

Managing Labor

Finding, retaining and managing a fluctuating multi-cultural workforce is just another challenge for today's superintendent.

With the continued reports of golf growth flat-lining, we thought it might be interesting to ask our members to write about how they have been affected in the labor management department. Since labor generally makes up 55-60 percent of a maintenance budget, how are the hard times affecting that aspect of golf course maintenance. Depending on your particular region, the available labor pool may have been affected by construction and hurricane cleanup projects, when laborers could get a few dollars more per hour for these short-term ventures.

Superintendents have had to juggle budget cutbacks or do some soul searching on when to run light on the crew and either postpone projects or back off on some housekeeping chores like pruning and edging, which might affect the aesthetics a bit, but not sacrifice the playing conditions in the primary playing areas. Here are a few comments on the subject of labor management from your peers

TECHNICIANS HARD TO FIND

Within the last six months, the labor market over here has seemed to free up; the building has slowed somewhat and we are having steady flow of applicants. Most are Hispanic and not many speak English. A year ago, most guys in town were really struggling to find help. What is hard to fill are the technician positions: spray techs, irrigation techs, etc. If you have a really good worker on staff, it seems as if the language barrier gets in the way with them reading labels, computers for setting up water etc.

We started this year with English classes for our staff. It is a longterm project and will be years before anything comes of it. One thing that is good is that we have a literacy council here in Bonita Springs and they have

book, computers and other materials available for the guys who really want to learn.

I think I will avoid the overtime question. We still run 5 to 7 hours per week depending if our guys work on the weekend. Each year I have to justify the overtime and it seems to be working. We have slight turnover but not too much – seems like the same one or two positions. Maybe the overtime coupled with the good benefits helps.

Private club operations are so much more different from the courses tied to real estate and/or resorts.

*Matt Taylor, CGCS,
Royal Poinciana Golf Club*

DON'T BACKFILL OPENINGS DURING SLOW TIMES

Over the past three and a half years, finding an adequate supply of labor has been very difficult due to the rapidly expanding housing market. Although I think few will complain about the exponential increase in the value of their homes, the housing market's effect on available manpower has made many superintendents' jobs more difficult. During the recent times of nonstop home construction, the labor pool from which most golf courses in southwest Florida draw their help was finding higher paying jobs. Price competition generally had not been a problem.

I often ask my colleagues how they are doing on labor, and usually they say they are always a couple of guys short.

In the last six months, since the housing market has flatlined and housing contracts are being fulfilled, several large construction companies laid off a large percentage of their work forces due to slow real estate sales. This downturn in the housing market has made a larger labor pool available once again. Right now I have maybe three to five guys a week walk into the shop

looking for work.

As with any position, salary depends on experience, but we typically start a knows- nothing guy out at \$8, knows-some at \$9-plus, knows-a-lot \$10-plus, and is an absolute life saver at \$11 and up. It's a crude but effective pay scale.

I have worked on both sides of the fence in my short career: courses that spend money and those that try to make money. At Collier's Reserve we would budget 3.5 hrs of OT every week and didn't depend on revenues. Here at Naples Grande we are a for-profit organization and the bottom line is everything. We don't compromise quality, but we try very hard to maintain no more than a 40-hour work week during the summer.

What I will do is not backfill any openings and run a few guys short during the slower summer season to save some labor dollars in the budget for any needed overtime during the winter months when you need all the details attended to as soon as they arise. These past two quarters have been the slowest in club history, thus affecting my spending, but we do what we can to try and ease the hemorrhaging money flow.

One way we will make up "project time" is to do it at night. We have two grow-lights mounted to a workman with a lift, we put a generator in the bed and now you have a mobile light stand. We will do the work and then send the staff home early if the payroll budget is running tight.

*Bill Davidson, GCS
Naples Grande Golf Club*

LABOR ISSUES

Availability: Construction still strong here but has slowed down some. Unskilled help readily available, experienced golf course workers more difficult to find, but not impossible.

Starting wages: Inexperienced \$ 8/hour; experienced \$ 9-11/hour; retention: 90 percent of my employees have been here longer than three years. We have had only one new hire in the past 2 years.

About 60 percent of my employees are Haitian, 20 percent Hispanic, 20 percent Caucasian or African American. Almost all speak English well enough to get by. I constantly encourage assistant superintendents to follow up on verbal instructions (be physically present to demonstrate) to those with weaker English skills. As long as we exhibit patience and willingness to teach and demonstrate, language is no barrier at all. If I need a new employee, my current employees usually refer enough candidates to me for me to fill the position without further advertising.

We allow all employees to work up to 6 hours of overtime each week. They were hired with that understanding

and Club has remained committed to honoring that agreement and allowing them that much overtime each week. About 80 percent of crew chooses to work that much overtime each week.

Our labor hours have not been reduced. We work diligently to ensure that our crew members are productive. Its my job to give good direction and supervision for necessary tasks, and not just keep employees occupied doing "busy" work.

I currently have one part-time (30 hours/week) employee. He is semi-retired after working full time here for 20 years. I have had a couple of other similar employees here during my eight years here. Students tend to be a challenge due to scheduling conflicts and restraints, so we have had only three or four (one at any given time) here in eight years. Since our crew size does not fluctuate on a seasonal basis, we have not needed part-time

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SUPER TIP

Words That Stick

By Darren J. Davis

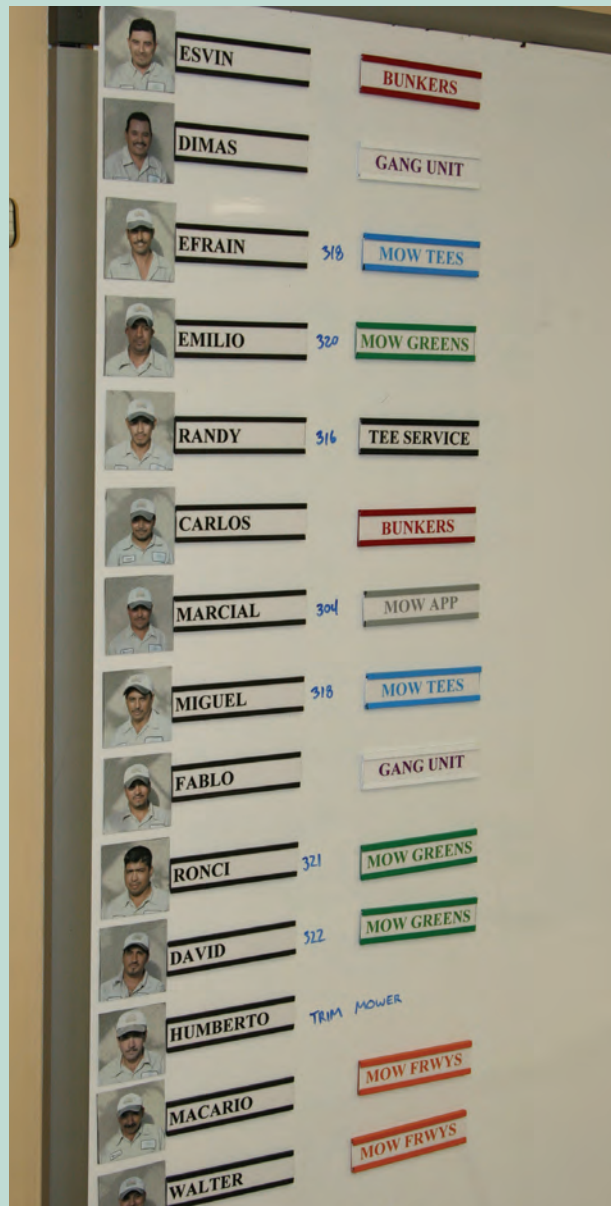
Since I am not one of them, I have always admired individuals with exceptional handwriting. Neat handwriting is definitely a skill I haven't mastered. In fact, given a choice I might use the paper with the dotted middle line used to teach handwriting in elementary school. With this said, the writing of the daily crew assignments on our dry erase board has always been a responsibility I have delegated to my assistant. However, we recently designed a system which, among other things, eliminates at least 75% of the daily writing required.

The first step in creating the new system was to purchase 4 x 1-inch magnetic holders. These are the same style of holder that we use to affix our employees' names to the assignment board (see "Names and Numbers for the New Guys" in the summer 2004 issue of *The Florida Green*). The magnetic label holders were purchased through TIMEWISE, a manufacturer of dry erase boards and accessories (www.timewiseboards.com). A package of twelve holders is \$13.85 and they are available in eight different colors.

While the magnetic holders were on order, my assistant and I decided on the eight most common daily tasks. These included mowing greens (mow greens), mowing tees (mow tees), mowing fairways (mow frwys), mowing approaches (mow app), mowing rough (gang unit), changing the hole location (change cups), bunkers and tee service. We then typed the tasks in Microsoft Word using 38-point Times New Roman font. After printing and laminating the page, we cut the individual words/phrases to fit snugly inside the magnetic holders. The lamination process could be skipped if you do not own a laminating machine. However, since the cost for us was less than \$5 we chose to laminate the paper to increase its durability and enable easy cleaning.

Since I do not write the daily assignments on the board, the biggest advantage of this new system for me is that it enables me to quickly inspect the assigned jobs and the quantity of people doing each. For example, if I wanted to see if my assistant sent out one or two fairway units I

just look on the board for the orange colored label holders. Or, if I wanted to make sure he had at least four walking greens mowers assigned I just count the green colored magnetic holder.



We created a total of 30 magnetic assignment labels so the total cost of the project was under \$45.

seasonal workers. If we need extra help for hurricane cleanup or help to prepare for the opening of the season, we use contract laborers on an as-needed basis to fill in the gaps.

I know a number of South Florida superintendents who rely heavily (up to 30-40 percent of their crew on some

days) on contract labor to supplement their regular crews. Though it has challenges, this method seems to work well for accomplishing low-skill golf-course maintenance tasks like flymowing, edging bunkers and cart paths, etc.

*Bob Randquist, CGCS
Boca Rio Country Club*

EXPERIENCED HELP SOMETIMES AVAILABLE

The labor market in north Tampa has been good of late. It seems that every time we have an opening, there is someone filling out an application. Lately, we have had several applicants who have golf course experience. This

is not always the case. New home construction has slowed considerably in our area. Right now, that job market is not affecting us.

We will bring on a new hire with golf course experience on at \$ 8.50/hour. No experience, \$8. Six of our 16 employees are of Hispanic background. Most speak and understand English. We utilize several crew members to interpret when necessary.

As at most courses we have been asked to keep overtime to a minimum. We schedule overtime for special events, aerification & topdressing.

We have been reduced in manpower by 1.5 workers. Budget reduction for payroll reduced by \$ 25,000 for 2007. For days of scheduled maintenance such as verticutting, aerification, we will start some crew early then overlap by having some come in later in the day to cover what is left to finish.

I do not use any part time help. The best way we have found help has

been by referral. If someone leaves, our Hispanic workers usually know of someone who needs a job.

*Bill Kistler, GCS
Tampa Palms G&CC*

MANY JOB CANDIDATES DON'T MEET BASIC REQUIREMENTS

There seem to be a lot of people looking for jobs. The problem we're having at Maple Leaf is that our insurance requires that we hire people who have a driver's license and we are a drug-free workplace. We've had problems finding people to meet these two criteria.

Our starting wages are low (\$8-8.50/hr) but we do offer a full benefits package, including uniforms, paid vacations, paid sick time, paid health, dental and vision insurance and 401K contributions. My staff right now consists of mostly older workers who are retired from another job. We have a good core staff, some of whom have

been at Maple Leaf for 10 - 25 years, but a few positions keep turning over. We have no Hispanic workers.

Overtime is generally limited to weekend work except when we are shorthanded or have special projects. Hours and manpower have not been cut, but I have a staff of only eight, inclusive. I have to be creative on a daily basis to get things done. I am budgeted for two part-time people. I have one at the moment and a second new employee waiting for drug test results. The current employee is a retiree and the new one is a student.

Comments: Given the size of my staff, I need to have quality people fill all my positions. I can't waste a pay slot. If I could offer larger salaries, it would definitely be easier to find good people.

*Nancy Miller, GCS
Maple Leaf G&CC*

Photo of The Falls C.C. staff by Joel Jackson.



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