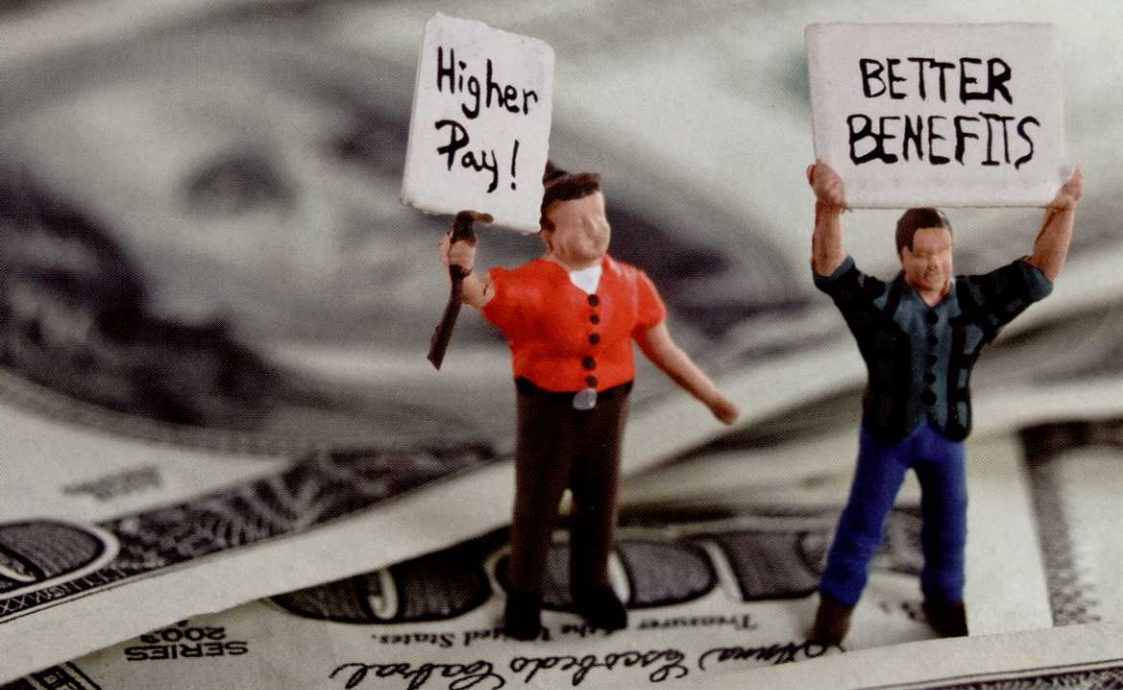


BY MICHAEL COLEMAN



# HIGHER PAY VS. BETTER BENEFITS

Knowing employees' preferences boosts retention and satisfaction

**Y**ou've seen the great match ups: Ali vs. Frazier, the Red Sox vs. Yankees, and at your course, pay vs. benefits.

Retaining the highest caliber staff takes significant time and insight into what energizes quality employees. Throw in the turmoil brought on by a floundering economy and tightening budgets, and situations can get pretty dicey from a staffing perspective.

Superintendents should ensure they have the best staff possible by examining what kind of employees they want to attract and what they value most in terms of compensation and work environment.

Some full-time employees emphasize excellent benefits, such as health care coverage and vacation time. Seasonal employees may prefer

to be paid more instead of taking health insurance they might not use or having access to a 401(k) plan they don't need. Retirees might be looking at the opportunity to work outdoors more and stay productive during their later years compared to a big paycheck or receiving additional insurance coverage.

"There's a lot of give and take regarding salary or benefits," says Lyne Tumlinson, director of career services for the GCSAA.

Much of what a superintendent can offer is dictated by the type of facility. Consider a high-end private club vs. a municipal golf course. A private facility likely pays a higher salary, but the benefits usually aren't as good as a municipality, where the crew receives the same benefits as all municipal employees, Tumlinson says.

## RETENTION AND COMPETITION

Optimizing the value of the pay and benefits a facility offers is more important now because of the economic recession. Superintendent Ricky Craig at Shingle Creek Golf Club in Orlando, Fla., says the sour economy has hurt the region, and his staff feels it.

"The cost of living has increased exponentially, and the pay increases haven't," he says. "In any business that's in a down economy, you have work, but you're struggling to get by because you're not making the wages that would be adequate to survive."

Some of those challenges are inherent to the golf industry.

"The salary range for equipment operators isn't very competitive compared to other markets, such as construction, or any other market for that matter," Craig says.

What's normally positive for employees, a good benefits package, seems to be valued less by the Shingle Creek crew.

"We have a decent benefit package, but most of our guys are more interested in their checks, not necessarily benefits," Craig says.

Because benefits have to be offered to the employees, even though they don't appreciate them, means some compensation goes unnoticed and underused. Some Single Creek employees don't understand the importance of being able to go to the doctor and be taken care of for just a small co-pay, Craig says.

Al Bathum, CGCS, at Cascade Hills Country Club in Grand Rapids, Mich., sees a variety of perspectives from employees. Bathum's full-time crew receives health insurance coverage, but seasonal staff must pay the entire premium if they want coverage. While he's had a pretty high return rate among the seasonal crew, the lack of insurance makes it difficult to retain experienced crew members.

"That's one thing that doesn't help bring anybody back," he says.

On the other end of the spectrum, Bathum has a number of retirees with other insurance, so coverage isn't a factor for them. Bathum tries to keep pay and benefits competitive with other industries in his area. He knows what the local landscaping companies pay – his employees make almost as much. Bathum pays his



year-round employees \$12 to \$16 an hour and seasonal staff about \$10 an hour.

"There aren't as many manufacturing jobs in our area anymore, which helps our retention," he says.

Bathum also improves retention by focusing on that from the beginning, during hiring.

"First off, we'd like to hire people who would like to return more than one season," he says. "If we can get three, four, five seasons out of them, we're not going to have to retrain."

Seeing the potential of several seasons of work can be a benefit for the employee as well, but often, the biggest draw for an employee depends on his personal situation. For example, some of Craig's laborers prefer slightly higher pay rather than benefits because – being a large Hispanic population – they're looking out for families and want to be able to cover expenses at home.

"You can't eat benefits," Craig says.

John Cunningham, CGCS, director of golf and landscape operations at the Four Seasons Resort and Club, Dallas at Las Colinas, agrees. Having the right employees is the key factor for the success of the 36-hole facility near Fort Worth, Texas, home of the EDS Byron Nelson

Championship.

"There are some employees just looking for that extra dollar an hour," Cunningham says. "But ultimately, we're looking for the employee who realizes and understands the value of insurance, employee benefits, uniforms and a 401(k) match."

If the Four Seasons attracts that type of employee, the club is better off, Cunningham says. On the other hand, employees who don't use benefits, such as insurance, are often sick and miss more work.

#### A GOOD MIX

Recruiting people who see the value in employee benefits, such as health care, taps into a traditional human-resources approach to benefits, which encourages companies to offer health insurance because it promotes good health, as well as higher productivity with less work missed. Variety among a staff can increase productivity, too.



Cunningham

"It's nice to have a broad spectrum of employees because the young people learn from the retirees' work ethic and Hispanic employees, because their work ethic is second to none," Bathum says.

Bathum estimates his crew is about one-third retirees, one-third Hispanic and one-third college age.

"It can be a challenge if superintendents mix certain retirees, with say, college students, because of generational differences," Tumlinson says. "That's something superintendents are learning a lot about: how to deal with Generation Y, and what makes them tick, and how to make it a win-win situation."

Bathum found ways to keep his crew engaged, using fun outings to try to encourage a light atmosphere. The crew takes a long canoe trip together every year.

"Just being together, having a little bit of fun, especially the young kids, they like that," he says.

Sometimes it's the little things, the soft benefits, that add up to a more positive experience for employees. The extras count when it comes to keeping employees satisfied.

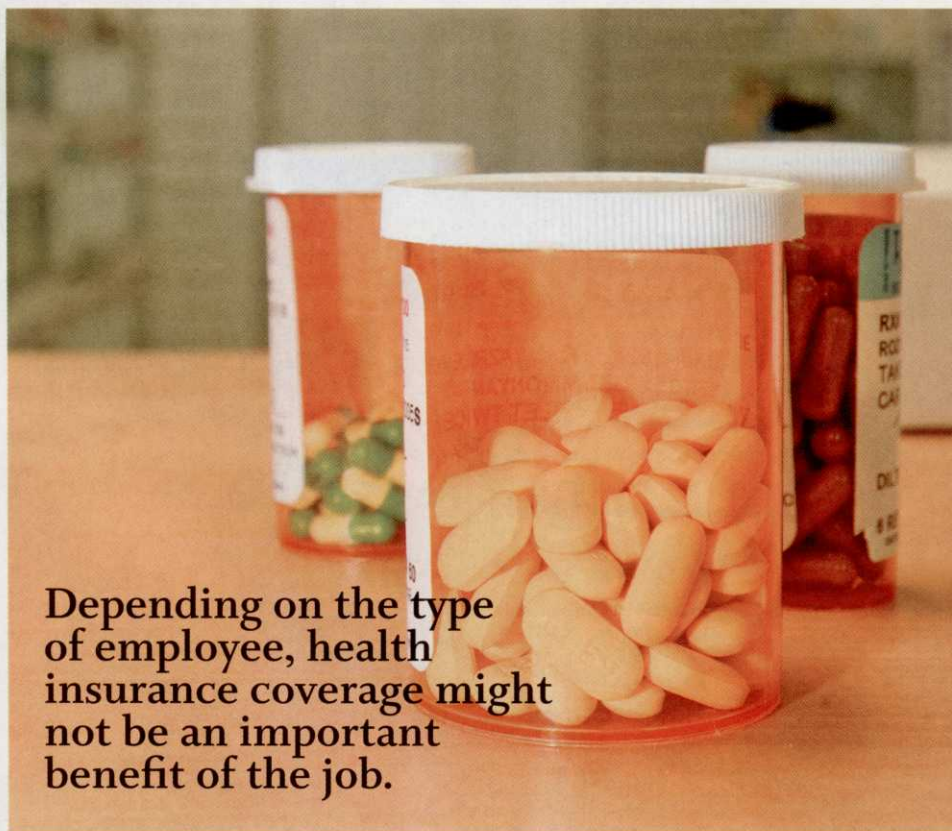
"They go above and beyond here at the Four Seasons to make sure the employees know they're appreciated," Cunningham says, citing several ways employees are recognized. "That goes a long way. Everyone has a choice where they want to work."

#### ILLEGAL CRACKDOWN, MORE TRAINING

Laws can have a significant impact on staffing. Trevor Monreal, the superintendent at Lone Tree Golf Club in Chandler, Ariz., had to make staffing-level adjustments since taking over in September of 2007. Lone Tree is the first public course at which Monreal has been superintendent. What started as a staff of 15 has been reduced to 10 people, including a mechanic and irrigation technician. Monreal gladly pays more overtime for his high-quality crew.

Monreal has had to be more selective when hiring and retaining staff, primarily because of the Legal Arizona Workers Act, which has been enforced since March 1, 2008. It requires employers to verify, through a federal Web site, that new employees are authorized to work in the U.S. legally. There are stiff penalties for knowingly hiring someone without legal documents.

"The illegal labor has allowed us to be lazy,"



Depending on the type of employee, health insurance coverage might not be an important benefit of the job.



The lack of health insurance makes it difficult to keep experienced seasonal crew members on board at Cascade Hills Country Club in Grand Rapids, Mich., according to superintendent Al Bathum.

Monreal says.

Now, with an emphasis on hiring people who have all the legal paperwork in place, there are fewer people to consider for employment. One way Monreal dealt with that was by hiring people who worked for him at other courses in the area.

"The face of entry-level labor has changed in Arizona," Monreal says.

It used to be a superintendent could ask one of his best employees to bring a friend or relative, who is a good worker, to work with him. Now, employers aren't willing to take the risk in a climate of increased enforcement. Additionally, some workers applying with the right paperwork don't have the experience they need, Monreal says.

"At first, it was discouraging; then I realized it's my job to train them," he says. "We shouldn't be looking for guys who know a lot about golf course maintenance."

Monreal has been focusing more on teaching and coaching less-experienced employees.

"It's not just this industry, but many industries," he says. "We're not taking the time to train them."

#### CONSISTENCY, LEADERSHIP

To find and retain the best people for an operation, superintendents need to examine their needs. Monreal has focused more on consistency because his staffing levels have declined as a result of budget constraints. He's able to offer limited benefits to his crew, which is provided with uniforms, boots and jackets. Health insurance isn't offered.

To meet budget work, Monreal is choosing to staff his crew with fewer workers who perform at a higher level. He spreads the same budget across a smaller staff, meaning those who work harder and earn overtime are able to make more than if the crew still numbered 15.

All said, a crew's success depends on the superintendent's leadership.

"If a superintendent does a good job of training, mentoring and helping the crew feel like a team and understanding how they're working together, they won't have a problem with having to hire less-experienced staff because people will stay from year to year," Tumlinson says. **GCI**

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