time, and seasonal employees does your location currently have?

24

full-time

8

seasonal

2

part-time

34

Average
number of
Employees



What was your 2022 revenue?

More than \$4 million.....	24%
\$1 - \$3.9 million	24%
\$500,000 - \$999,999.....	11%
\$200,000 - \$499,999.....	13%
\$50,000 - \$199,999	15%
Less than \$50,000.....	9%

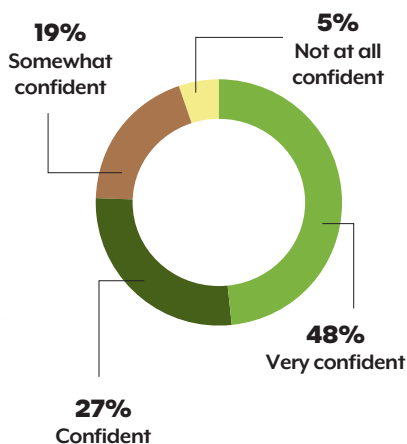
\$2.3 MILLION

Mean Revenue

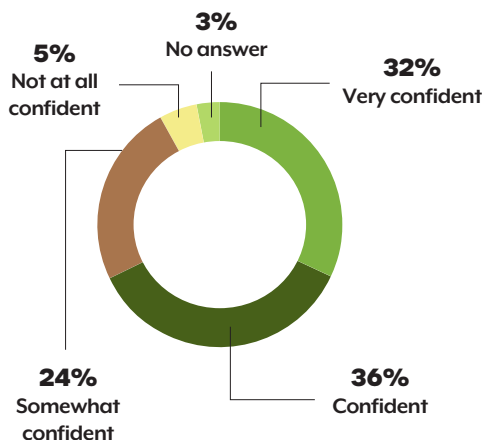
\$1 MILLION

Median Revenue

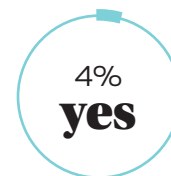
How confident are you that **your location's business** will grow in revenue in 2023?



How confident are you that the **national landscape industry** will grow in overall revenue in 2023?



Does your company currently have private equity investors?



Do you anticipate your business will be sold in the next 10 years?



do not know: 32%

Approximately what percentage of your location's 2022 gross revenue came from each of the following property types?

59%

single-family
residential

26%

commercial/
industrial

9%

multi-family
structures

4%

government/
institutional

2%

other

WEST



A LOT RIGHT ON THE LEFT COAST

Business is still strong out west, even though there have been some hurdles.

Story by
KIM LUX

Illustration by
ALEX GREEN
(FOLIO ART)

Jennifer Chaplin

CEO, Botanica Landscapes,
Yuba City, California

EVER SINCE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, Botanica Landscapes has seen a boom in design/build projects. Now, a few years removed from the shutdowns, CEO Jennifer Chaplin says she thinks that trend is here to stay. In fact, it's helping the business reach about \$4 million annually in revenue.



"For us, this year is going well," she says. "When COVID hit, our residential construction portion of the business really increased and it has pretty much stayed at that point. We are booked three months out for appointments. That's just scheduling a visit."

Chaplin, who has been CEO of the 40-year-old business for a few years now, says that while having all this work is great, the most challenging aspect can be managing customers' expectations.

"We have customers that we're doing installation or maintenance for that've been our customer for over 30 years," she explains. "And they want us to do it the same way we've always done it. So, we work with them on that. Then, we have other customers who are brand-new to us and come into it with brand-new ideas and things that they've seen on Pinterest or something like that."

"Some of them have very grandiose ideas," she adds. "They don't know it but what they want a quote on is a concrete planter that costs \$4,000. And their budget is \$3,000 for the whole renovation."

Chaplin says as social media and other technology continues to be more of a mainstay in people's lives, it can be harder to bring them back to reality.

"That's something we've really been working with people a lot on — they just don't know. They just know what looks nice to them, but they don't have any concept of how much things actually cost or how difficult it is to install," she says.

Also, when it comes to their customers, Chaplin admits she thought they'd be a little more upset about a recent price increase than they were.

"We've raised our wages of our employees and therefore we raised the rates for our customers. We implemented an annual 3% increase," she says. "I was curious when we did that how much pushback we'd get from people, but we really didn't get hardly any. I had a couple of people ask where I came up with that number, and I told them the Consumer Price Index and then they were O.K. with that."

"We had some other customers who were not thrilled we were raising their rates, but then we went and talked to them

Is there an exit strategy to sell
your location's business?

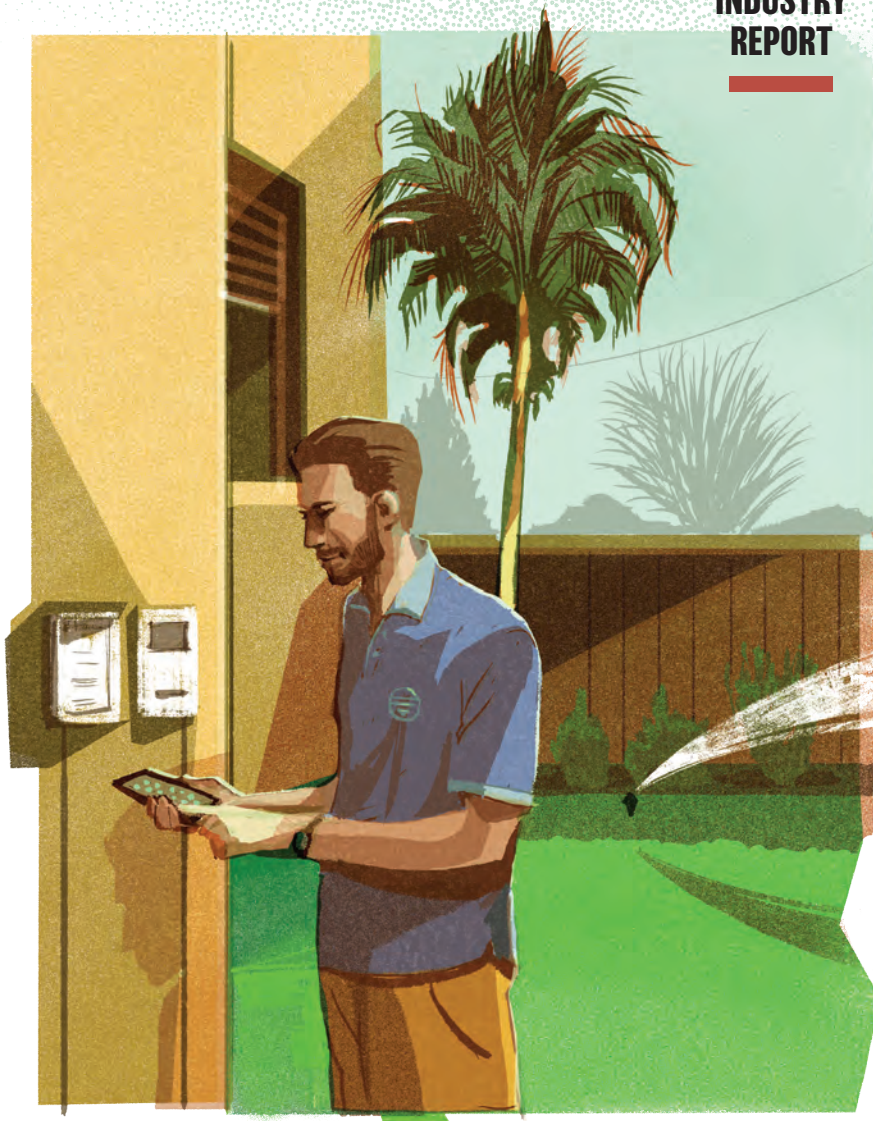
50% 44%
yes no

do not know: 4% / no answer: 2%

and explained that one of the reasons why was because we were paying our employees more," Chaplin adds. "Once they learned that was why we were raising our rates, they were happy about it. It's because they're happy with the crew members who work on their homes."

Despite the recent price increase, Chaplin says Botanica isn't even looking to grow — but rather improve profitability.

"That's what I've been working on are systems and efficiencies and things like that," she says. "It's difficult to try and change a company culture in a company that's been around for this long. There's not pushback, but sometimes I think people don't really believe the changes are going to happen...now that I've been CEO for a few years they clearly know that I mean what I say, and I say what I mean, and we've enforced change. People have been more onboard."



Cody Rindlisbacher

Owner of CPR Services, Riverton, Utah

CODY RINDLISBACHER has been in the green industry mowing lawns since he was 11 years old. Now, after starting CPR Services eight years ago, it's him and a small team of five employees working around the clock.

"It's been busy," he says. "All the contractors I know — everyone's been loaded with work. Everything is still booming and there's

been a lot of commercial landscape projects, though the residential market has slowed down a little bit."

Rindlisbacher says the company is expected to do over \$310,000 this year if all goes well. Though, he says most of his struggles currently stem from a lack of labor.

"We cannot find people who are willing

to work or want to do manual labor," he says. "We've had to turn down a lot of work and we've just been able to keep our steady load that we've had. We haven't picked up much more work than we can handle."

He adds that he's done about everything and anything he can to try and entice prospective employees but even

getting them in the door is harder than expected.

"We've had job listings posted everywhere online," he says. "We've tried word-of-mouth and contacted a lot of people to let them know we're hiring. We've been so slim on interviews and applications."

As much as he hates having to turn down work, Rindlisbacher notes CPR is growing.

"We've had steady growth every year," he says. "We've grown 15-20% at least every year. We don't do any marketing. Everything we do is through word-of-mouth. I attribute our growth to doing good work and our clients talking to people they know about the work we've done for them."

Outside of looking for labor, Rindlisbacher says the weather can also pose challenges and that droughts have caused some new trends in landscaping and stricter irrigation practices.

"We've noticed a lot of people in our area are doing xeriscapes, because we've been struggling with a drought here," he says. "There's been a lot of people removing their lawns and putting in gravel and low-water-use plants."

Though watering regulations are common in Utah, Rindlisbacher says they haven't been too bad this season.

"This year we haven't run into too many regulations or issues that've caused problems for us," he says.

And while xeriscapes are trending, Rindlisbacher says it's not something he pushes his clients toward.

"We offer those things, but we try to stay away from the trends in that aspect," he says. "We figure that by installing a proper irrigation system and educating our clients on how to water, we aren't going to have to tear up the whole yard to do rock, which will just be hotter on the house."

Dave LaFore

President, Colorado Green Pros, Sheridan, Colorado

SERVICING MORE THAN 300 COMMERCIAL LOCATIONS,

Dave LaFore says changing his business model years ago and relying on technology will help his company reach over \$3.5 million in revenue this year.

"I have a group of subcontractors and partners that've been the same group of people since 2012," he says. "Back before that I had about 50 employees, 30 trucks and was the typical landscape operation."

In addition to his subcontractors, LaFore explains he has two employees in-house helping to manage everything.

"We're a highly automated operation and we're using a lot of technology," he says.

Colorado Green Pros utilizes a mobile phone-based app that has crews uploading photos and recordings out in the field.

"I give my corporate clients an account and they can see basically a live feed," he says. "They can see everything in that feed and what's going on at that property. It's a real good tool for engaging the clients."

Engagement and communication are some things LaFore says can be difficult in the commercial realm.

"Because they're corporate clients, they aren't at the property while the crews are there. They might be in New York or Chicago or somewhere else managing hundreds of properties across the country. The technology helps connect everybody," LaFore says.

Another aspect of the app is accountability for his subcontracting partners.

"Instead of doing paper timesheets, they record everything in our mobile app," he explains, "which is also available in Spanish. That's huge and it's a big impediment of technology these days because most of it is built only for English speakers."

LaFore adds Colorado Green Pros has had to deal with its fair share of material costs rising and other expenses going up.

"One of the challenges is insurance," he says. "If you're in the snow removal business, the insurance costs are just horrendous. Our insurance costs have doubled within the last two years. And all the people I'm talking to in the business are just feeling that same pressure."

LaFore notes higher costs for pipe, parts, fertilizer and other materials have caused him to make some major changes in pricing.

"Before COVID, we didn't do many price increases, and the ones we did were few and far between," he says. "But these last couple of years we've had to do some substantial price increases just to cover costs."

Thankfully, LaFore notes that the reception to these price increases has been rather positive.

"A couple of clients made the comment that they knew this was coming," he says. "Because they're getting price increases from all their vendors and not just their landscapers."



In the past 3 years, have you been approached about selling your business?

50%
yes

49%
no

no answer: 1%

Craig Duttarer

VP of operations, Superscapes, Carrollton, Texas

LAST YEAR WAS WHEN SUPERSCAPES

really felt like they were coming out of the pandemic lag, Craig Duttarer says. The company achieved \$39 million in revenue. With 350 employees, the company hopes to reach the \$50 million mark in 2023.

While he's confident they will reach this goal, Duttarer says this year hasn't been without its problems.

"In the landscaping industry, we're always dealing with some sort of drama," he says. "One of the biggest challenges we've had in 2023, and a lot of the drama, has been around environmental factors like too much rain, or it's too cold, or there's a shortage of a certain plant or tree that we have to overcome."

Duttarer says he's been in the industry for decades and never experienced the kind of chaos that a lack of available sod caused this year.

"This year is the first time in 25 years that I've ever experienced not being able to get sod from our sod farms," he says.



"That's a critical element to complete a project — you have to have sod."

According to Duttarer, the problems all started back at the end of 2022 when another "Texas Freeze" wreaked havoc.

"Because of the freeze that happened in December, there were quite a few sod farmers that lost crops," he says. "We're talking 500-800 acres that they had to till over because it died. And then we had an excessive amount of rain in March and April. So, they were getting hit with all these rain showers where they couldn't cut viable sod. A lot of projects were impacted by that in the months of May and June."

There wasn't anything they could do about the unexpected interruption, Duttarer explains, though they did start widening their circle of suppliers.

"We had to wait it out," he says. "We did find one supplier who was in a different area of Texas, and we brokered a deal. We pre-bought 100 pallets of sod just to get us over the hump. It was like 30 truckloads of sod."

While too much rain was an issue this year, Duttarer notes that almost every year his market deals with some type of drought and watering restrictions.

He says this summer's high temperatures have caused more of the same.

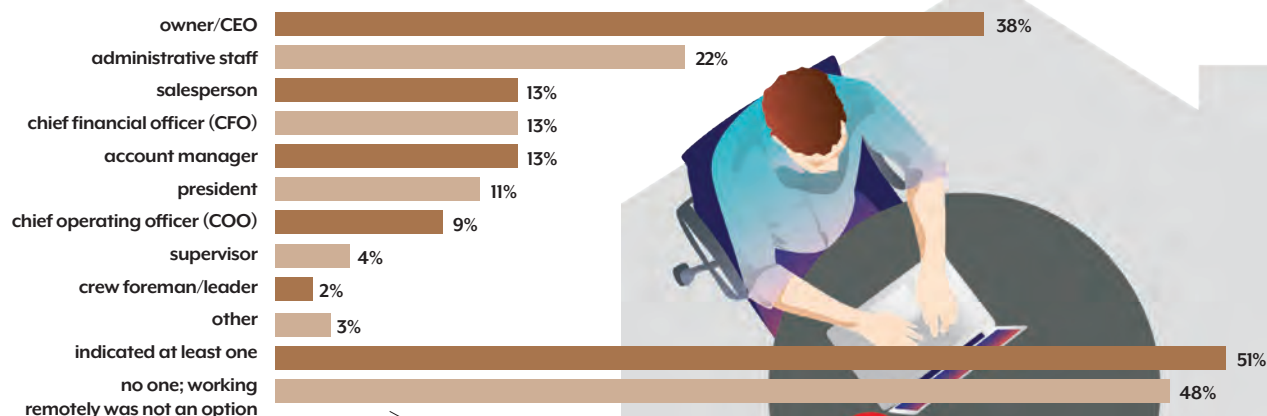
"They haven't fully gone to any dramatic decreases in water usage on new construction yet," he says. "That's always something to be mindful of because some municipalities will start to shut off water and water is critical to our installation process."

But despite the curveballs of Mother Nature, Duttarer says growth has been steady at Superscapes and the company hasn't had to do anything out of the ordinary to expand.

"We're kind of a woodchuck company — you know...how much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could," he says. "We do what we do best and try not to get fancy with incorporating something new into our business. We do what we know and chuck as much wood as we can."

The author is assistant editor at Lawn & Landscape.

In the past 12 months, who at your location was permitted to work from home?



SOUTH



PRICES AND POLITICS

Recent legislation and rising costs are at the forefront in the south.

Story by
KIM LUX

Illustration by
ALEX GREEN
(**FOLIO ART**)



Pete Lucadano

CEO & co-owner of RedTree Landscape Systems,
Tampa Bay, Florida

TRYING TO CONTROL THE UN-CONTROLLABLE has been difficult for RedTree lately, Pete Lucadano says.

Everything from the weather to unexpected legislation has posed challenges for the \$8-million-dollar company.

Lucadano says legislation passed by Governor Ron DeSantis earlier this summer caused mass panic for much of the His-

panic workforce in Florida.

"Florida imposed several levels of legislation targeting illegal immigrants," he says. "There was mass panic, and it caused somewhat of a mass exodus of a lot of our industry employees here in the state of Florida. Every major landscape contractor that I know felt the adverse effects of it."

Lucadano notes that RedTree and other companies affected

Sam Creekmore

Owner of Creekmore Landscape, New Albany, Mississippi

NOT ONLY HAS SAM CREEKMORE owned his business since 1992, but he is also a Mississippi State Representative.

A policy Creekmore is looking to change has been impacting green industry companies for years. He says it's time to move past it.

"In Mississippi, a landscape architect and an architect cannot be partners," he says. "We are one of few states in the United States that has this archaic law."

Creekmore says he fears this law keeps fledgling and future landscape architects and horticultural students from settling down in the state.

"For the future of our industry and to keep our young people in the state of Mississippi, this needs to be changed," he says. "We're limiting ourselves with this regulation."

While Creekmore says he'd have no plans to partner with an architect if this stipulation changed, there are several other issues impacting his business.

"We service about a 90-mile radius, so travel time and gas prices have been an issue," he notes. "That's a challenge for us."

To combat the rising fuel costs, Creekmore Landscape decided to make a big investment to save not only money but also time.

"We installed gas tanks here on site to cut down on any stoppages along the way at convenience stores," he says. "We use GPS and we're constantly monitoring to see where there is idle time or any kind of breakdowns in our travel planning."

"We've absolutely seen savings," Creekmore adds. "The

biggest savings has been on man hours. We fill up at the end of the day, and then when they come in in the morning, they're out the door by 7:05 a.m. at the latest."

Another way they're saving time and money is by keeping a keener eye on overtime, Creekmore says.

"We've tried very hard to keep our hours down and to not have as much overtime," he says. "Sometimes that doesn't work out but for the most part, we're trying to keep crews at 45-46 hours. That also makes for happier employees."

Creekmore adds a recent price hike to combat wage increases and other rising costs was inevitable.

However, it's seemed to work out so far.

"We were behind on doing price increases, so last year we raised our prices an average of 20% on the project and the maintenance side," he says. "We knew there'd be some growing pains from that, but we were able to retain probably 80% of our work."

Now, in 2023, the company is expecting to earn about \$3 million in revenue. Creekmore adds that the goal for this year is all about customer service and building valued partnerships.

"With the price increases, we decided we can't just increase prices and have our clients expect the services to be the same, we need to improve it," he says. "We've been intentional on customer relations and trying to build up our relationships with each of our customers. We want their experiences with us to be memorable and pleasant."



weren't doing anything wrong and already E-Verified employees, but there was still stress and confusion in the Hispanic communities.

"That legislation is possibly the single biggest challenge Florida landscape contractors will face this year," he says. "We understand what our government is trying to do, but as is often the case, it tends to target the wrong people."

Immediately, Lucadano recalls RedTree strived to communicate effectively with its

crews about what was going on.

"This is where having good relationships with our people really paid off," he says. "Because being able to sit down with our entire team, in small groups, and give them assurances that this won't affect them...and that their employment here is secure...that helped tremendously."

Lucadano also recognizes state-level industry associations for helping to answer legal questions for business owners and their employees.

Lucadano says a lack of real storms and unusual weather patterns have also created difficulties.

"It was very dry for sections of time, so that caused a lot of horticultural challenges," he says. "Being in a tropical climate, a lot of that plant material and turfgrass really depend on water — especially when the temperatures get into the hundreds for the bulk of the day. Irrigation systems can only do so much. They aren't a 100% replacement for precipitation."

Lucadano adds it's been one of the hottest summers on record for the state.

Like so many others, rising costs have caused RedTree to increase prices. Lucadano says the reaction has been mixed.

"The biggest struggle we have as contractors is being able to help our clients understand that these costs are rising," he says. "It's a challenge to try and explain to them that we as one landscape company can't shield them from the effects of the world."

Grayson Smith

Owner of Elite Landscaping,
Valdosta, Georgia

ELITE LANDSCAPING has been through a lot so far in 2023, and Grayson Smith notes there have been plenty of struggles.

"Last year our market was really good," Smith says. "This year it's been good, but about a month ago it tanked and went to virtually nothing. The maintenance is just like it was, but the installation side has basically gone away."

"We never had to hunt for work really ever since I've started, and now I'm going around to the banks we do and apartments trying to sell enhancements," Smith adds.

Currently, the company has about 32 employees divided up into nine crews. Smith says he's hoping to reach \$3 million in 2023.

Unlike most of the industry, Smith says he hasn't really experienced a lack of labor but just the opposite. With new legislation

being introduced in Florida, he says a large amount of the Hispanic workforce there has made its way into Georgia and his market.

"The whole deal in Florida has driven a ton of Hispanic workers to our area," he says. "Every week we probably have 10 people calling the office wanting a job. We're being flooded with a workforce now, which stinks because we don't really need anyone."

Smith says the major slowdown Elite's been experiencing has forced him to look harder at his bottom line.

"Since we've slowed down in design/build, I've been analyzing my maintenance really closely because I know that's what's going to be carrying us through," he says. "I've spent three weeks analyzing every account. We're trying to get more efficient and trying to get our routes tighter."

Smith says he was surprised to learn about 60% of his maintenance jobs weren't breaking even.

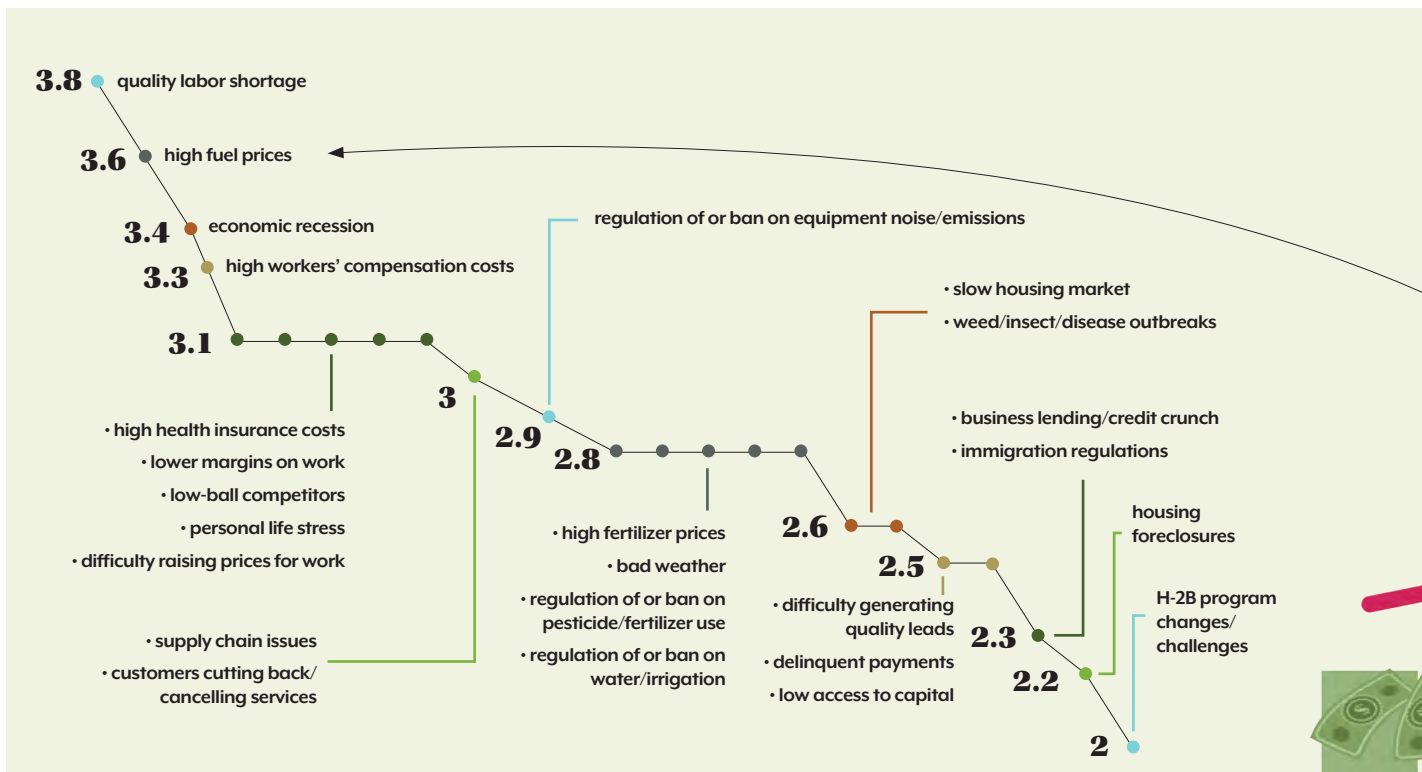
"I've come up with a percentage for every account on what they'd have to go up to be

in the green," he says. "I'm having to battle internally and figure out if I should call the worst ones and say, 'I can't do it for this price, it's going to be \$200 more a month.' or what the best decision is. That's a huge hurdle of ours currently."

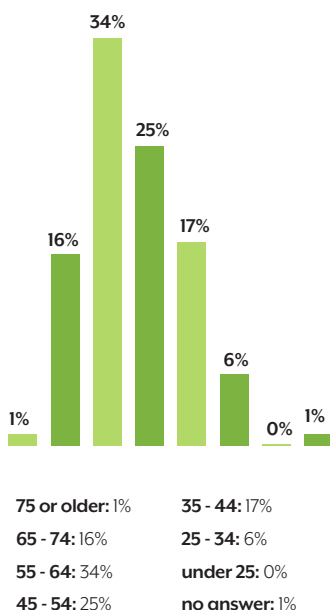
Smith says the lack of profitability is due to a combination of pricing and crews taking longer than they should to complete the work. To combat the latter, he has instituted a new bonus program that he hopes will boost efficiency.

"We put GPS on our trucks a couple months ago and we've been catching them sitting in the vehicle, making extra stops and all that," Smith says. "So, we brought the crew leaders in and said if they can meet each jobsite's estimated time, and they don't miss any for that pay period, they'll get an extra \$125...So they can get an extra \$500 a month if they do it consistently."

"We just implemented it this week," he adds. "So far, they've totally changed what they're doing but who knows if they can do it consistently."



What is your age?



mean: 54 / median: 55

Scot Williams

General manager of GLS Landscaping and Maintenance, Greensboro, North Carolina

SCOT WILLIAMS SAYS IT'S BEEN a banner year for GLS as the company is expecting to grow by about \$1 million in 2023.

"The commercial industry is blowing up now," he says. "I'm finding three more accounts a day... we've signed so many accounts today."

Williams says he attributes this most to a "return to normalcy" after the COVID-19 pandemic and big, commercial office sites getting back to the status quo.

"We've stayed pretty stagnant coming out of COVID, but it really boomed in 2023," he says. "It's an unusual year for us... I think the next two to three years will be pretty solid for everybody."

He adds that the company's 15-20 employees, depending on the time of year, have been working tirelessly — and he wishes there were more hands on deck.

"We're working a lot of overtime these days," he says. "The guys don't mind that. They're picking up probably two or three extra accounts a day. We're still not to the point where we have to work on the weekends."

"The only problem we've really had so far is labor," Williams adds. "People still don't want to work."

In addition to commercial work returning to pre-pandemic levels, Williams says some new marketing tactics are also playing a role in their growth.

"For the first time, we got talked into working with a new marketing company," he says.

"It was pretty much all in-house before then. We started working with them about three months ago and they've revamped our website, our Facebook, Instagram and all that. The phone is starting to ring a lot more than it used to."

With the future looking bright, Williams says he's turning his attention to something he feels is on the horizon for all landscaping companies — battery-powered equipment.

"I've looked into electric and autonomous units because I think we're going to start getting pinched more on gas-powered equipment," he says. "I think it's coming...I don't think it'll be in the next three to five years, but probably hit after that."

While they haven't purchased any new mowers just yet, Williams says they are working with battery-powered blowers and hand tools.

"We're testing stuff out," he says. "The biggest problem we're having with it is the runtime and the charge. Most of these charges take 45 minutes to an hour so you have to buy three batteries to go with it and the batteries are the most expensive part."

Additionally, Williams is keeping a close eye on how the competition and his peers are handling the transition.

"We know a couple people larger than we are and we talk," he says. "The one said he bought 12 autonomous units, and it was the worst thing they've done. They aren't lasting nearly as long as they thought they were going to. It's a \$30,000 investment and then you have to train all the guys to know how to work them."

"We have the luxury to hold off on and see what my counterparts are doing," Williams adds.



How concerned are you about the impact of each of these issues on your location's business in the next three years?



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MIDWEST



WEATHERING THE SUMMER SEASON

Too much rain, and not enough labor, has plagued parts of the Midwest recently.

Story by
JIMMY MILLER

Illustration by
ALEX GREEN
(FOLIO ART)

Ken Schwarz

Vice president and COO, K&R Landscaping
Hamilton, Ohio

KEN SCHWARZ BELIEVES last year's supply chain shortage was the worst he's dealt with since he started his company in 2007.

"We had trouble getting all kinds of different things," he says. "We had put in some major landscape installs where we were waiting on products."

Anything from garden fences to plant material was delayed, especially the latter given freezes in the south where lots of nurseries are housed. But Schwarz pivoted quickly, sourcing some materials like mulch locally.

Now, shipping outlook on some products is still as long as 12 weeks, but he believes it's been much better.

"Everything like fuel is still pretty high," Schwarz says, adding that replacement parts are more expensive, even on anything as small as a snap-on toolbox for his shop. "The product's available, but it's costing a lot more."

As winter approaches, Schwarz says his team doesn't have an offseason like others — they'll be doing commercial snow services again this year, though he anticipates doing more salting than snow removal. After all, a lukewarm winter season resulted in lots of ice in the Midwest but not so much snow, save for a few particularly intense storms.

Managing those services can be trickier because of the rising costs, too. Schwarz says the price on salt has risen dramatically, and many of his commercial accounts are multiyear contracts. He's not passing on much more than a 3% price increase onto his clients.

"We're out there to be a profitable company but we're out there to take care of our customers, too," Schwarz says. "That's how you keep the customers forever. It's all about the relationship."

Speaking of relationships, Schwarz says he's actually managed the labor shortage well. He's got a staff of 15 employees and expects to pull in around \$3 million this year. But the real trick has been keeping his crew leads happy: they've all been with the company for over 10 years.

"We've never had any problem getting labor as far as experienced labor in our area," he says, adding that they work with the H-2B program, getting as many as six employees sometimes from H-2B.

A big reason for the H-2B usage, he says, is that finding experienced labor has been an issue this year. Just recently, he had an employee who was supposed to show up to his shift but ghosted the management entirely when it was time to actually report to work.

"It blows my mind away," he says. "Of course, I've been in the business for over 30 years now. I've seen a lot."



Peter Salmeron

President, Professional Landscaping Services, Wichita, Kansas

A TIGHT LABOR MARKET has kept Peter Salmeron and Professional Landscaping Services busy in Wichita, Kansas.

But actually, completing that work has been a tall task. With temperatures peaking over 105 degrees at times this summer, that has forced his team to operate at capacity. He's always dealt with hot summers in Kansas, but "this year has been different." It's affected their revenue because they can't do the work, and job estimates aren't as accurate because 10-hour jobs are now 15 hours as employees need to take more breaks or come back the next day to complete the job.

"All that affects the bottom line," he says.

Of course, with enough workers, that's not a huge issue. And at one point, the \$1.5-million company had people waiting in line to apply for work. Now, Salmeron says they have to look for them. PLS has found its workers — they do a mixture of design/build and maintenance work with their 20 employees. And some of those employees have been great workers there for several years. But it's been a struggle — he estimates a quarter of his staff is a revolving door of workers.

"It's been difficult. The labor source has dried up," Salmeron says. "Unfortunately, the new generation has different standards and different work habits. They're not as committed. They don't seem to be as interested in the quality of work. There doesn't seem to be as much pride in the work."

Managing the training with such high turnover has been another challenge, but Salmeron says PLS has a good system in place now with biweekly safety meetings, combining the experienced employees with the newer ones in one spot.

But what's been particularly trying is figuring out the right price to charge

customers based on the labor that can get done. Salmeron says it's been more critical than ever to get these prices right.

"It's very important for a landscape company to understand the labor cost," he says. "If you don't understand what your costs are, you're doomed to go bankrupt or close your business."

This is also important given the high markup on materials. Salmeron says PLS irrigation pipes and sprinkler heads have doubled in price, for instance, and seed has increased over 50% due to its lower availability after droughts sabotaged the supply.

Other challenges Salmeron says PLS has faced include the hoops needed to jump through to finance equipment and trucks, which often come with a high interest rate. He says the supply chain has stabilized but they're still waiting a few days to get new materials or parts from time to time.

For his part, Salmeron is passing those costs on to the customer. He hasn't had much pushback because everyone else is going through the same issues they are.

"It is what it is," he says. "I'm sure if they think it's too expensive, they'll go to somebody else."



Dave Thurston

President, Royal Lawn and Landscape, Holt, Michigan

DAVE THURSTON CALLED THIS YEAR'S weather pattern in Michigan the weirdest he's ever seen.

It's not for a lack of experience in the industry: Thurston says Royal Lawn and Landscape, now at roughly 17 employees, has operated since 1990. But the weather this year certainly ignited some consternation, as a normal-looking spring quickly turned into a dry spell. The maintenance crews could skip mowing the lawns since so many hadn't grown at all.

The dramatic shift in weather came after the Fourth of July, as Thurston says they've had inches of rain every single week since Independence Day. One week after Labor Day, and his part of Michigan still dealt with an inch-and-a-half of rain.

"Our grass is out of control," Thurston says. "We're double, triple-cutting to get rid of excess grass. That's very odd for our climate."

Thurston says the other primary challenge this year has been a higher cost of living in the state. To help compensate for that, they raised wages early in the season. Thurston says this isn't atypical though — they do it once or twice a year, especially if the employee has been with the company for a while. But by and large, most of the team earns \$2-\$5 more an hour than they did even a few years ago.

But the wage hike isn't because Thurston's struggling to find employees. He believes he hasn't seen the same labor shortage that other contractors report. Each morning, he pulls up to traffic lights or gas stations and sees landscapers in trucks fueling up.

Sure, Thurston does readily admit finding employees wanting to do physical labor is a challenge, but as far as the industry goes, he believes it's a matter of forging the right connections.

"We're short on people who want to work on that short of a labor skill, but I don't know if it's necessarily just our trade," he says.

So, Thurston says he's taken to investing more time with prospective employees during interviews. As a result, where some employers are taking anyone they can get, he's been able to select employees from a lineup of a few candidates. Asking questions about their personal goals, getting a sense of what makes them tick and asking how Royal can help them reach their goals within the next three to five years has been helpful.

"I hired a guy that started this week, and he said, 'I've had several jobs in my lifetime, I've worked in the green industry for the last 10 or 12 years, and I've never had anyone dialogue with me at this level,'" Thurston says.

Now, it's also all about qualifying the candidates, too, so the hire makes sense. Thurston says he looks at previous job histories and asks about what's behind that pattern. If they stuck around somewhere longer than others, Thurston asks what changed there.

And, he feels he's also honest about what his line of work's all about. He tells candidates, "we work when it's hot, we work when it's cold. And if it snows on Christmas, we get called in." Thurston says from there, he's become good at reading body language to see if they're excited about working in the industry at all or not.

"I think the people that want to be in this industry are seeking out stronger companies to work for, places where they can be treated well. Considering the fact that they also have families, quality of life is important to them," he says.

That extends to clients, too. Thurston says he's got a positive outlook because many of his top clients re-signed on to Royal's latest bids despite some price increases. And in some cases, some of his clients are buying more real estate that'll need some of their work, and previous clients who left for other landscapers are coming back because they missed out on quality service.

That high-quality service isn't always easy, but there are some easy solutions. Thurston says he's seen some customers who never hear from the other landscapers they call requesting quotes.

"If they call and you respond, you'll probably get the job," he says.

How many years
has your company
location been
in business?

6%

50 or more

12%

40 - 49

18%

30 - 39

12%

25 - 29

12%

20 - 24

11%

15 - 19

10%

10 - 14

11%

5-9

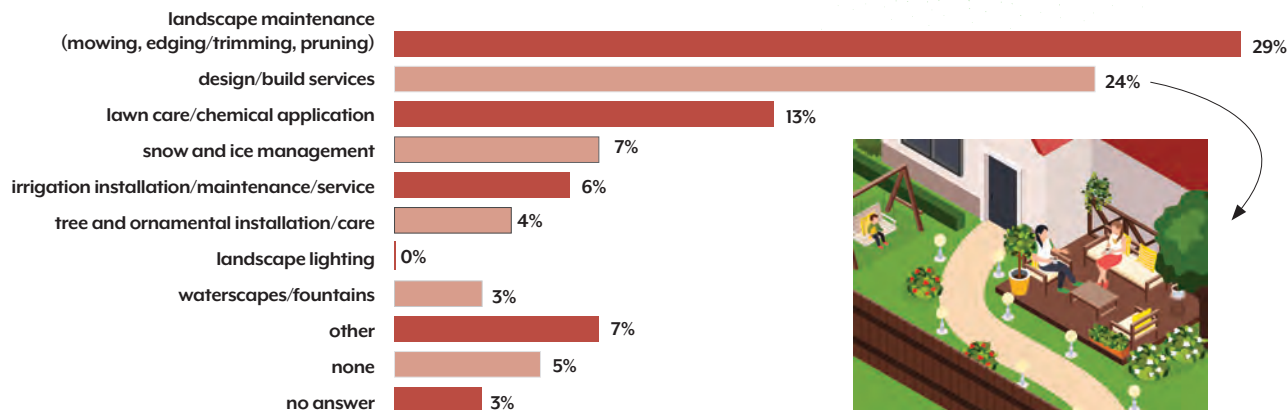
4%

3-4

4%

less than 3

What was your location's fastest growing service for revenue in 2022?



Eddie Martindale

President, D&E Landscaping and Grading, Richmond, Michigan

ELSEWHERE IN MICHIGAN, Eddie Martindale's team at D&E Landscaping and Grading are catching up with "an ungodly amount of rain" from the summer season.

"The faucet never shut off all summer," he says.

With 37 employees, Martindale's team does all sorts of landscaping jobs, and there's plenty of maintenance jobs going around. But he says they can't service the properties weekly like they usually would due to the massive amount of rain.

And Martindale adds he's seen customer demand for design/build jobs slow down dramatically on the residential side. The slowdown was coming at some point after unprecedented demand, as Martindale says during COVID-19, they could pick and choose where they wanted to go, even needing to throw some estimates out because they didn't have enough people to handle the work.

Over the last year or two, Martindale

says he lost several key employees, and he believes that was a trend across the industry as wage increases occurred. Of course, he also says they raised their own wages about 10%. There was so much work to go around that everyone in the industry started paying employees more to handle it all.

"If your guys wanted to move, the demand of work was so high, so you had to pay your guy or they would've gone somewhere else," he says.

With the market bearing a higher wage, Martindale obliged the requests for increased pay, but he also adds that it was probably a long time coming. He wants to ensure his employees make more than enough to live comfortably.

"You've got to make it worthy for someone to make a living doing (our work)," he says.

Demand has slowed, though not correlated with the wage increases that Martindale will certainly keep. He says most calls about residential hardscap-

ing come down to needs and not wants. Say a retaining wall is collapsing near a driveway, they'll still get plenty of that work. But nobody's taking out cash to install giant patios like they were.

"I think the last three years, everyone decided to do their projects all at once, so there will be a little pause before some new ones come in," he says. "It's still around, there's still some work, but it's not like it was last year."

As far as the designs actually being done, Martindale says one trend he's noticed is that most customers are ordering larger pavers than they did before. There's less maintenance and less weeds, and the look just generally seems to have more appeal at the moment.

"I think people visually are liking the larger paver now," Martindale says. "That trend has switched over here probably in the past four or five years."

The author is associate editor with Lawn & Landscape magazine.

EAST NORTH



CURRENT ON THE COAST

Contractors are increasing wages and pivoting to new, profitable services.

Story by
JIMMY MILLER

Illustration by
ALEX GREEN
(FOLIO ART)

Danielle Pungitore

Marketing manager, Pungitore Irrigation and Fertilizer, Hingham, Massachusetts

PUNGITORE IRRIGATION and Fertilizer is growing despite the ongoing challenges of finding qualified labor.

Danielle Pungitore says the labor shortage isn't just about finding people — it's about finding good people who fit the team culture and who know how to work in the green industry. Of course, she recognizes they have to start somewhere, but they don't want people who take the position as just a last resort.

"We want them to want to be here," she says. "I think COVID had a lot of impact on that. Our theory was (people) were trying to keep up with unemployment applications.



"We've been able to find talent and people with prior experience," she continues. "We have a great mix of people, although it's still challenging to find people in that space who are wanting to work, have the right drive, have the right talent."

Danielle and her husband, Mike, have taken over the lawn maintenance work from her father's company this year as he retired. It's been an interesting jump into a new segment of the industry, but Danielle says she and Mike have learned a lot about that side of landscaping. The nice upside is the strong, predictable and recurring revenue stream.

Of course, that also comes with some challenges. As they added a whole crew, vehicle and equipment to what Mike previously ran, they've learned maintenance customers tend to lead to more client complaints because of how familiar they get with your service.

"You provide more service, you're naturally going to hear more about it," she says.

Back on the irrigation side of things, Pungitore says she's noticed an increase in costs for all sorts of materials they've had to pass along to customers. One other thing they've done is recently open a warehouse/garage area to store some of those pipes and spray heads. As the prices of those materials continue to rise, Pungitore says it's nice to store them up to mitigate against more possible price hikes in the future.

"Fertilizer is harder to store," she adds, "but we've made other choices based on pricing and supplies, (and we) changed our vendor."

Pungitore predicts that this time in the next few years, she'll be talking even more about water conservation trends. She's noticed they've really taken off in drought-stricken areas of the West, but she says those same trends will spread nationally.

She says it's an area of opportunity to introduce more conservation-based practices. "We need to get ahead of that. Other areas of the country have already faced more water restrictions than we have," she says. "It's only a matter of time."



Pete Haran

Senior Director of Operations, Cenova, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

SNOW SERVICES have traditionally occupied over 90% of the revenue at Pete Haran's company, Cenova.

Not anymore. The company pulls in roughly \$10 million in the Philadelphia area, and a vast majority of that revenue does still come from snow and deicing. But with such a light snowfall last winter and rising costs of salt, Haran says Cenova has seen an opportunity to grow its landscape presence.

"We doubled or tripled our revenue source for the landscaping," he says.

Cenova once had just one landscape crew but tacked on two more this last year. Haran says the employees are seasoned horticulturists — for his part, he's worked in the industry for nearly 40 years. And Cenova had previously done other green industry work like tree care or maintenance, but over the years, they saw the snow segment emerge as the primary money-maker. He believes it's because there's lots of sidewalk work in the city that

other contractors might balk at due to the risk. So, with limited competition, Haran says Cenova has been able to charge a good fee for the snow services to make it worth it.

But their re-introduction to some services cannot come at a better time, Haran says.

"In my 40 years in the industry, I've never seen a year this low in snow in the Philadelphia market," he says.

Haran says his team self-performs winter work in the Philadelphia market but will subcontract out work well into northern New Jersey and into Maryland or Delaware. And despite the fact snow has been the backbone at Cenova, Haran says the mild winter proved deflating.

To further complicate matters, Haran says they recently met with two of their salt suppliers. He admits they were surprised to learn that costs hadn't tapered off a bit, but instead, the prices have stabilized to be about the same cost as they've been since COVID-19. It's hard for the company to store a bunch of salt because there's not a lot of places in the city where they can burrow away bulk salt in bins, but they have a yard in Philadelphia they keep open 24/7 for subcontractors to snag the materials.

So, keeping enough supply to feed the demand might be challenging this year.

"Our fee for deicing has gone up because of the salt," Haran says. "(Adding landscaping) has nothing to do with the price of salt. It just has to do with increasing some revenues based upon the fact that if there is a slow snow year, at least we have some revenue coming in."

One thing Haran says has become a trend in his area is wage inflation. His laborers are now wanting roughly \$20 an hour.

"The demand is there for these guys because they will jump ship for a nickel," Haran says. "Our feeling has always been to try and create a good culture and a good workforce where everybody gets along. We want them to come in and enjoy what they do."



Eric Wenger

President, Complete Lawn Care
Gaithersburg, Maryland

WHEN ERIC WENGER talks to clients about their county's herbicide ban, he does so with the understanding that they might just go buy the illegal chemicals themselves.

Montgomery County, Maryland, banned pesticides in January 2020. At the time, Wenger and other lawn care operators in the area pointed to a ban in Canada where residents there just drove across the border to Detroit to get the chemicals and brought them back home. The litigation process obviously didn't go Wenger's way, and for the last three years, he and other LCOs have just adapted to the regulation.

There's no other choice. Wenger still believes it affects some of their ability to provide quality service.

"I like to say that we used to have a toolbox filled with precision instruments, and the county threw it away and gave us a hammer," Wenger says. "The unwritten joke is that there's massive cheating everywhere."

Wenger believes his clients are just enhancing the services performed by his two companies, Complete Lawn Care and Complete Plant Health Care. He hasn't seen any more cancellations than he did before.

Another area where his clients are affected is by material shortages, where Wenger says the supply chain is still slow, albeit better than it was this time last year. Specifically, he points to plant materials, where shortages have affected the scope of his clients' projects. When product finally becomes available, the clients have already changed their minds often times, making it difficult to stay on task.

"There's definitely shortages of plant material," Wenger says. "The combination of economy, COVID and then weather has wrecked a lot of nurseries in the southeast—it's really fascinating to see how that has impacted the availability."

To keep up with the price increases on the materials and fuel surcharges on those deliveries, Wenger estimates that his prices to clients are up as much as 20%. With a spike like that, Wenger anticipated some client frustration but they've also all been understanding.

"We are really passing it along. Prices are up," Wenger says. "I think that we are seeing some push-back, but a lot of folks just understand. They're seeing it everywhere."

What do you predict will be your location's fastest growing service for revenue in 2023?



30%

Landscape maintenance
(mowing, edging/trimming, pruning)



25%

Design/build services



13%

Lawn care chemical application



6%

Snow and ice management



5%

Irrigation installation/maintenance/service



4%

Tree and ornamental installation/care



1%

Landscape lighting



1%

Waterscapes/fountains

other: 8% | none: 5% | no answer: 2%

Mark McAteer

CEO, The Laurel Group, Long Island, New York

WAGE INCREASES AREN'T just apparent in Pennsylvania — they've seen them in New York, too.

Mark McAteer leads The Laurel Group, a collection of companies in landscape design and maintenance that's amassed over 300 employees and spans across 11 locations in Long Island, New York. The company pulls in \$40 million.

Despite all that to manage, McAteer isn't bothered by the rising price of keeping his employees. In fact, he's encouraged by the changes his team has made — an improved benefits package and higher pay among them. They've even seen less labor market burden than before.

"It is significantly alleviated from the worst period, which was 18 months ago," he says. "We're seeing all throughout the entire ranks, from the professionals to unskilled labors. We're seeing an availability of laborers."

Some of the wage inflation comes from state legislators, where wage escalators and PTO laws have forced companies in the state to adapt quickly. In February 2022 when the changes were implemented, McAteer says Laurel was behind the curve on the wage inflation. Their contracts for design/build and maintenance were already out, so the contracts were going to underperform due to the wage increase plus spikes in fuel costs. In-season price increases to try and close that gap helped, but it still proved trying for the business.

"The budget was blown before March 1st," he says.

But McAteer called the changes "overdue increases." He says Laurel had some time to get it together after that initial shock, and the lowest employee ranks were already paid above the new minimum wages. But, existing employees had legitimate points about wages rising for everyone but them.

"They said, 'My moment has come,' and they were right. It's part of how we operate anyway," he says.

As an added benefit, McAteer says he's seen less turnover as a result of the changes.

"Ultimately, we were in competition for CDLs (Commercial Driver License) with big, national companies," he says. "We went from losing several CDL drivers per month to stopping that deterioration and then reversing it entirely."

Now, McAteer says the company still has a steady pipeline of work. Their range of clientele goes from upper middle class to wealthy, and he says that at the very top level, that work continues on unabated. However, it seems to be slowing some at the lower end of their client spectrum.

“

It is significantly alleviated from the worst period, which was 18 months ago. We're seeing all throughout the entire ranks, from the professionals to unskilled labors. We're seeing an availability of laborers."



Still, nobody's going back to cutting their own lawn anytime soon. McAteer says his clients do value the relationship they have with Laurel, and while they may be choosing fewer enhancements, all evidence points to an intention to stick around.

One challenge McAteer says is tough to navigate in his region is heightening restrictions on building permits and administrative hurdles that go along with design/build installations. It's roughly half of their business, but it's becoming trickier than ever to get approval for new designs. That's why he's brought in two permit expeditors to stay in house — every time they want to take out a tree, they need a permit. If they want to widen the driveway, they need a permit. Installing a little garden near the house? A permit's needed.

"You have to be good at it. Our internal landscape architects and designers are constantly dealing with the application process," McAteer says. "It's particularly acute in east side of Long Island, where preservation of native habitat is prevalent at a developmental restriction."

That geographic area also proves difficult the further east they get, as materials and manpower get harder to find the closer to the coast they get.

"Geographic isolation means you have a finite pool of labor, even though it is a wildly lucrative area," McAteer says. "But the reduced availability of manpower and material is a very complex thing to navigate on a day-by-day basis." **L&L**

The author is associate editor with *Lawn & Landscape* magazine.



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EYES ON THE FUTURE

Lawn & Landscape hosted its fourth-annual **Lawn & Landscape Technology Conference** Aug. 9-11 in Las Vegas, Nevada. Topics ranged from artificial intelligence to data analyzing to using technology to combat climate change, while the trade show floor featured the latest technological advancements in the green industry. Next year, the event will take place July 23-25 in Atlanta.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Get more information
about past and future
tech conferences at
bit.ly/lawntech2023.

POWERING YOUR COMPANY WITH AI

Keynote speaker Kevin Surace told Technology Conference attendees that artificial intelligence is here to solve the labor shortage. **By Jimmy Miller**

Kevin Surace started his keynote speech at the Lawn & Landscape Technology Conference with some bad news — the labor shortage isn't going anywhere.

Surace told conference attendees that statistically, the birth rate nationwide has trended downward for 40 years while the need for employees has gone up. The previous strategy of doubling productivity at work was to double your employment. Surace says that's a reality of the past.

"Each one of you thinks you have the trick to buck the macro trend. It's a macro trend — you can't win," Surace says. "We can't double the people. There *aren't* double the people. If there aren't double the people, that means you must embrace the technology."



Kevin Surace told attendees technology is the solution to our labor shortage.

Not all's lost though, Surace says. Increasing artificial intelligence capabilities have proven to be overwhelming at times, but still quite useful. Surace showed attendees videos that were entirely AI-generated. They heard voices and music that were never produced by human beings. They watched Mona Lisa talk and Elon Musk use Surace's voice. And Surace even used AI to tell landscaping-specific jokes on stage, including a quip about lawn mowers.

For the record, the joke was: "What do you call a group of lawn mowers? A grass-roots movement."

But beyond a few punny sayings to use at a party, how is AI applicable to landscapers? Among other ways, he suggests applying it in the following areas:

Content generation and content editing: Use AI to create blog posts for your website to bring extra views, helping your search engine optimization and presence online.

Landscape design: Help clients envision their dream backyards by taking a picture of their landscapes, then apply filters on AI-powered apps that would show edited photos of their properties with certain landscape types (Colonial garden versus New England garden, for instance).



Surace says AI can help generate anything from landscape designs to blog posts.

Robotic field work: Allowing autonomous mowers to run the maintenance side of your business, empowering employees to do other work.

Surace says AI is often viewed as the boogeyman — or, more specifically, a job thief. But Surace says AI is just leading to less tasks, not less jobs. In fact, in the past, AI has proven to actually lead to more jobs. Calculators did not shut out accountants; it empowered them. And today, as AI is

conquering language after conquering mathematics, he says we're seeing AI do anything like more accurately diagnose heart arrhythmias than leading cardiologists, or scan through NDAs in 30 seconds when lawyers need 90 minutes.

"Your future growth," Surace says, "will come from your leverage of technology."

The author is associate editor with Lawn & Landscape magazine.

KNOWING NUMBERS

A data analyst can help landscapers focus on the right trends within their companies.

By Jimmy Miller

His team might joke that Todd Reinhart likes to count mulch down to each individual nugget, but he can't understate the importance of finding a data analytics position for your landscaping company.

Reinhart told Lawn & Landscape Technology Conference attendees that anybody who actively uses technology sees massive amounts of data coming in the door every single day. He recommends creating a data analytics position at your landscaping company to help parse through some of the numbers, determining which data is important and what can be ignored.



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Grow a better tomorrow

Panelists offered advice on anything technology, including implementing autonomous mowers.

Reinhart says this person can help your company develop a detailed business plan, which is among the most important things your team can have.

"If you don't have one," he says, "you have no idea what you're trying to accomplish."

A data analyst can help landscapers determine which data is significant in building out a business plan. Reinhart says one example is tracking lost sales in a CRM, which helps businesses figure out if they're on pace to meet their business plan goals or not.

"If you track your lost (sales), you can tell whether your salesman is being honest or not," he says. "We never want to turn anything to lost (sales). It's a disease we have. But it's so important as a company."



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The conference also included a trade show floor with the latest technologies on display.

Reinhart also points to data unification as a reason to hire a data analyst. So often, companies will run on so many software platforms and systems that the numbers — and their true benefits — get lost in the shuffle. A data analyst can not only create and collect data with software they know well, but they can also bring together existing numbers and streamline some of the data reporting they currently use.

This also means that a data analyst can establish good key performance indicators specific to your company. Reinhart says an operating manager may be really interested in seeing the labor management data, such as what jobs are completed versus which ones have callbacks. But the operating manager may not want to sift through KPIs that a marketing director would need, like how many new leads were generated by a social media campaign.

“We spent a long time arguing and really getting after, what are those things that every person needs to see?” Reinhart says. “It’s a constant refinement.”

So, a data analyst isn’t just there to help generate new numbers — they’re there to really show the whole team which numbers are pertinent to them. But in order to find the right fit for the job, Reinhart says a data analyst is going to need to have skills in six different areas.

- **Basic mathematical skills:** No, a data analyst may not need to know how to do parabolic functions, but they should know enough math to quickly identify when numbers are askew.

- **Data analysis and interpretation:** It’s one thing to look at data — it’s another to understand it. Data analysts should correctly understand what all the numbers mean and be able to explain it to the rest of the staff in



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ways that make sense to them.

• **Data visualization and reporting:**

One way to communicate data significance is by creating data visualizations. These visuals help the whole team understand what trends might exist — do the numbers suggest an increasing revenue? How about how much more of a revenue increase year over year?

• **SQL and programming skills:** Knowing Structured Query Language can help a data analyst identify problems with the software and how to fix those issues as they arise.

• **Statistics and machine learning:** Statistics knowledge will help a data analyst devise the right algorithms and equations for coming up with data, and machine learning helps simplify that process by using computer programs to recognize data trends.

• **Business acumen and communica-**

"WE NEVER WANT TO TURN ANYTHING TO LOST (SALES). IT'S A DISEASE WE HAVE. BUT IT'S SO IMPORTANT AS A COMPANY."

— Todd Reinhart

tion: None of it matters if the data analyst can't communicate why it's important to look at certain data sources for the business, plus communicate those effectively.

Reinhart also offered two key remind-

ers: one, that results won't just happen overnight; and two, in addition to those six items, a data analyst should be curious.

"They have to want to understand why something happened," he says.



LLTC attendees got a first-hand look at what's on the horizon in terms of technology within the green industry.



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SCIENTIFIC STEWARDS

It just might take data to combat climate change effectively.

By Jimmy Miller

The days of taking care of grass and calling it a day are long gone.

Loren McIrvine, the owner of Allied Landscape in the San Francisco Bay Area, says that since COVID-19, more clients are spending time outside with their landscapes. Many work remotely and see their property all day long rather than just pulling up after work ends when it's already dark outside. Plus, many more clients are environmentally conscious, and McIrvine believes landscapers should adapt their messaging with that in mind.

"I think there should be a narrative (with your landscapes)," he says.

Maybe landscapers aren't just planting a garden anymore — they're building a botanical garden so clients can teach their kids what plants are in there. Maybe urban landscapes that were previously at odds with nature are instead ecological restorations for local birds and insects.

It's not just a branding tactic though. McIrvine says landscapers have more technology than ever before to develop environmentally friendly landscapes. Sure, it'll help landscapers who adopt more eco-friendly practices to outbid competitors, but McIrvine says it's also just the right thing to do, too.

"We should be offering sustainable services because it's going to help us in many facets of our company," he says.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT. Fiona Mayne, the ASC director at Allied Landscape, says there are some pragmatic steps to take to evolve the business.

But beyond the technology, it first starts with identifying the personnel dedicated to implementing changes. Mayne referenced a book called *Rocket Fuel*, which speaks to two personality types — visionaries and integrators.

"Now, most of us won't fit perfectly into one box or the other," she says. "But think about where you, your leaders, and your team members might fall."

Visionaries are the types of leaders at your company who love big ideas, generating them at sometimes a rapid rate. While these employees are great at devising innovative changes



Fiona Mayne, left, Loren McIrvine, center, and Justin White spoke about technology and the environment.



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at their companies, they often move from project to project before the previous ones are finished.

So, the integrators are the ones who play a big part in making those ideas happen. They often see realism over idealism, for better and for worse.

So the question is, how do you get these two entirely different employee types working fluidly together?

"How do we respect the visionaries without being the Negative Nancy in the room?" Mayne says. "How do we get the innovators to rely on their skillset to get things done?"

She says the key is relying on data to collaborate. Planning ahead together to figure out a return on investment with the technology you're implementing is important, as is using that data to guide decisions.

Plus, Mayne offers some clarification on who's being a "Negative Nancy" versus

someone who's helping out the cause.

"Pause the next time you open a can of worms, and look at the numbers behind it," she says. "Is it really a problem, and is it really a priority?"

RUSHING WATER. Justin White, the third speaker during the session, is the CEO at K&D Landscaping. He spoke to the practicality of using good data to make business decisions that also benefit the environment, as K&D launched a water management division to help make landscapes look beautiful while using less and less water.

"Most landscapers, us included until about 18 months ago, have no idea how much water we should be applying to our sites," he says, adding that they were recently called into an HOA to see a landscaper's property was using double the water they actually needed.

Data suggested there was a market demand and need for water conservation. So now, water management has become a bolt-on service that has benefitted their local drought-stricken environment while also benefitting their bottom line. And White's employees are happy because they're able to be paid \$40 an hour. "I may have one or two techs who clear six figures this year," he says.

He added that he's even taken to educating his competition because it helps the local environment. As an unintended benefit, White says the competition that was undercutting him has seen data that shows they can actually charge more.

White suggests using data to pick one new initiative for the rest of this year. "Don't try to do a little bit of everything," he warns, "because you'll do a little bit of nothing at the end of the day."

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Speaker
Sean Cooke

BIG TIME CHANGE

Avalon Landscapes went through a myriad of changes all at once to better embrace technology and help move the company forward. **By Kim Lux**

When Sean Cooke came on as general manager of Avalon Landscapes, the company knew it had to undergo major changes in order to grow to the next level.

Cooke quickly identified five key areas where technology would help the company operate more efficiently and therefore more profitably.

"My analogy was I was rebuilding the Titanic with the same materials that were on it as it was sinking," he says. "And I had to do it quietly enough that the guests didn't notice."

The guests in that analogy were Avalon's long-time clients — who wouldn't want any disruption in their services.

The areas where technology helped assist Avalon Landscapes were:

Operational efficiency — this included everything from support for all services and departments; budgeting, routing and scheduling software; quality control through note taking and photo documentation; mobile capabilities and much more.

"They all have specific needs and we wanted to find platforms and solutions to solve those," Cooke says of the different departments within the company.

One of the biggest inefficiencies Cooke says he noticed early on was overtime.

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"When I came on board, we were averaging 400 hours of OT a week and that had a huge impact on the bottom line," he says.

Managing overtime better, through specialized routing and scheduling software, allowed for plenty of perks for not just the company's bottom line but its employees too.

"It's allowed us to increase their hourly rates and have them spend more time with their families," he says.

Account Management — Cooke wanted to find software that would improve Avalon's estimating, have a customizable CRM (customer relationship management), contract and customer portals and tools for budgeting and P&Ls (profit and loss statements).

Bookkeeping and Financial Management — going hand-in-hand was more technology to improve invoicing, job costing and other financial tracking.



Cooke says he wanted something that would sync with the company's existing accounting software and where he could drill down on the P&L.

"We needed to find out at an executive level where things are going," he says. "There were a lot of things as a team we didn't know to ask."

Human Resources — Finding technology to better streamline HR processes like job posting, onboarding, benefits management and more was mission critical, Cooke says.

He adds that by embracing technology Avalon was also better at distributing company-wide notifications.

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and tackle all these issues at once, he now recommends companies evaluate their needs and fix the most important things first.

"It was a real challenge," he says. "We can see the sunlight a little bit now."

However, despite any challenges, Cooke acknowledges Avalon and its employees learned a lot along the way.

"When you're in the trenches with somebody you really see what they're capable of doing," he says.

Cooke adds that while technology is great and can help make improvements — it isn't necessarily a quick fix or a band-aid for bigger problems.

"Software is not a fix; it's not a magic wand," he says. "If you don't have well-established policy and procedures, a software platform isn't going to fix that — it's going to magnify those problems."

The author is assistant editor with Lawn & Landscape magazine.

"It's been a great resource for us," Cooke says. "It's great to be able to recognize our employees for their accomplishments and recognize them in bulk."

Physical Resource Management — Cooke says he wanted something to better

monitor the company's equipment, fleet and inventory.

"We need to manage all of that so we know when it breaks, when it needs service," he adds.

While Cooke decided to dive head first

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Adam Frederico focused on how he integrated technology after taking over his father's company.

COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATION

Frederico Outdoor Living is tapping into what employees want from technology to create a winning company culture.

By Kim Lux



In the first few weeks after taking over his father's business, Frederico Outdoor Living, Adam Frederico learned a lot.

While still shadowing his father, there was a problem one morning when a crew lead didn't show in a company truck. Other crew members didn't find it strange and said it had happened before.

Two or three days go by, and no one has heard from him.

Frederico starts to panic but it turns out all was fine.

That instance prompted Frederico to deploy GPS trackers into all the vehicles.

"A week later, I started to notice some very interesting data patterns," he says. "A vehicle was stopping at a residence every morning for about an hour and a half... it wasn't one of our jobsites."

Frederico went to talk to the employee and after being confronted he quit abruptly.

"We quickly realized there was a lot of work to do here," he says. "But there's been a lot that's helped us grow and helped us change how we operate."

As a high-end residential design/build company with 35-plus team members, Frederico Outdoor Living has to get creative with the technology it uses.

"We're not just adopting tech to adopt it — we really dig deep to find out how it's benefiting the team," Frederico says.

Communication has also helped change the culture within the company. Frederico suggests a great way to boost communication is through chat apps.

A fun way the chat apps are used is to give kudos from teammates. They are encouraged to post positive remarks to each other for the whole team to see.

"Anything to encourage collaboration and engagement with the team is what we're trying to do," Frederico says.

End-of-day reports are also all done through the chat apps. Crews can include pictures and updates on jobsites that are then archived to be reviewed whenever and leadership can comment on the status.

"It's all about building momentum and inclusivity in our culture," Frederico says. "The team thrives on appreciation."

The company also uses automated to-dos and other pipelines along with more tracking tools and timekeeping.

Another piece of advice Frederico has is to make sure the technology matches your workforce and their preferred methods.

He adds that customers becoming more tech savvy has also contributed to the digital transformation of the company.

"What are you doing in your business today to adapt to your changing environment?" Frederico asks attendees.

Frederico says all this new technology has improved culture because it brings them more information and more knowledge to the job.



Attendees got a chance to view the latest in autonomous mower technology as well.

**"WE'RE NOT
JUST ADOPTING
TECH TO ADOPT
IT — WE REALLY
DIG DEEP TO
FIND OUT HOW
IT'S BENEFITING
THE TEAM."**

— Adam Frederico

"Let's all visualize together what success looks like," Frederico says. "It's really helped us get the team excited."

Now that's its successfully implemented a number of things, Frederico says the business is now dabbling in some others including drones.

Drones are improving culture too as team members take pride in the work they're doing and enjoy viewing and sharing the videos and photos taken with family and friends.

"We've used the drones for a number of things including marketing, general site conditions and some stuff to provide progress updates," he says. **L&L**

ADD IT UP

What's next? If you're asking this question, learn from companies that expanded their service offerings to become more profitable, more efficient and secure customer loyalty.



By Kristen Hampshire

The profit-winning equation that also streamlines efficiency is rooted in offering more services, more value, more problem-solving. But there's a balance when considering which offerings to include on the menu. Here's how these three landscape companies determined which add-ons build the business, and what extras can break it.

FINDING SYNERGIES. Lawn care and pest control are yin and yang. "The licensing you need for pest control coincide with some of the lawn care certifications in our state, so we were already able to apply products in the lawn for ant control for instance," says Daniele Collinson, director of client experience at Blades of Green in Edgewater, Maryland, and Fairfax, Virginia.

When Blades of Green started, its focus was lawn care services — fertilization and weed control programs. Then, an industry colleague pointed out the missed opportunity. Pest control just made good

About seven years ago, Pennsylvania-based Burkholder Bros. started selling Christmas trees in their retail space. Now, the seasonal event has become a well-known add-on to their business.

sense. Adding the service would open up cross-selling opportunities, not to mention technicians could focus on efficiency by providing more than one offering on properties. By nature, this makes every job more profitable.

"We were already using some pesticides with our lawn care programs, so we got the additional certifications required and eventually acquired a pest control company — and that owner still works for us today, 13 years later," Collinson says.

With the acquisition, Blades of Green could market its pest control services to existing lawn care clients, and vice versa.

At first, technicians were dedicated to lawn care or pest control. But gradually, Blades of Green began cross-training its people. "That improves efficiency, and with the rising cost of goods, products and gasoline, it's a great way to not increase prices for customers while saving on labor and expenses," Collinson says. "Our techni-

cians are able to get much more done production/revenue-wise with less drive time."

Also, Blades of Green can create career paths. "Now, technicians can gain additional skills and certifications, making them even more valuable to the company — so we pay them more," she says. "It gives them ownership over their pay increases and allows them to expand their capabilities."

When adding on services, Blades of Green listens to its customers. And the company considers its existing labor pool. "If you can't use your existing employees to perform a new service, what does it look like to hire from the outside?" Collinson says. "For us, we want to add services we can do in conjunction with our existing offerings. Our service model is to be efficient, so it has to line up with our service menu."

This is how plant health care and mole control came to be. "We already have the pest control side, and moles can be destructive to lawns," Collinson says. "While

technicians were walking the lawns they were treating, they were feeling the mole tunnels and noticing damage."

The service was relatively low-capital to launch. "There is no set equipment, per se, and we use a combination of different products and traps," Collinson says. "There was some trial and error to get the right mix of when to use products, traps or both."

The company's experienced pest control technicians applied their knowledge to researching how moles operate, different mole tunnel types, and where to target — feeding tunnels vs. pass-through spaces. Then, they shared the information with the rest of the team. "We have a successful program now," Collinson says.

Seasonality and truck setup are also considerations when adding a service to the mix. Blades of Green has considered how it could sustain employment for more of its team members during the off-season. But again, it has to be a true fit.



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“While technicians were walking the lawns they were treating, they were feeling the mole tunnels and noticing damage.”



– Daniele Collinson, director of client experience at Blades of Green

“We do not service properties from Christmas until about Feb. 15 and technicians take a temporary layoff,” Collinson says. “A couple people have asked us, ‘Why don’t you do holiday lighting?’ but those need to go up in November and our technicians are still producing lawn care at that time. So, while taking down lights in January and February would be great, it wouldn’t help us in December.”

Ultimately, Blades of Green’s add-on strategy is what Collinson describes as a “wheel and spoke” approach. Services are interconnected and roll into each other. And because customers’ agreements usual-

ly include more than one offering, they are inevitably more loyal. “It results in higher retention,” Collinson says. “If we are doing five services for you, there is more value because we are solving many problems.”

STACKING THE DECK. Once a traditional, modest-sized landscaping company performing new installs, renovations and some pruning, Saluda Hill Landscapes has evolved into a major production landscaping, grounds management and design/build player in South Carolina during its 32 years in business.

“Over the years, our company has grown

through spinoffs within the developer world and now we can stack services based on their needs,” says Wendell Furtick, president of the Lexington, South Carolina-based firm.

Saluda Hill completes about 250 new home landscape installations every month. It operates three divisions: production landscaping, design/build and grounds maintenance. And over the years, the company has expanded like an accordion file, strategically adding more pockets to the service portfolio so clients do not have to go elsewhere.

Rewinding to the late 1990s, Furtick says

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ADD-ON SERVICES

tract home builders in South Carolina's midlands were developing large plots of land. "We saw that as something sustainable that could keep us busy without having to reach out for work all the time," he says.

The company began developing relationships with these developers, which resulted in creating a production landscape division. "That's all those crews did," Furtick says. "We got pretty proficient at that and outfitted our crews alike. They have the same truck, skid-steer loader, trencher attachment and other tools so we can focus on that work — and at the same time, we were doing other traditional landscape jobs."

Production landscaping grew exponentially through the 2000s with more communities cropping up across the region. "There was also a need from our builder base to offer community grounds maintenance, so we launched that division specifically for HOA work," Furtick says.



Installation crews at Saluda Hill use hydraulic, self-propelled rollers for sod installation.

HOA grounds maintenance uncovered more opportunity in this market: design/build projects for community entrances. This division is run like a separate business under the Saluda Hill umbrella with its

own crews, equipment and management. "The initial focus was to provide turnkey community entrance design, build and installation to meet client's needs," Furtick says, estimating hundreds of completed

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ADD-ON SERVICES

projects of this nature. Because of what entrance projects entail, Saluda Hill has in-house graphic design services for community logos, in-house masons who build monuments and a lighting division that illuminates entrances and amenity centers.

Today, production landscaping is about 60% of the overall business, with 30% falling in the design/build division and about 10% in grounds maintenance.

Grounds maintenance accounts include the metropolitan airport and high-end commercial properties. As for the traditional landscaping that Saluda did when it started, homeowner projects need to be at least \$10,000 in value.

So how does a company driven largely by production landscaping deal with a market slowdown? While 2021 and 2022 posted record growth in that arena, there was a drag in business in January 2023 due to rising interest rates that skyrocketed home values in the area, Furtick says.

"Our reaction to that was to reallocate some of our team into other areas of the business that were booming at the time," Furtick says, pointing to grounds maintenance, its fastest growing division today. Also, Saluda Hill leveraged its loyal customer base, inquiring about nearby development opportunities and then branched out into neighboring markets including Augusta, Aiken and Florence.

Innovation also drives add-ons at Saluda Hills. A couple of years ago, the company created a custom app for quality control and dedicated two team members to the role. "Within 48 hours of installing a landscape, they go through the checklist of items and we capture pictures of the irrigation operating, installed sod and so on," Furtick says.

"So, say six months after a purchase, the homeowner doesn't water their lawn and says, 'The grass was dead when I moved in,' our developer customers can go into

the cloud-based app and retrieve those pictures and say, 'This is what the lawn looked like when you bought it.' It doesn't generate extra revenue for us, but it saves us a lot in what could be perceived warranty work and our customers love it," he says.

Saluda Hill gained contracts for seven new properties after rolling out the app. "Developers like that reassurance," Furtick says.

Not every service is a fit. Years ago, Saluda Hill forayed into the silt fence business for soil stabilization. "It's just a different type of work and something where we couldn't execute it with pride as a quality product," Furtick says.

However, the company is currently adding on soil stabilization and erosion control services. Some developers expressed frustration with their current providers. "We acquired some direct seeding equipment and while we didn't really want to get into it because of the specialized tools, it pays

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ADD-ON SERVICES



Saluda Hill invested in equipment like ride-on lawn care applicators for fertilization and weed control.

for itself and it's a respond to customer demand," Furtick explains.

Meanwhile, internal add-ons that aren't exactly profit centers do help the business run efficiently and cost-effectively. Saluda Hill has its own nursery and on-site mechanic shop for servicing equipment and

vehicles. In-house landscape architects and masons allow the company to maintain quality control and offer the full-service package to customers with a single point of contact.

Investments in equipment like ride-on lawn care applicators for fertilization and weed control also improve efficiency and allow Saluda Hill to deliver on its quality promise. "Along the way, we have not been shy with experimenting with new types of equipment to help us do a better job," Furtick says, add-

ing that installation crews use hydraulic, self-propelled rollers for sod installation. "It helps us make sure we have good sod-soil contact, and it smooths out the surface. Our customers love it — the lawns look impressive."

But the best equipment in the world

won't make up for a poor operator. "You need to have the right people on board," Furtick says.

Through the years, Saluda Hill has been focused on finding great people to fuel its growing divisions. "We have been very intentional about promoting our culture during the last 10 years," Furtick says, adding they run employee appreciation breakfasts and a quality-based incentive program to attract talent. "We want to be a destination employer — where people come for a career," Furtick says.

Word of bonus opportunities passes around. "We have outpaced competitors by paying well and that is a productivity-quality combination," Furtick says of how the company can earmark those reward dollars. "It attracts people who want to do quality work."

An open book approach helps managers and team members understand where the company stands and their role in achiev-

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Home Owner Association work opened the door for Saluda Hill to tackle community entrances.

ing goals. "At the end of the day, as the company does well, everyone does well."

MAKING SALES MERRY. During a slow-down in the summer of 1995 for the design/build side of Burkholder Bros. in Malvern, Pennsylvania, brothers and co-owners Mark and Barry Burkholder decided to dip into irrigation.

"I went to a supplier, they explained it, I rented a pipe puller, and it probably took three days to complete a job that would take

usa day now," says Mark, co-owner and general manager. "But we are both mechanical, so it wasn't that difficult to figure out."

They decided to brand the division Sir Sprinkler as a business under the Burkholder parent company. "At the time, there were irrigation companies and landscape companies, but not both," Mark explains. "We didn't want to look like a landscape company doing sprinklers, which is why we made the trade name. Over time, it merged."

There was a comfort factor for clients when they saw a Sir Sprinkler truck pull into the driveway. They were getting a pro. So, the company retains this brand. "It also helped that if another landscaper that doesn't offer irrigation was doing a project on the property, we wouldn't be stepping on their feet," Barry says. "We are respected as a company they can trust who will not steal their work. It's a partnership."

Three years ago, the company added plant health care services. The Burkholders

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hired a recruiter to find the right person to run the division. Team members who perform these services are certified arborists with field experience. “Where the mulch beds end and the grass starts, we stop,” Mark says of the focus on plants, not turf.

Burkholder Bros. acquired specialty rigs to equip the plant health care division — split tank trucks with built-in shelving storage. The company steers away from major tree jobs but performs corrective pruning.

Eventually in 2006, the company entered the grounds maintenance arena and became the fourth LandOpt licensee in 2007. “It enabled us to scale and create a system, and financially it has helped us develop financial plans and grow,” Barry says.

Maintenance was a natural segue for the firm. “We’d complete projects, people loved us and we never did the maintenance before, so it would continue service for clients,” Mark says. “On the other hand, if

“The initial focus was to provide turnkey community entrance design, build and installation to meet client’s needs.”

– Wendell Furtick, president,
Saluda Hill Landscapes

they are maintenance clients who have a project in mind, we can help.”

While the Burkholder Bros. business is diverse, “we stick to what we know,” Mark says.

They’ve learned add-on lessons the hard way. “We added pools before starting landscape maintenance, but when the economy went down in 2008 and 2009, the pool division was too distracting for us,” Mark says.

Barry adds, “It was Mark and I back in the trenches, so it really took us away from the core business. So, make sure you know who is going to manage (a division) and plan the staffing before jumping into a service.”

Meanwhile, the purchase of their current building in 2016 introduced another retail service opportunity that boosts brand recognition. The property they found was an abandoned garden center and included nine acres. The brothers fixed up the property and relocated to the site. They leased part of



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“It was Mark and I back in the trenches, so it really took us away from the core business. So, make sure you know who is going to manage (a division) and plan the staffing before jumping into a service.”

– Barry Burkholder, co-owner, Burkholder Bros.



the space to a seasonal garden center. A few years into their time there, the Burkholders decided to sell Christmas trees.

“We occupy the garden center space during the off-season—and over the years, my wife started buying ornaments and gifts to sell along with the trees,” Mark says.

The shop opens after Halloween, and Christmas trees arrive during Thanksgiving weekend. They create a family experi-

ence with food trucks and live reindeer at the “grand finale” toward the end of December.

Generally, they sell about 600 trees, and the business has grown as families continue a Burkholder Bros. holiday tradition. Of course, estimating how many trees to order can be tricky. “The first year, we decided to order way too many, and we scaled back the next year,” Mark says.

Finding tree suppliers is more challenging. “Last year, I gambled because the only way to get more trees was to buy another truckload,” Mark says.

He has reached out to most suppliers along the East Coast to source trees, with the main supplier located in Pennsylvania. “The cost for Burkholder Bros. has quadrupled during the last five years. “If you want to make money on the trees, having the Christmas shop adds up to help make a good profit,” Mark says.

The company will continue its seventh season selling trees this year.

“It’s very well-known in the area,” Barry says. Plus, they earn landscape business from guests who enter the holiday-dressed design center and see photos of completed projects reeling on the big screen. “The slideshow draws questions and interest from Christmas shoppers,” he says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.



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Software should be in your plans

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE ANOTHER YEAR is nearly in the books. It seems like not too long ago we were busy planning and strategizing for 2023, and now here we are doing it for 2024. As we look toward the future, it's important to identify emerging trends that could influence business going forward – which is why reports like this one are so important.

We're proud to sponsor this invaluable report and hope the data contained in these pages proves to be useful. The industry continues to face familiar challenges such as employee hiring and retention, rising costs, and supply chain issues. These problems continue to frustrate business owners and impact the bottom line. Despite these persistent concerns, the industry, by and large, continues to maintain a strong growth trajectory thanks to the use of technology and software, specifically.

This stands as a testament to the hard work and ingenuity of lawn and landscape professionals like you, who continue to innovate through adversity to find new ways to achieve growth objectives. And standing right beside you are forward-thinking partners like Aspire.

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This past year, we launched our PropertyIntel solution which helps businesses collect property data quickly and easily with state-of-the-art visualization technology, helping our customers produce accurate estimates, simplify the bidding process, and service more jobs in less time.

Likewise, our Crew Control solution makes it easier than ever to get your crews scheduled, your customers serviced, and your invoices paid. We've also added a number of exciting integrations to deliver even more flexibility and convenience to forward-thinking operations looking to grow fast and achieve more.

Indeed, the role of technology has never been more important or impactful to the industry. Everywhere you look, crews are pushing resources to the limit to meet growing demand, service more customers, and maintain stellar customer service.

As you review the data on within pages, it should be noted that technology — once a luxury — is now a necessity for businesses working to stay competitive in a rapidly evolving industry. We'd love the opportunity to see how we can help give you an edge in the months and years ahead. Give us a call and let's talk about the future of your business.

MARK TIPTON
Chief Executive Officer



Mark Tipton
Chief Executive Officer



This stands as a testament to the hard work and ingenuity of lawn and landscape professionals like you, who continue to innovate through adversity to find new ways to achieve growth objectives.

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POWERING THE MODERN BUSINESS

Across the industry, business software is changing the way landscape and lawn care professionals do business.

By Kristen Hampshire

Tapping into past years' data in a completely paperless business environment allows Mike Bella to zero in on labor hour missteps and job costing oversights that steal profit. A few years ago, Bella's Lawn & Landscape in Toledo, Ohio, switched to a more scalable business software platform for the growing multi-service maintenance operation. What a difference.

"Now, our historical data is right there, and we can see which crews have mowed an account and the hours," says Bella, president. "If we are under-performing on the job three years in a row, we look to see if we need to adjust the hours, so our target gross margin is achieved." That was definitely the case. Bella says once implementing the software, account managers reviewed labor hours for all accounts, meeting with the production team to come up with a plan. Does the crew need more training to meet the goal? Does the account manager need to add more hours to the contract at renewal?

Bella recognized the business was bleeding potential income.

"We used to go over by 20% on hours," he says, upon reviewing reports. "Now, after the third year of using the software, we are 20% under on our hours and our profit

margins have gone up from less than 50% to over 60%."

It's no surprise that Bella says business software is "a game-changer if you want to take your business to the next level."

FROM PAPER TO TECH PLATFORM. Is a move to a new business software platform an all-or-nothing feat? Not if you ask Jack Harder, general manager of Harder Services in Hempstead, N.Y.

"I've spoken with peers where they swept the desk off and said, 'We are going

to revolutionize how we price work, how we handle leads, how we schedule crews.' I wasn't in a position to say, 'Take everything we've done and forget it.' And looking back, I wouldn't want to."

A happy medium for the 101-year-old, fourth-generation business included meshing time-tested old processes with new, automated back-office solutions.

What was the old way? Imagine reams of dot-matrix printer paper with perforated edges requiring manual removal. Think about printing monthly invoices — and the labels — stuffing envelopes and applying stamps. More perforated edges on work orders, sorted by day and route, requiring a full workday every week to prepare.

In 2019, Harder Services adopted a software solution that employees with decades of tenure might have called newfangled, but it was in fact necessary. "We gained back a full day of time in the office weekly, getting rid of a lot of hand work," Harder says.

Now, preparing the next week's maintenance work orders takes about five minutes.

The company's main goal was to streamline workflow and customer communications. Some of the paper would stay in place, such as work orders. The company had no plans to equip veteran crewmembers with iPads and break a system that had been working for a century.





Note: The survey results are based on more than 100 respondents. Not all survey percentages will total 100 due to rounding.

HOW MANY EMPLOYEES DO YOU HAVE?

17%

100 or more

7%

50 - 99

37%

10 - 49

16%

5-9

24%

less than 5

“One software sales rep told us if we were not willing to move to smart phones, mobile printers and tablets for every crew foreman and sales rep, it wasn’t the software solution for us,” Harder says.

He agreed.

“Some crew foremen are open to it, some are not,” he says. “I’ve worked with a couple of crews to change from paper to iPads or iPhones, but we weren’t willing to take crew foremen who had been working with us for years and turn their worlds upside down.”

So, Harder’s approach when introducing and integrating business software was to focus on back-office processes and workflow. Customers who still want a paper invoice can receive one. Most don’t.

From a crew standpoint, conversion to screen versus paper is gradual. But now, all information for job-costing, customer contacts and project information are available in real-time. “We have GPS trackers in our vehicles so I can schedule crews and direct them to locations,” Harder says.

For Harder Services, the goal was mainly to update the “old way” of billing — and from there, the company has adopted other automated processes. That includes setting up jobs for four distinct operations: tree care, landscape installation, landscape maintenance and IPM/plant health care. “We needed a software solution that could handle small-scale, large-scale and recurring jobs with different billing setups for our office,” he explains.

The company implemented the software during winter, running through test scenarios during quieter months. “We were able to work out some kinks so when it came time to start the season, we had the data plugged

in for scheduling jobs, getting work orders ready and preparing monthly invoices for maintenance accounts,” Harder says.

Now, the workflow is seamless.

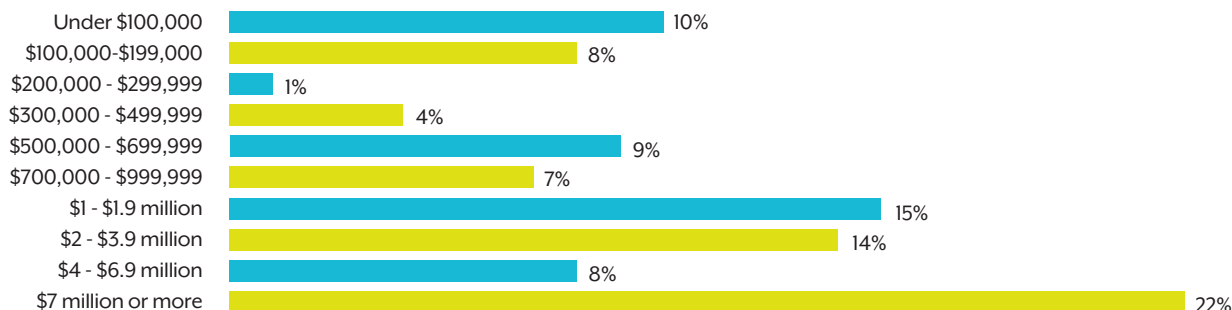
Plus, the company has added a fleet of phones and tablets for supervisors and foremen, improving communication. “They can snap a picture and say, ‘I noticed this at the Smith residence,’ and it’s a limb that fell down and is hanging on a fence,” Harder says. “Our ability to address issues on customers’ properties has improved dramatically from seeing a hand-written note on a work order to texted pictures that allow us to address problems instantly.”

EFFICIENT, BY DESIGN. How business software functions and companies’ technology requirements vary. That’s why Diana Grundeen, owner and principal designer of Trio Landscaping in Minnesota’s Twin Cities, worked with a business consultant to identify what tech platforms would work for her outdoor living design/build firm.

“I needed to understand my processes inside and out, and really know what I was looking for,” she says, adding that a business with large projects versus recurring maintenance has completely different software requirements. “I have such a different mode of operation,” she says of a business model centered on her design expertise and project management skills. She coordinates with installation partners who perform the labor.

Grundeen started her business in 2010 after working over a decade at another landscaping firm. At first, her “tech” was paper and pencil. Then, she moved to Excel for tracking customer information

WHAT WAS YOUR 2022 REVENUE?



and communications. By 2014, she started shopping for customer relationship management options, tried a number of them, and was disappointed. “None seemed to fit the right niche,” she says, explaining that they were for operations much larger, they were too complex or centered on recurring revenue.

That just isn’t how Grundeen works.

She landed on a product in 2016 that was a fit and enlisted a virtual assistant to set it up for her, easing the headache of transitioning from spreadsheets to a real-time tool. It was a disaster. The assistant didn’t understand Trio Landscaping’s operations, so the pipelines and customer communication flows were off.

Grundeen doesn’t blame her. It would have worked if she operated a virtual assistant business, too. But she’s a designer. So, back to the digital drawing board per se.

She tried again with an assistant who took an industry approach and helped reframe certain functions to make it applicable to Trio Landscaping. “I have three sales buckets I track,” Grundeen says of the CRM specifically. She uses different tools for business accounting and landscape design.

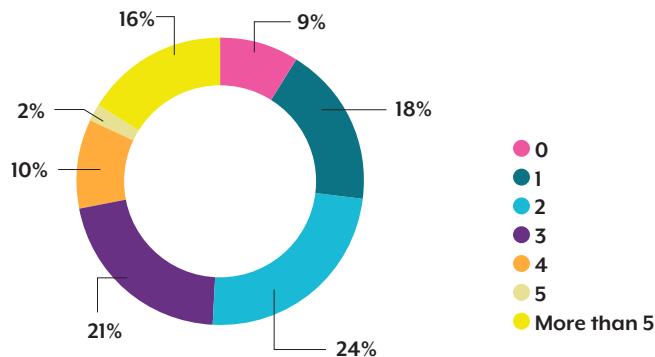
The first is consultation. “Did we make it to the consultation level or did we lose the prospect because they weren’t the right fit or there was a lack of follow-up on our end or the client’s end?” Grundeen says. Next is design work, also a sale. Third is project management, which includes the cost of labor and materials.

Grundeen didn’t want a software product that forced her to nail down every single line item to “bake the cake” she sells as a final product. “I’m not selling the ingredients,” she says. “I tell them what goes into the cake and the frosting — those are the two costs in case you don’t want the frosting.”

In other words, the software is retrofitted to include what jobs entail without detailing exact dollar amounts for every little thing. Grundeen does that on her own.

The key with CRM software for Grundeen is tracking the sales journey and customer experience. “We can make sure we sent an email, find out if the customer responded — have they opened it?” she says. “I might

HOW MANY DIFFERENT BUSINESS SOFTWARE PRODUCTS DO YOU CURRENTLY INVEST IN?



see that they opened it up five times but did not send a reply, so are they click-happy or do they have other questions? I can then give them a couple of days and poke to follow up. Seeing whether they received communications and opened it is a very important point of our CRM.”

As for the design software, Grundeen delegates the input of her paper designs. She recognizes the need to give clients that HGTV-style 3-D rendering that seems to come to life in a few seconds. But the reality is, manipulating the tools takes time and she prefers sketches.

“Now, I have a design assistant who learned the technology, so I don’t even use the program,” Grundeen says. “She does all the base maps, I apply my design concepts to the map of the property and turn it back in, and she makes it look awesome on the computer. This leverages my time so much better, and she is wonderfully efficient at using the design program.”

AUTOMATING THE WORKFLOW. When Michael Crnkovic started his business in 2015, he Googled “free accounting software” and came upon a basic platform — think super stripped-down QuickBooks. (Remember, free.)

By 2019, Crnkovic realized he needed a more robust CRM solution that would grow with Fresh Cut Pros in Minooka, Ill. At the time was bringing in about \$100,000 in revenue. Since then, the numbers have grown to over \$1 million.

Crnkovic was in his early twenties, “and I grew up in the tech era,” he says. “It took an afternoon to learn it, and I had a couple hundred clients at the time, so it was fairly simple to get it up and running to use minimally until we learned all of its functions.”

Admittedly, there was trial and error involved. “I had to figure out the wrong and right ways to do things, and I’m also in a Facebook group with members who have used the software longer and deeper than I have, and they all offer tips and tricks, workarounds for known issues,” Crnkovic says.

Within a season, all systems were running smoothly.

“What a really good CRM software does is the things that humans don’t have to, so we can focus on the things that only humans can do, like building client relationships,” Crnkovic says.

For instance, Crnkovic set up drip automated communications. “We target customers who have one service to sell another, send happy holidays emails and do everything from lead intake to estimate to follow-up — asking how the job went and requesting a review,” he says. “It’s all done automatically.”

Explaining the updated workflow, a lead filters in through the company website. Prospects fill out a form that creates an account in the CRM system. “Then, we can contact them or measure their property, create an estimate and send it,” he says. “Next, it is converted to a job that converts to an invoice once complete, and payment is taken on the portal.”



HOW MUCH HAVE YOU
**INCREASED YOUR
INVESTMENT IN
BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
TECHNOLOGY
IN THE PAST YEAR?**

13%

A lot

38%

Somewhat

33%

The same

6%

Somewhat less

11%

A lot less

Overall, Crnkovic says the software “makes it that much easier to build relationships” because of diligent check-ins and seamless service.

The software ties to a fleet management platform that provides driver safety reports like notifications for hard stops, quick acceleration and idling. Crnkovic built a bonus program around these reports, sporadically handing out cash incentives to drivers with the highest safety scores. He says, “People think, ‘If I keep it up, maybe I’ll get a bonus as well.’”

BOOSTING TRANSPARENCY AND RESPONSE. Mike Bella reflects back on implementing his company’s first business software, when the data was still in his head and he had to input it into the system. It took well over a year. When he changed platforms a few years ago, the process took about 90 days. “Initially, I had to build out an item catalogue, service catalogue, production rates — there was a lot,” he says.

Though, he adds, “Everyone struggles the first year.”

He learned some lessons the hard way. For instance, he accidentally setup salt to be allocated by the pound. “It was a typo,” Bella says. “I wanted to allocate it by the ton, so all of those 50 to 80 snow contracts were locked into that and it caused some billing issues.”

Bella corrected the problem on the back end. “Now, new contracts have the ‘new allocation’ but with those that were locked in, I had to wait until I renewed them and remember to change the allocations. Software can have quirky challenges.”

But overall, the customization capabilities have finetuned tracking and shed light on the company’s productivity and revenue opportunities, he says.

Crews must use the software, and Bella provides a \$50 allowance per month toward their cell phone bills. “We tried company phones, but it was too much of a hassle,” he says.

With the mobile app, “there is no hiding anything,” Bella says. “Drive time is allocated to service tickets so they can’t fudge the numbers. The data is real time, so if we have 15 crews out and one is behind, it takes five seconds to see how we can reallocate a nearby crew to help and you don’t even need to make a phone call.”

Before, Bella would have to personally contact all 15 crews to find out their location, their work order status and whether they needed help.

The office can quickly respond to customer requests by accessing a real-time trail of service notes, crew locations and labor hours. Account managers can gather the information they need about an account without calling the production manager for notes.

Crnkovic says, “As you get larger, you need to run a business by numbers, by data, and this software literally offers that in real time, so you get it instantly and it’s accurate.”

SCHEDULING A HIGH VOLUME. Aside from maintaining government-owned properties and some residential accounts, Faithworks Total Ground Maintenance in Mt. Dora, Fla., also offers janitorial services and pressure washing — a lot of it, to the tune of 1,400 stops.

“Software is important,” says owner Felecia Freeman, an understatement given she is the office staff and crew members are constantly deployed in the field. Still, since she runs a tight shop. “Some of the bigger software companies wouldn’t even talk to us, and they had another division for smaller companies but that software was not as robust,” she says.

Freeman wanted to be sure she could fully demo a business software platform before putting it into play. Organization was key. “We take pictures after every

WHAT **PAIN POINTS** DO YOU HAVE WITH YOUR BUSINESS
SOFTWARE SYSTEMS? (CLICK ALL THAT APPLY)



AI ADVANTAGE

WHEN FELECIA FREEMAN needs to interpret a complex government contract and better understand its scope, she turns to Open AI's ChatGPT and pastes portions of it into the "send a message" box. "It will briefly outline what the page was about, and then I can go in and ask it to create a checklist for me to go after the bid," explains the president of Faithworks Total Ground Maintenance in Mt. Dora, Fla.



Felecia Freeman

Freeman asks for little things like supplies or questions she should ask regarding the contract. "It spits out the information, and I siphon through it to find what's important," she says.

Freeman says ChatGPT is "like having another employee in the office."

She has used AI to specify janitorial and lawn care work, though she says its feedback is accurate about 75% of the time. "I can say, 'I'm going to cut 2 acres of land with three 72-inch mowers, how long will it take and how many crews do I need?'" Freeman says. "I have my own spreadsheet I go by to come up with my numbers. But it will tell me, 'Based on the square footage of the property, you probably need one person to supervise, another person to cut grass — it tells you all of that and provides a basic checklist of the hours and manpower you might need.'"

Freeman's business software is testing various AI plug-ins and integrations. For instance, a call system that would speak to customers like a human, answering inquiries. This is appealing, since it could eliminate the need for a call center she employs.



Writing emails, pulling tips for safety tailgate meetings and rewriting job descriptions are a few ways Michael Crnkovic has put AI to use at Fresh Cut Pros in Minooka, Ill. "I get so many emails that are similar in nature, so I have asked ChatGPT to compile my average response and edit it," he says of pasting previous replies into the search box.

Crnkovic uses ChatGPT to write Facebook posts. "Every once in a while, I will have to filter it to have the right tone," he says. But generally, the tool saves him tons of time.

"I copy and pasted our company handbook into ChatGPT and said, 'Divide this into 32 groups with three to four bullet points for a meeting,' and it did this in, like, 35 seconds," Crnkovic says.

When he needs to explain a system in simplistic terms, he also relies on AI. "I copied our pay-for-performance document and said, 'Explain this back to me and give me some FAQs that could be easily misunderstood,'" Crnkovic says. "It simplified the document, offered some FAQs, and I printed and laminated those to hang up in the shop."

stop, which allows us to protect ourselves and makes it easier for invoicing," she says.

She is in the process of migrating data now after moving from a different platform. Her advice: "Just use the software and don't be afraid." In the beginning, some of her crewmembers were resistant, but they got used to the convenience of checking off jobs through the app. Freeman keeps a small fleet of tablets and cell phones in case their personal phones are not updated enough to run the app or if there is not enough storage to upload it.

"I have a friend in the industry who said, 'If you go to software, your people will threaten to quit,'" Freeman says. "But this is the way life is going. You need to be able to move forward."

Easing team members into the system with support and technology, if needed, has resulted in Faithworks winning acceptance, even from the "old school." And, they're teaching each other easier ways to use the note-taking tool, such as talk-to-text. Freeman says, "We didn't have any really formal training — they just caught on." ■

WHAT TECHNOLOGY DOES YOUR COMPANY PAY FOR?

(CLICK ALL THAT APPLY)



74%
DESKTOP
COMPUTER



77%
LAPTOP
COMPUTER



59%
TABLET



42%
LANDLINE
PHONE



89%
SMARTPHONE



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Brenna B.
Owner

GetApp

SEPT 2022

★★★★★

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Leif H.
CEO

SoftwareAdvice

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★★★★★

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Brian S.
Maintenance Operations Manager

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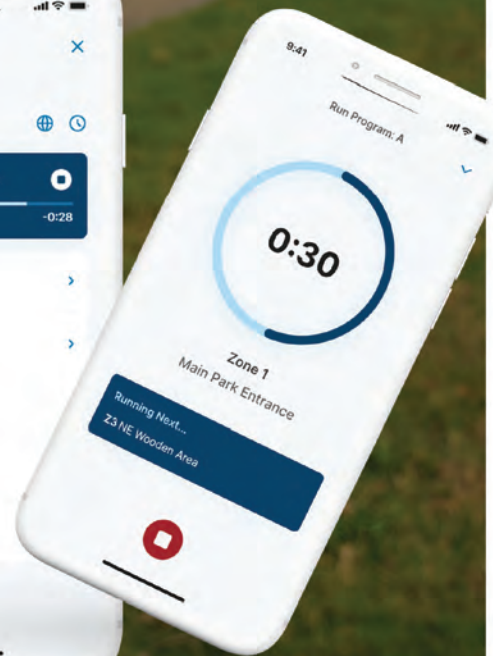
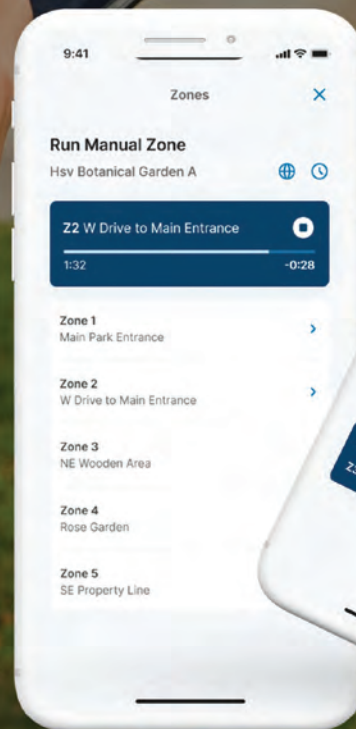
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WEATHERMATIC PREMIER PARTNER CASE STUDY:



The primary goal of the Weathermatic Premier Partner Program is to provide a solution to improve the labor efficiency and revenue opportunities for a Partner's irrigation business. The following is a case study highlighting the effectiveness of building a strategy to get this done.

In 2020, this full-service landscape company became a Weathermatic Premier Partner. Like most landscape maintenance organizations, they approached their irrigation repair business as a requirement for fulfilling their maintenance contract responsibilities. The irrigation group was largely unorganized and was reacting to every irrigation issue. They had a hard time catching up.

Things began to dramatically change in 2020 when the leadership team decided to focus on creating a more profitable irrigation business. This required evaluating and changing their irrigation practices to eliminate inefficiencies and improve accountability. Key to their strategy was to adopt technology to help improve labor efficiency, gain remote access to all of their irrigation systems and provide an opportunity to be on the leading edge of irrigation to attract new talent.

The Premier Partner Program enabled the company to cost effectively convert all the irrigation controllers they managed to the SmartLink platform as a significant part of their overall strategy.

	2020	TODAY
Revenue	\$15,000/mo	\$65,000/mo
Gross Profit	< 20%	58%
Irrigation Team	8 Technicians	6 Technicians
Inspection Process	All on paper	SmartLink cloud-based
Unapproved Proposals per Year	300	0
Scheduled Inspection Completion	< 35%	100%
Steps from Inspection to Invoice	10	3
Inspection Schedule	Lots of inefficiencies and time wasted	Efficient schedule where monthly inspections are often completed in 3 weeks
Recruiting irrigation talent	Ineffective. Difficulty in hiring adequate staff	Waiting list of potential new employees

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GETTING THE WORM



Early birds usually earn great advantages, but industry professionals weighing early order programs have plenty to consider.

By Jimmy Miller

For nearly 20 years, Bruce Love has used early order programs. The president of Lawn Rx in Pennsylvania says he's worked with the programs since founding the company in 2004.

The deals, especially on chemical lawn care products, just keep getting better and better.

"Over the last five or six years, a lot of distributors and vendors have really upped their game to get people to buy early," Love says.

Josh Wise, the CEO of GrassRoots Turf in Georgia, has been in business since 2002. He's also used EOPs for at least 15 years, maybe longer. Wise estimates that the deals he's received over the years have saved him thousands of dollars. He believes it's often 10-15% on products they purchase.

Even still, Wise warns contractors wanting to start EOPs to wade into the water first — don't just jump in.

"Make sure you don't bite off more than you can chew," he says. "Sometimes with EOP, they'll have a program they're running, (like), 'If you buy a case, you can save on this (product) and this and this.' If you're not going to use it, don't spend the money."

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Experienced contractors like Love and Wise feel they've struck the right balance, both saving money and ordering just the right amount. From estimating next season's needs to finding a place to put all that product, here's how they've maximized their EOPs for their respective companies.

FORECASTS IN THE FALL. Many suppliers begin offering their early order programs Sept. 1, and some even incentivize particularly early orders with eye-popping deals that disappear as time wears on. Love says his company doesn't start ordering until about October, which is when he feels the craziness of the summer maintenance season finally tapers off into the offseason.

To participate in any EOP, contractors will need to know just how much product they'll need the following spring. Love keeps his formula simple — he accounts for how many clients they had that cur-

rent season and adds somewhere between 10-20% growth.

Wise believes EOPs can actually push contractors into a forward-thinking mindset.

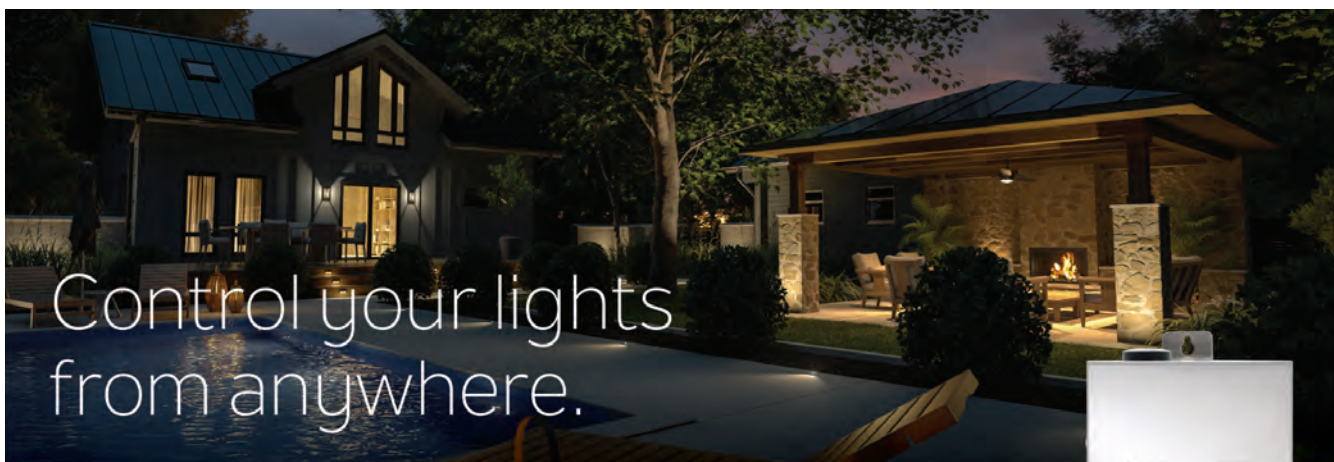
"A good thing is, it makes guys have to plan," Wise says. "If you're going to participate in EOP, it kind of forces your hand to think about, 'What are my sales going to be next year? What's my retention going to be like next year?'"

Wise says if he knows his sales team and marketing dollars will be the same, they'll simply "rinse and repeat" what they did the prior year, factoring in how many new sales they had the previous year and their customer turn rate.

TO PARTICIPATE IN ANY EOP, CONTRACTORS WILL NEED TO KNOW JUST HOW MUCH PRODUCT THEY'LL NEED THE FOLLOWING SPRING.

Wise also estimates how much to buy based on how many acres they've treated before, calculating the average square footage per property. For example, if the average square footage of treatment per property is 600, and he thinks he's going to sell to 500 more customers, he knows that he'll need enough product to cover the new 300,000 square feet. He'll add that number to the square footage he already has booked for his clients.

So, if it's 2 million square feet they serviced the year prior, Wise simply adds the 300,000 square feet and now has 2.3 million square feet to cover with product the following year.



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LCOs have to consider many factors including what pests and weed pressures their region will face in the following season.



"I'm conservative on my sales numbers," Wise adds. "I'd rather have the problem of, I need another case of that product, because my sales are more than I said they would be."

One other factor worth considering is what types of pest or weed pressures your region might face the following year. Love says that by the fall, most contractors should have some idea what those pres-

ures might look like. For instance, in his area, chinch bugs, armyworms and spotted lanternflies have all emerged as newly prevalent threats in the last few years.

"You may get a different pest in the area or need some new chemistry on something," Love says, "But you can foresee that going into the next season."

PLAYING THE GAME. Wise cannot emphasize the importance of relationships enough — he says they're critical to getting the best possible deals each autumn.

"Relationships are huge. You want to be loyal to your vendors," Wise says. "I think EOP is very, very good, but guys have to think outside the box, too."

Thinking outside the box for Wise looks like constant communication with the vendors and dealers. For example, Wise says if he needs 100 gallons of herbicide but contractors need to order 26 gallons to reach the top-tier discounts and rebates,

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- Curby Hughes, Owner, Curby's Landscape 

LAWN CARE

he'd place orders with three different vendors, especially if it's an agency product that's the same price regardless of where it's purchased.

Now, in this hypothetical, Wise says he's got three vendors who appreciate his business. In the future, they might even give him deals on non-agency products where prices can be negotiated.

"When you're talking and working deals, there's plenty of deals to be made with your vendors," he says. "Maybe they're sitting on pallets of fertilizers or something."

For Wise, it's even helped with getting deals on equipment, though EOPs usually focus specifically on preemergence and postemergence products. If he orders EOP through his supplier representative, Wise

Knowing how much to order, and where to store it, is another important element of EOP planning.



says he's asked them if they can knock \$1,000 off a spreader, and suppliers may say yes to keep client loyalty going.

In terms of the numbers, Wise admits EOP is often best for companies that are a bit bigger. It's why he might have his franchisees participate in EOP through him rather than individually.

Still, Wise says there's lots of irony in how EOP works.

"When you're small, everything costs more," Wise laughs. "When you're big and you can afford it, it's all cheaper."

Love also recommends really studying the math on the EOP offerings for each program. Typically, he's found that the parameters of the savings earned aren't always clear. Rebates, rather than discounts, can especially get complicated.

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"When they say you're getting 10 cents off here, 10 cents off there, it's usually that you've got to purchase a baseline and then there's calculations that aren't so much straightforward," Love says. "You've got to really examine that and get help from your rep to see what your true savings are going to be."

Love adds that often, suppliers are selling similar products but with different titles. Comparing the active ingredients, quantity sizes and overall price among distributors is key to getting the best deal.

"Every manufacturer has the same kind of products but just under different brand names," he says. "You've got to know what kind of chemistry you're buying."

ANTICIPATING ARRIVAL. When the products actually come in, Love recommends having a plan for keeping the EOP products in stock. Sure, it's nice to save money on the products you'll need, but once those

products actually ship, you'll have to put them somewhere for the season.

Lawn Rx recently built a 4,500-square-foot warehouse to store its chemicals. Considering some suppliers want to ship the materials over the winter — and that some dealers can't hang onto the products for everyone they sell to — it's important to have a plan in place for all that product.

Wise also says his team can store the products it buys, but he says many smaller companies are operating out of their own garage or a storage unit. So, he recommends having conversations with vendors first on whether or not they can hold onto the products.

Wise also remembers when his company was small and the tough conversations he had with vendors about affording all he ordered. It's not easy to call and ask to return products if they ordered too much, but he acknowledges that EOPs can drain smaller companies short on cash flow. That's why

having a gameplan for product arrival is just as important as getting in on the hot EOP deals. After all, Wise says the savings might not always be worth it if you ordered products you don't actually need.

"Some guys will buy more than they need because of the savings, but in the long run, did you spend more money than you had?" he says. "Now you're cutting back on your marketing dollars or you can't hire that technician."

Love says contractors who act early but act with a strong game plan are the ones who ultimately win with EOPs. It's no big surprise — the saying goes that the early bird gets the worm. But being responsible while acting fast is critical to success.

"There's no real secrets or anything like that," Love says. "You've just got to know what you want to do and jump on it because the savings are significant." **L&L**

The author is associate editor with Lawn & Landscape.

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Light of at the end the tunnel

Demand for landscape lighting isn't as hot as it was a couple of years ago, but the future is still bright for contractors using the right approach.

By Gregg Wartgow

Chris Waugh, owner of NY Landscape Lighting in Yorktown Heights, N.Y., started noticing a slowdown in lighting inquiries in late July. It was nothing to cause concern though. "Things typically slow down in the summer because people begin traveling and getting out more," Waugh says.

The thing is, the normal summertime slowdown hadn't happened for the past few years because people were staying home. Nowadays, things are starting to feel like pre-COVID again. In turn, Waugh has ramped up his marketing to more of a pre-COVID level, too.



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How to save on solutions that will save your lawns

By: Envu Lawn & Landscape

A lawn care operator's job is never done. Even with the busy summer months behind us, you still need to plan out next year and stock up on the solutions that your business depends on. Luckily, Envu is currently offering its Fall Solutions program, which runs from October 1 through December 4. So now is the time to plan out the year ahead, save on solutions you'll need, and set yourself and your customers up for success.

The Fall Solutions program offers four ways to save, including off-invoice discounts, select product rebates, agronomic pairing incentives and purchase tier rebates.

With it, you can save on innovative products like Tetrino® insecticide. Tetrino is a game-changing grub control solution that provided excellent control of all white grub species in research trials and real-world use in the last few seasons. It also shows excellent extended activity against other prevalent pests including billbugs, chinch bugs and caterpillars like sod webworms, cutworms and fall armyworms.

Plus, unlike some other solutions, Tetrino insecticide also gives you flexibility in application timing. It allows you to take either a preventive or early curative approach to pest control. However, the best time to apply (especially for white grubs) is generally between late June

and early August to control the larvae and keep them from feeding on your customers' lawns. But after that initial application, you'll see control for the remainder of the season (typically about six to eight weeks of residual control for caterpillars depending on the rate).

Along with Tetrino insecticide, the Fall Solutions program also offers ways to save on herbicides like Specticle® FLO, Specticle® G, Celsius® WG, Celsius® XTRA and Tribute® Total to protect your lawns from invasive grasses, weeds and sedges.

So trust in your favorite products and in your own expertise, and don't worry about what Mother Nature might bring in the coming months or what unexpected obstacles homeowners might throw your way. With Envu as your partner for leading-edge solutions, you can handle just about anything.

Don't wait. Plan ahead, save today and thrive all year long when you start taking advantage of the Fall Solutions program. All you have to do is log in to My Envu Rewards to get started. From there, you can rack up rewards and calculate your savings on the spot with an easy-to-use calculator spreadsheet. Because when it comes to your business, you need to control all that you can.

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Bistro lighting has gained popularity as more homeowners seek to create warm and inviting outdoor dining areas in the backyard.

"We did a lot more direct mail this year and it worked very well," Waugh says. "We like to drive leads and get all of our work lined up by summer. For the most part, we were able to do that. When things did start to slow down this summer, it was OK because we were already booked up. Now we're focused on holiday lighting. Everything goes in cycles, and we're fine with that."

In the San Francisco Bay area, landscape lighting has been included in roughly 80% of the projects Bayscape Landscape Management crews have installed over the past few years. That is starting to change as homeowners begin paying more attention to their budgets.

"The customer almost always loves the complete landscaping plan, but they want to scale back right now," says Rick Gallo, vice president of construction at Bayscape Landscape Management in Alviso, Calif.

"We've even seen \$180,000 construction projects get whittled down to \$70,000. The designer had put in \$25,000 just in lighting. Lighting is one of the first things to get value-engineered out of a project. With any home improvement project, the landscaping is the icing on the cake. The lighting is the candles and sparklers."

It's not that consumers no longer want the candles and sparklers; it's just that they realize they may not need them right away, especially when having to pick and choose what they're spending money on.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Jon Anderson, owner and president of Sunshine Irrigation & Light in Phoenix, Ariz., says there's a good chance the customer will eventually want lighting added to their landscape, probably sooner than later. Furthermore, whenever that day comes, the landscape may be in a better position to really showcase the value of lighting.

“With any home improvement project, the landscaping is the icing on the cake. The lighting is the candles and sparklers.”

— **Rick Gallo**, vice president of construction at Bayscape Landscape Management

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LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR LIGHTING SALES. As Anderson explains, for a homeowner to feel the full benefits of landscape lighting, the landscaping needs to be worthy of lighting up. Just illuminating the front of a house usually doesn't produce a lasting wow factor. When fine-tuning a landscape plan based on a client's tighter budget, Anderson would rather focus on things like trees and water features — things that can be accented by lighting in the future.

To make sure lighting remains on the table, Anderson stresses the importance of getting the infrastructure in the ground.

"With the way things are right now, our contingency has been to really push a rough-in," Anderson says. That's the stage of a construction project when items like the utility lines are put in place. "We're already trenching for irrigation," Anderson continues. "So it makes sense to roll the lighting cable in the trench and tie it in knots where there's a tree or sculpture the customer plans on lighting at some point. Down the road, the customer can call us back to put the transformer and fixtures in, maybe work out some extensions here and there, and hook everything up. At this

"We've been using larger bulbs on string or cable that's hanging over a patio or firepit. People have been wanting to make their outdoor space more like an outdoor restaurant or resort."

— Chris Waugh, owner of NY Landscape Lighting

stage when we're roughing it in, we're pretty much just charging for materials (the lighting cable). We make it pretty hard to say no."

Gallo is taking the same approach. "We sell the customer on the idea that we won't have to tear their yard up again when we come back to finish the lighting," Gallo says.

Additionally, Gallo likes to initiate a conversation with the customer regarding the purpose of the lighting. Some lighting elements are purely decorative and could be put off for a while. Those that provide a safety element, however, should be installed right away. He's talking about things

like step lighting.

"Regardless of how the market is, there is always a little push and shove when it comes to lighting," Gallo says. He adds that the trick as a contractor is knowing when and how to push back.

CREATING A COOL OUTDOOR HANGOUT

To make the most of the immediate opportunities that are out there, it pays for contractors to understand what the trends are.

NY Landscape Lighting has been seeing an increase in homeowners wanting to create outdoor dining-type areas. Kitchens and outdoor living in general have been popular for many years. But when outdoor dining started to become a thing in the restaurant industry a few years ago, homeowners were inspired to create the same type of environment in their backyards.

"We've been doing a lot more bistro lighting," Waugh says. "We've been using larger bulbs on string or cable that's hanging over a patio or firepit. People have been wanting to make their outdoor space more like an outdoor restaurant or resort."

Gallo has been seeing the same trend out in California. He especially likes using the low-voltage LED bistro lights offered by one of his primary suppliers.

"We're doing less lighting in front yards these days," Gallo says. "We're mainly lighting pathways, with maybe an accent here and there. The lion's share of the lighting



With any home improvement project, the landscaping is still the star of the show. That means the lighting is either a great add-on or the first thing clients cut from the projects.



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fixtures are going in the backyard. That's the space most homeowners really want to activate now. Low-voltage LEDs help create this warm place for people to hang out. We'll run LED bistro lights all along a fence line, creating a sense of space and light all around the yard. Then we'll add some uplights and spotlights in a few areas to accent a few things."

Even though demand has softened a bit this year, Anderson says he is still running into opportunities where lighting is a good upsell. There are instances when he feels confident that lighting would enhance an outdoor environment more than, say, a random water feature. "I'll tell the customer, 'Your backyard is already a cool place to hang out. Why not just light it up so it will look so much cooler? Plus, it will require less maintenance,'" Anderson says.

"I'll tell the customer, 'Your backyard is already a cool place to hang out. Why not just light it up so it will look so much cooler? Plus, it will require less maintenance.'"

— **Jon Anderson**, owner and president of Sunshine Irrigation & Light

Waugh has become a big believer in lighting up sections of a yard as opposed to singular features.

"As a general rule, we like to create an entire scene with our accent lighting," Waugh says. "The same goes if someone has a small budget of a few thousand dollars. It doesn't really make sense to spread 10 fixtures over a 1-acre area. We encourage them to focus on one part of the yard and look at their entire lighting plan in phases.

We can always come back later to light up another area. It's better to make what you're doing look perfect than it is to spread yourself too thin."

CONSUMER TASTES CAN VARY. According to Waugh, consumer preferences can vary from one market to the next, or even one client to the next. For example, there are some really exciting things going on with color-changing lights, and a lot of home-



When clients have a limited budget, a good strategy is to concentrate fixtures in a specific area to create a "wow factor."

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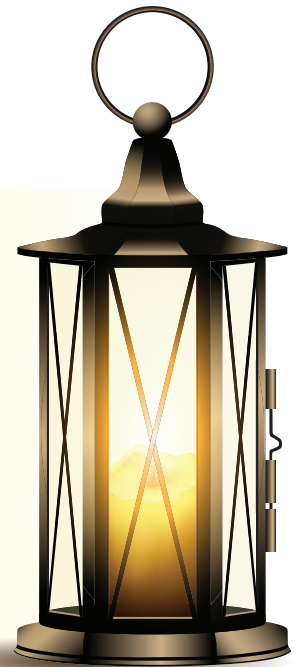
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That's a nice look to light up walkway areas and pathways through gardens and wooded areas. It's a nice, soft light that resembles a moon."

— **Chris Waugh**, owner of NY Landscape Lighting



owners and commercial clients really like them. But not everyone. "We actually don't do a lot of RGB," Waugh says. "I prefer that classic white look, and so does the majority of our clientele. I would say 95% of what we do is classic white." On the other side of the country in California, Gallo is seeing the same trend.

With respect to fixtures, Waugh has seen a growing interest in black as well as dark brass or bronze. He attributes this to a trend in homebuilding where black is frequently used for things like door and window trim.

"A dark lighting fixture is more modern-looking when you have that type of modern farmhouse look on a new home," Waugh says. "At the same time, a dark bronze or brass fixture blends well with any mulch in the landscape. This helps put the emphasis on the effect of the lighting itself, as opposed to the fixture."

Out in Phoenix, Anderson has seen a trend toward copper and brass. He is also seeing more interest in ground-well fixtures, which he is in favor of. As a landscape designer, his tendency is to hide the lighting as much as possible.

"I want the landscape lighting to be invisible until it comes on at night," Anderson says. "That's why we've been buying more ground wells than anything else over the past five years. We've also been shying away from things like pathway lights and bullet lights all over a patio."

Up by New York City, Waugh has also

seen a trend where pathway lighting is starting to fall by the wayside. "We've started doing a lot more downlighting, or 'moon-lighting,'" Waugh says. "That's a nice look to light up walkway areas and pathways through gardens and wooded areas. It's a nice, soft light that resembles a moon."

One other trend is that many homeowners are looking for more control over their lighting systems as opposed to just having them turn on/off at certain times.

"Consumers are looking for systems that are dimmable and programmable," Gallo says. As a result, he has been looking to lighting manufacturers who've gotten into programmable transformers. He has also taken a liking to transformers with an astronomical timer built in.

"With some of these systems now, you can link everything to the GPS location of the house," Gallo explains. "Then you can tell the system to turn on an hour before sunset, for example. Homeowners really like that."

GREAT MAINTENANCE IS A GREAT SALES TOOL. NY Landscape Lighting has been in business since 2005. Lighting system maintenance has been a huge part of the company's value proposition from day one. To that point, Waugh says he emphasizes one characteristic when evaluating new lighting fixtures.

"I look at the ease of maintenance," Waugh says. "I look at how difficult it's


going to be to change lamps and clean the glass. With some fixtures I've used in the past, you had to remove several screws to get the lens off and the bulb out. That becomes an issue when you have 50 to 100 fixtures on a property. I like fixtures that are simple to put together, simple to take apart, and look nice."

Waugh also considers how difficult it will be to adjust integrated fixtures. Some, he says, make it pretty easy to adjust the lumen output or the angle of the lamp. When those tasks are made easier, managing the overall system becomes easier for the lighting maintenance crew.

"We offer maintenance plans where we'll come out two to four times a year to be proactive," Waugh says. "We keep the lenses clean. We adjust angles on fixtures or completely move fixtures around as shrubs and trees grow out. Part of installing a lighting system involves keeping the future maintenance in mind. We try to position the fixtures where we think they'll still make sense in a few years. We also leave a little extra wire just in case they need to move."

Good maintenance, Waugh says, is a great sales tool. When you can keep things looking like they did the first day they were installed, your customer notices — and so do their friends and neighbors. That's a pretty good tool to have to make future sales again. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based out of Wisconsin.




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Q&A WITH THE EXPERT



Q+A

with
Zac Reicher, Ph.D.

Envu

1 Why fall weed control?

Systemic herbicides are highly effective in the fall. During this time, perennial broadleaf weeds are preparing for winter and sending maximum photosynthate to the roots. Systemic herbicides move with the photosynthate, providing maximum control. Additionally, winter annual weeds are still young and relatively easy to control. Lastly, ornamentals in the landscape are not as susceptible to herbicide drift since they are fully mature, hardening off for winter and/or may be losing their leaves.

2 Controlling broadleaf weeds in cool-season lawns

Perennials like dandelion, clover, violets and ground ivy can be controlled in the fall with a broadleaf herbicide containing two to four active ingredients like 2,4-D, dicamba, MCPP or MCPA, triclopyr, fluroxypyr, etc. It's important to include multiple active ingredients to maximize the number of weeds controlled as well as help limit resistance chances. Applications should start with moderating temperatures in September and October and can stretch into November and December. The later the application, the more likely it will control newly germinated winter annuals like common chickweed. Experi-



Common chickweed germinates in the fall and is an easy target for broadleaf herbicides later in the fall.

ence and research show that late applications when mowing has slowed or even stopped can be highly effective, but keep in mind that control won't be seen until next year after the weeds die and literally disappear over winter.

3 Weed control in warm-season lawns

Much like in cool-season turf, perennial and winter annual broadleaf weeds are best controlled in the fall in warm-season turf. Many of the same active ingredients are available in both warm- and cool-season turf, but a product like Celsius® herbicide offers highly effective broadleaf weed control combined with outstanding turfgrass safety. Tribute® Total herbicide is an excellent option on bermudagrass or zoysiagrass lawns and controls many of the most problematic grassy weeds in

addition to numerous broadleaf weeds. Application timing is September through December, with later applications controlling later-germinating winter annuals, but visual control is slower with cooler temperatures.

Controlling annual bluegrass in warm-season lawns is also most effective in the fall. Annual bluegrass starts germinating in the fall when average soil temperatures fall to 72 degrees in the presence of adequate soil moisture from rain or irrigation. Traditionally, a single application of a preemergence herbicide was applied at a relatively high rate for adequate control through the following spring. Specticle® FLO herbicide was introduced over 10 years ago and raised the bar for preemergence herbicides in terms of duration and level of control. We now know that applying Specticle FLO later in the year and combining it with a postemergence herbicide like Tribute Total and simazine is even more effective, more flexible around fall weather like tropical storms, and highly effective for limiting herbicide resistance in annual bluegrass. Applications of the PRE3 program (Specticle FLO + Tribute Total + simazine) from Envu made in October through November or even better, sequentially at reduced rates in October plus December provides the most effective control of annual bluegrass.

4 What weeds aren't controlled in the fall?

Summer annuals like knotweed and oxalis have completed their life cycle by fall and can only be controlled in the spring. Nutsedge has also completed its life cycle and is not controllable in the fall. These weeds will still require spring/summer applications, but limiting weeds in the fall will lead to denser turf and fewer holes where these weeds can gain a foothold next spring.

Early order programs can help you save money on your herbicide orders

The NOW Solutions program from Envu started in August followed by the traditional Fall Solutions program (Early Order program) starting in October. These programs can save you substantial money and provide financing through early summer. Specticle FLO, Tribute Total and Celsius from Envu are all available in the NOW Solutions program and the Fall Solutions program.



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Ryan Lawn & Tree is going the extra mile, whether it's giving their employees awards or working with local charities.

By Jimmy Miller



When a brutal storm in Wichita damaged one of their client's trees beyond repair, one employee at Ryan Lawn & Tree did something special.

"I remember everything about it like it was yesterday," says Sam Wentling, Ryan's employee who serviced the tree several times before needing to take it out entirely. Wentling says most clients can't even tell him what type of trees they have in their own backyard — but those who can have an obvious attachment. "As an arborist, you can pick up on that really quick," he says. "They might really care for their property, or they just kind of live at the house."

Wentling mentioned to the client that the tree didn't look too good, but she insisted it stay up, so he sent her an invoice and moved on. A few months later, he returned to the property — she called him back out to do some limb removal.

It was then that the client revealed her late husband had planted the tree, so it held a lot of sentimental value to her. "This was sort of their oasis they had created together," Wentling says, "and he was no longer with her. When people tell you those sorts of details, it makes you care so much more about the tree and care so much about the environment."



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"I THINK THE KEY IS YOU HAVE TO IDENTIFY THE BEHAVIOR THAT YOU'RE WANTING TO ESTABLISH OR YOU'RE WANTING TO DEVELOP. FOR US, THE END GOAL WAS TO ESTABLISH A TOP-NOTCH, CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE."

— Jeremiah Samborski,
Director of Marketing

And a year after that, he got one more phone call — this time a storm had finally done the tree in for good.

When Wentling arrived to the all-too-familiar property, the client was outside, just looking at the tree. It was then he had a heart-to-heart conversation with her and assured her at the beginning of the job that "this isn't the last time you'll see this tree."

Wentling saved the wood and got to work on what he calls a "garage hobby," creating a nice piece to commemorate the tree. It took about a year, but on one slower day, he took one of the newer employees at Ryan and said "let me show you something." Wentling approached the client's property with the piece hidden behind his back, and when he arrived, he reminded her of his promise.

"She bubbled up and burst into tears, then I bubbled up and burst into tears," he laughs. "She was floored. It gets me emotional every time talking about it again."

"Honestly," he continues, "it just felt like the right thing to do. I wasn't thinking about EMA or anything other than just trying to do something nice for a lady who lost so much. I just happened to be fortunate enough to work for a company that recognized that."

The EMA, of course, is Ryan Lawn & Tree's Extra Mile Award, one of the several ways the company recognizes its employees for going above and beyond. The company has now spent the last few years recognizing employees like Wentling, who have earned the company's Extra Mile Award through anything from writing customers cards to saving someone from a burning building.

Finding those to recognize was the first step to creating the award. When the company's marketing team started monitoring

online reviews, they noticed that clients would mention their employees by name. So, the Ryan Lawn & Tree team started emphasizing Google Reviews — not just to help with finding new EMA winners but to bolster the company's presence online.

THE REVIEWS ARE IN. When the team's Director of Marketing, Jeremiah Samborski, started at Ryan, he says the company wasn't really monitoring its reviews on Google Reviews or sites like Yelp. Nowadays, thanks to concerted efforts to obtain and respond to these reviews, Ryan has earned over 1,000 5-star Google Reviews.

But even back when Samborski began looking through these reviews in 2017, he noticed there were lots of positive reviews. "Something I noticed time and time again," he says, "customers would mention Ryan Lawn & Tree employees by their first and last names."

Maybe those employees clipped an extra branch or stayed a little later on a project — whatever the case, Samborski says they repeatedly saw reviewers write that employees "went the extra mile."



Jeremiah Samborski

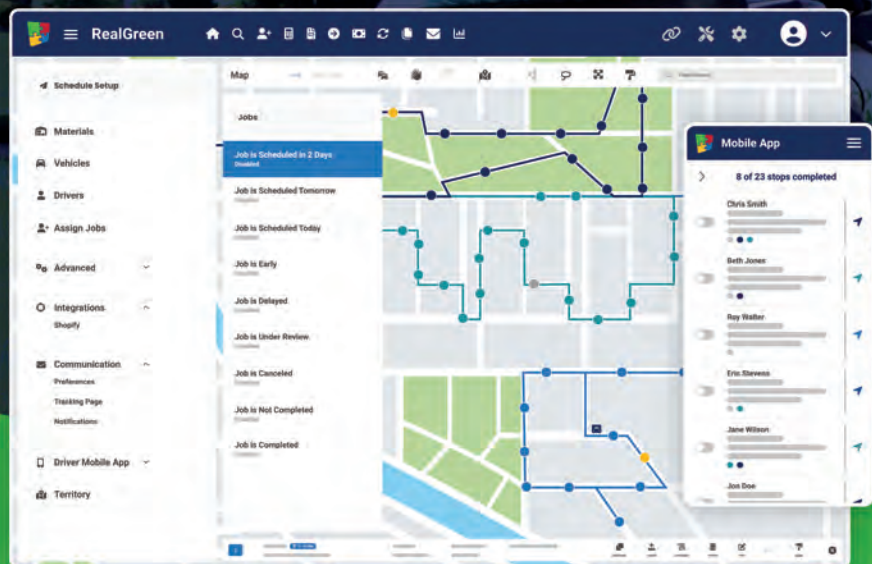


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COMPANY PROFILE



Ryan has recognized plenty of Extra Mile Award winners like Corey Ingalls (left), Austin Mertz (top) and Robby Keith (bottom).

Samborski believes it's important to respond to all reviews, and the Ryan Lawn & Tree marketing team began responding within a day or two of each review. They use tools that notify them when these reviews are posted, such as Google My Business. If it's a five-star review that the team is accustomed to receiving, they thank the customer for taking their time to leave a review. If they say they had a poor experience or left anything lower than three stars, "we need to know that as well," Samborski says.

"You don't want to respond with emotion or the feeling of you're being attacked," he adds. "We really have to take a neutral stance and be professional in our communications. Usually, it's something that can be worked out."

The marketing team will also use their CRM to tag whoever is being mentioned, especially if it's a positive review. They'll even loop in their supervisors when the comments compliment an employee by name. And by using tools like Listen360, the company can ask clients who leave net promoter scorers of 9 or 10 (out of 10) to copy their comments and leave them on Google, too.

TELLING THEIR STORIES. So, with all those positive reviews rolling in, the marketing team added the Extra Mile Award.

Ryan started planning the award in late 2020 and announced it to the team at the start of 2021, a great time to boost morale amidst the pandemic. The idea initially stemmed from reading a book called "Raving Fans" by Sheldon Bowles and Ken Blanchard, which emphasized the importance of highlighting positive reviews.

The recognition process is pretty elaborate: It's an awards presentation held in front of an entire branch, and it's often a surprise to the whole branch or even company. Someone from the leadership

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COMPANY PROFILE

team presents the employee earning the Extra Mile Award with a trophy.

Ryan Lawn & Tree established a peer-to-peer nomination form so associates are the ones nominating each other. This is especially important because some of the good acts done for clients might only

be seen by each other if the clients don't proactively reach out.

But what constitutes employees just doing their jobs versus going above and beyond to serve the clients? That's one distinction Samborski had to help make with the company executives.



"I think the key is you have to identify the behavior that you're wanting to establish or you're wanting to develop," Samborski says. "For us, the end goal was to establish a top-notch customer experience."

Samborski says Ryan not only measured this customer experience success by Google Reviews, but also by customer retention rate, which hovers around 85%. He considers the Extra Mile Award one additional incentive to make sure clients are happy with each transaction.

"You might get people in the organization to act (once)," he says, "but you want it to become part of their work and employment patterns and processes."

For his part, Wentling says that he was reminded of Ryan Lawn & Tree's mission statement as he worked on his client's property — it starts with "to serve God by helping our clients create beautiful and sustainable environments." He admits the recognition is nice, but Wentling says this sort of selfless behavior is reflected in everything Ryan employees do.

"It definitely makes you feel good to be recognized for something that you think people don't even really notice," he says. "But a lot of times, (the EMA) goes out to people doing sort of daily things. Mine was just one nice thing. There are people doing above-and-beyonds every day."

"You need to allocate resources, and it's not just throwing money at a good cause," Samborski says. "You can dedicate a person or a team to really come alongside and get the most from that partnership. Building that long-term relationship is essential." L&L

The author is associate editor with Lawn & Landscape.

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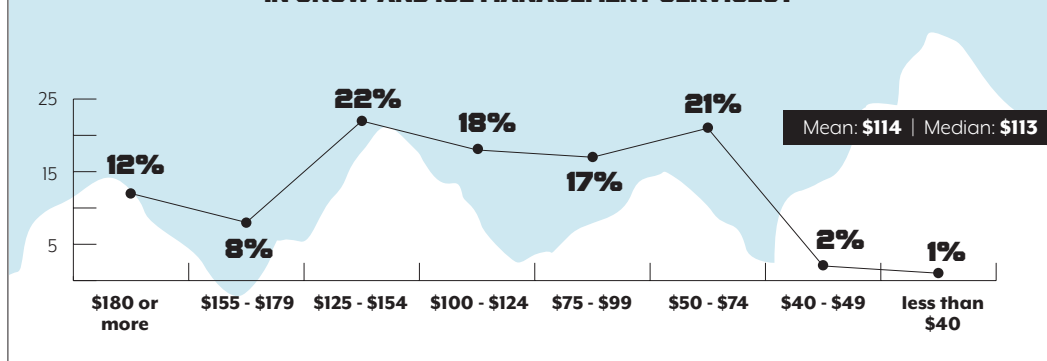
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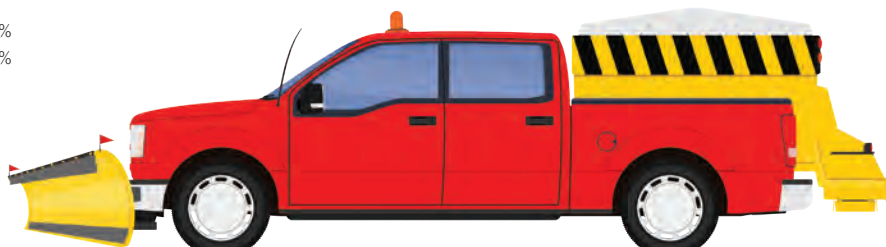
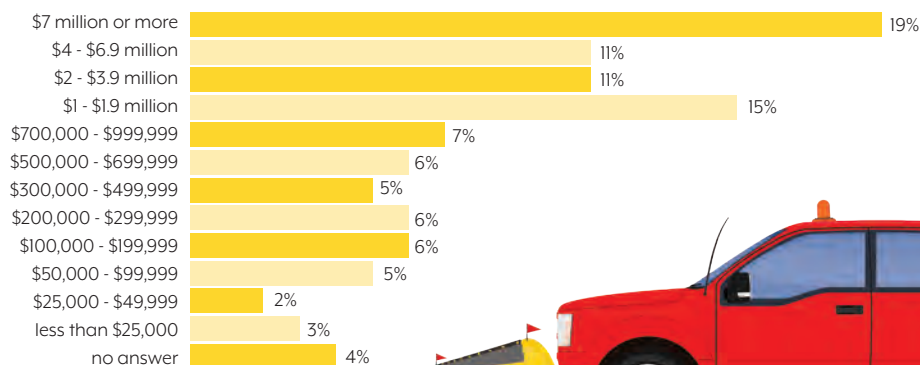
3

Part-time

43

Total current employees

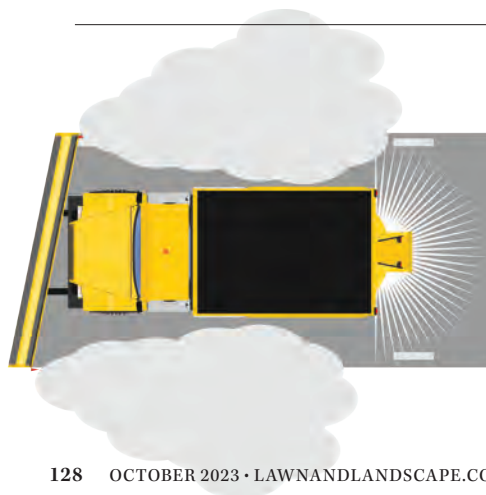
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The pitch: For 2024, Exmark debuted larger Vertex X-Series and compact Vertex E-Series machines.

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For more info: exmark.com

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For more info: JohnDeere.com



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For more info: westernplows.com



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For more info: greenworkscommercial.com

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Event Speaker(s)

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Rob Garcia
Ronnie Holder
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RAISE THE BAR
WITH JUSTIN WHITE
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RAISE THE BAR is a monthly column by Justin White, CEO of K&D Landscaping, written to help improve professionalism in the green industry.

THE POWER OF TRUSTING YOURSELF

→ **WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IN YOUR LIFE** if you started trusting yourself a little more each day? Could this belief in your ability to set and achieve goals truly make a significant difference? A few weeks ago, I found myself preparing a presentation for NALP's Elevate conference. The topic was, "How to build a 5-year plan." During this process, a simple but profound question surfaced in my mind and has since become an obsession: What if I trusted myself more?

As I sat in my office reviewing the PowerPoint presentation I would soon deliver, I had everything prepared — the content, the transitions, the detailed instructions. Yet, I felt something was missing. I sensed that there was more to achieving goals than having a well-structured plan; there was a secret ingredient waiting to be discovered and shared. That day, I left the office feeling somewhat defeated, with a nagging concern that I might let down the conference attendees by only providing a fraction of the required information to achieve success.

But then, while working out at the gym that evening, it struck me like a lightning bolt: The secret sauce is trust! Not just any trust, but the profound ability to trust oneself. I began to reflect on how, back in 2015 when I set K&D's Big Hairy Audacious Goal, our 30 by 30 goal, I possessed an unwavering trust in our capacity to achieve it. This trust extended to my own ability to lead our team toward that audacious goal. Strangely, I had no concrete evidence to back up this belief; in fact, I could list numerous reasons why I was ill-suited to be the CEO and to set such ambitious targets. Nevertheless, I had an unwavering faith in myself and our team's potential.

If you were at the Elevate conference and happened to be in the room when I shared my story, you know exactly what I'm talking about. For those who missed it, stay tuned; I'll be sharing the K&D story in greater detail on our new podcast very soon.

Take a moment today to reflect on the concept of trusting yourself. Do you consistently honor your commitments when it's just about you and your life? Do you keep promises to yourself with the same dedication you do for others? It's likely that, like many of us, you find yourself saying "Yes" when it involves others but "No" when it comes to self-commitments.

In my journey, I've realized that by elevating my personal standards and holding myself accountable, I've been able to build confidence, which naturally leads to self-trust. This self-trust, in turn, propels us toward our goals, creating a positive feedback loop of accomplishment and, yes, even more trust.

As we navigate the responsibilities of leading our companies, providing for our families, advancing our careers and shaping our lives, let's keep this simple yet profound concept in mind. Let's push ourselves beyond the confines of limiting beliefs and venture into the realm of self-trust. Who knows? You might achieve something that once seemed entirely out of reach.

The most rewarding investment you can make is in yourself because knowledge is an asset that nobody can take from you. Condense decades into days by learning from those who have taken the same path and faced similar challenges. I encourage you to register for a conference or event in the near future and devise a plan to ignite transformative action in your life.

Before you go, I'd like to share some exciting news: My good friend Maggie Wymore and I have launched a new podcast, "Trades Talk." Our mission is to share inspiring success stories, promote professionalism in our industry and kindle the entrepreneurial spirit in the next generation. You can now catch "Trades Talk" on all major podcast platforms. **L&L**

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