

# The Trouble with Teens

Before adding a teenage worker to your crew, be sure you fully understand the many problems that can accompany him to work

BY BECKY MOLLENKAMP

**H**iring teens for your work force makes sense in many ways. They are available when you need them most (especially during peak summer months), they have youthful strength and stamina, and they are affordable.

"You don't have to pay teens a lot," says Mike Sosik, owner of Harrisville GC in Woodstock, Conn. "But when you get people in their 30s, they want to make real money,"

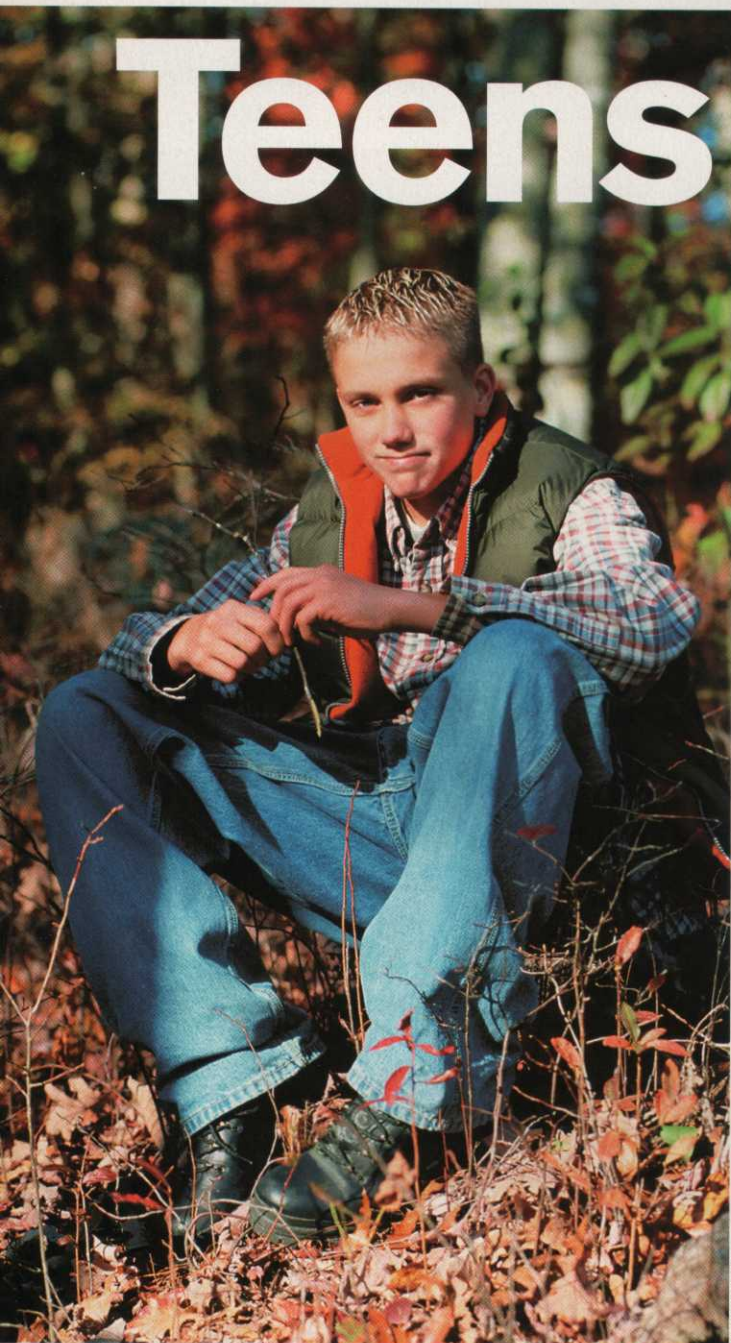
But don't hang the help-wanted sign up at a local high school just yet. Before adding a teenager to your crew, be sure you fully understand the many problems that can accompany him or her to work.

Employers are responsible for understanding and following the voluminous federal and state laws that protect young workers. They must provide a safe work environment and proper training. To top it off, they have to deal with many teens' questionable work ethics and attitudes.

And no matter what management does, teens are still more likely to take risks and make bad decisions. That may explain why each year thousands of teens are injured — and some even killed — while at work. These on-the-job injuries can be costly to both the worker and the employer.

## Deadly driving

There is no better example of the risks of hiring teens than the story of a September 2000 accident at a private golf club north of Boston. On one of the busiest days of the year, a 16-year-old golf-bag room attendant crashed the golf car he was driving into a wooden deck attached to the building that housed the golf-bag room. The vehicle slid three feet under the deck, shearing off the steering wheel and leaving the driver pinned between the cart and the deck's floorboards. Although his co-workers immediately called for help, which arrived within minutes, the



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boy was pronounced dead at the hospital.

At the 86-year-old country club, 30 of its 130 summer workers typically were under the age of 18. The country club's handbook had general written procedures for each position but did not include specific techniques on how required tasks should be completed. There was also no designated safety representative at the club.

Although federal law and Massachusetts state law prohibit minors from operating motorized vehicles on the job, 17-year-olds are allowed to do "incidental and occasional" driving (no more than one-third of a work day or no more than 20 percent of a work week). No criminal charges were filed in the case, but the federal occupational safety agency fined the country club \$1,000 for not reporting the death within eight hours. A civil case is pending.

The Massachusetts teen was one of 73 teens killed on the job in 2000 (a teen worker died every fifth day that year).

Although teens are barred from the most dangerous occupations, they're nearly twice more likely to be injured than adults. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a research arm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, estimates that 200,000 of the 5.5 million adolescents with jobs are injured in the work place each year.

Teens are killed at work most often while driving or traveling as passengers in vehicles, according to NIOSH.

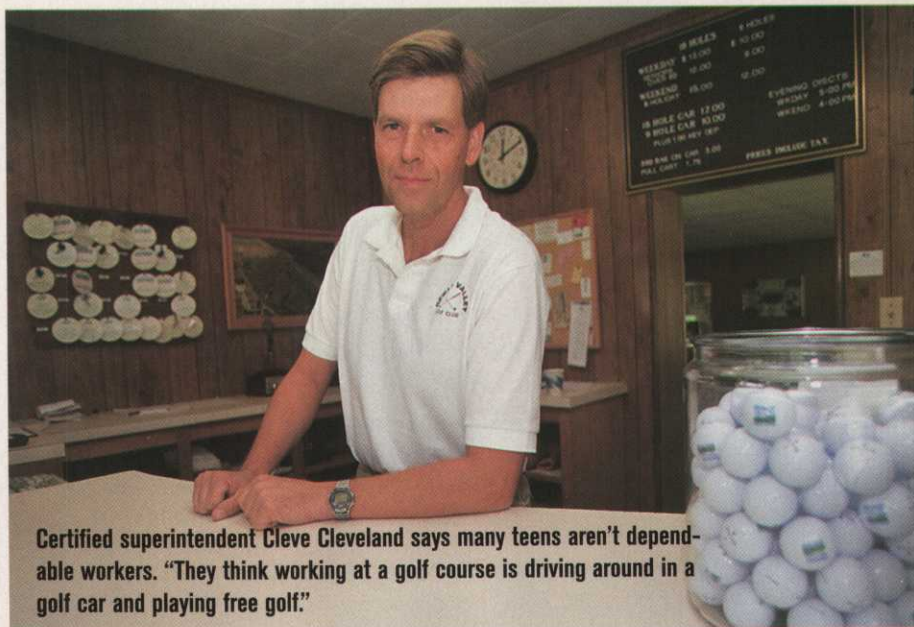
"One of the reasons I avoid hiring teens is because of the safety issues and the age requirements for riding carts," Sosik says. "You can't have someone working for you, certainly in the maintenance department, and not have them drive a vehicle. It's just a tough situation. There have been so many safety issues lately with kids and golf cars."

Most teens have been trained in how to do their jobs, but training on issues such as dealing with angry customers and avoiding injury is less common. In one study, more than half of 14- to 16-year-olds injured on the job said they had not received any training on how to prevent the injuries they sustained. A supervisor was present at the time of the injury in only about 20 percent of the cases.

### Take action

Preventing injury and death is the employer's responsibility as much as (or more than) the worker's, especially with underage employees.

Federal and state laws on child work-place safety can be con-



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fusing but if you hire anyone under the age of 18, it's your responsibility to understand them. Basically, adolescent workers are protected by two federal laws (the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Act), as well as the child labor laws in the states. (You can pick up a copy of the child labor statutes at your local state labor office.)

Many teens are injured when trying to please their bosses, according to NIOSH research. If you choose to employ teens, take these steps to protect them:

- Assess teens' tasks and revise them as needed to eliminate the potential for injury or illness. Likewise, make the work site as safe as possible.

- Evaluate the equipment adolescents operate to be sure it is legal and safe. Label the equipment young workers cannot operate.

- Train young workers to recognize hazards and to be competent in safe work practices. Training should include what to do if they get injured.

- Provide appropriate supervision of teen workers.
- Implement a mentoring or buddy system for young workers.

- Develop a safety and health program that involves workers and management. Evaluate the program each year.

### Bad attitude

Although work-place injuries are the most serious problem employers must worry about when hiring teens, there is another that is far more rampant.

"Many teens have no work ethic," says Cleve Cleveland, certified superintendent of Newark Valley GC in New York.

More than just a boss' gripe, lazy and whiny teen workers are a big deal, Cleveland says. If a teen doesn't show up (because

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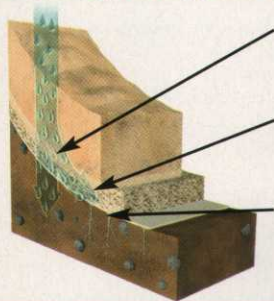
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## Teens

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he was up too late partying or because he'd rather go swimming), it's Cleveland who has to get the work done.

The change in attitude has been swift and significant, Cleveland says. Just 15 years ago, a teen would work every summer throughout high school and college.

“Now I never have the same one back, and I'm lucky to get the same one all summer,” he says. In fact, Cleveland typically goes through six teens each summer to keep just two positions filled. “They aren't dependable. They think working at a golf course is driving around in a golf car and playing free golf.”

### Protecting Teens

If you hire teens, keep these points in mind:

- Assess teens' tasks and revise them as needed to eliminate the potential for injury or illness.
- Evaluate the equipment adolescents operate to be sure it is legal and safe.
- Train young workers to recognize hazards.
- Provide appropriate supervision.
- Implement a mentoring or buddy system.
- Develop a safety and health program that involves workers and management.

John McClaren worked at a golf course all through high school and college and loved the job. Now as superintendent of the Madison (Pa.) Club, he hires few teens because of their attitudes. “They end up costing more in the long run by not showing up or not doing things right the first time,” he says.

When superintendents hire young workers, it is typically to do odds-and-ends that would otherwise tie up the more skilled full-time crew. The problem is, most teens are less than enthusiastic about sorting for recycling, emptying garbage or trim mowing.

“They realize it's real work — manual labor — and some of them start thinking it isn't what they signed up for,” Sosik says. “Maybe they thought it was going to be leaning on a rake and then going out and playing free golf after work. It's when you ask them to actually use the rake that you have problems.”

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### Older is better

Given the potential hazards (both injury and attitude), many employers simply steer clear of hiring teens. Instead, they opt for slightly more expensive — but much more reliable — college students.

Once a child turns 18, of course, he or she can work any job for any number of hours and in any type of job because child labor rules no longer apply. Also, college workers tend to work harder and whine less.

“They are more mature,” Sosik says. “They are starting to realize that someday they are going to have to work for a living.” ■

*Mollenkamp is a free-lance writer from Des Moines, Iowa.*