

I've lost count of the number of great superintendents I know who've finally thrown up their hands and given up the profession over the past few years.

For some, the physical and emotional demands of the job are too much. Two or three decades of uncertainty, long hours and lack of recognition will take their toll. For others who are forced by a new general manager or club president to "seek other opportunities," the daunting challenge of finding an equivalent position in one's 40s or 50s is more than they can stand. This drain of veteran expertise is a quiet crisis in our industry that will continue as long as superintendents remain in the underappreciated and overworked category.

For most who no longer wish to practice the art and science of greenkeeping, the prospect of moving to the private side — selling turf products to their former peers — is a tantalizing one.

The question facing these potential sales side recruits is whether the grass is really greener on the other side of the superintendent vs. salesperson fence. Here are a few observations on the matter gleaned from years of talking with those who've made that transition.

Get a life

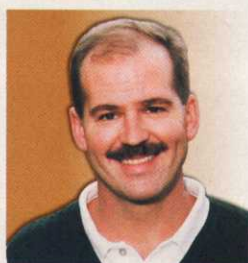
I'm fond of relating the highly illustrative story of a Pennsylvania superintendent I bumped into during a family weekend at a mountain resort a few years ago. After exchanging some pleasantries and introducing our families to each other, he pulled me aside and asked in a whisper, "You're not going to tell anybody I was away from my course on a Saturday during the season, are you?"

The most common thing you hear from the fence-jumper is, "Hey, I finally get weekends off and I'm starting to recognize my wife and kids again." There's no question that's a benefit. It's as if these folks have finally come up for air after being underwater for years. They feel they finally have a real life.

But it's not always an endless vacation on the sales side. The time demands of the course

Always Look Before You Leap

BY PAT JONES



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are to some extent replaced by the time demands of business. Those constant cell-phone calls from your crew or boss are replaced by constant cell-phone calls from customers who have urgent needs or problems.

Those weekends spent baby-sitting a sick pump station are replaced by weekends standing in trade-show booths at turf conferences or attending corporate sales meetings at the Cleveland Holiday Inn. In short, there's hard work, time demands and pressure on the sales side too ... they're just a little different.

Job security

Another constant refrain from superintendents is, "They can fire me for nothing!" There's no question that horror stories like these are abundant. An influential member takes a dislike to a superintendent, works his or her way onto the club board and moves heaven and earth to fire him. It all adds up to getting fired for reasons beyond your control. It's unfair and it's short-sighted, but it is a possibility for every superintendent.

That never happens to salespeople, right? Well, on the other side of that fence, you have mergers, acquisitions, downsizing and bosses with ridiculous expectations (does that last part sound familiar?).

I occasionally run into sales representatives who are pining for a return to turf management. For them, it's easier to put the upsides of being turf managers — those beautiful sunrises on the course, satisfaction in a job well done — into perspective with the negatives. Always remember that before you take the leap over the fence.

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