


It doesn't take  
Charles Schwab  
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that increasing  
employees' pay  
can help solve  
your labor woes

# Time to Ante Up



BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

## "Help wanted."

 That sign is posted in front of golf course maintenance facilities from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Ore. Many superintendents need quality course workers like George W. Bush needs a spike in the approval polls. Badly.

But there's a problem — a big as a waste bunker-sized problem. Many laborers don't want to work on golf course maintenance crews for what they consider piddly pay.

You can't fault them. If you had a choice between working at the supermarket for \$9 an hour (no weekends) or working on a golf course maintenance crew for \$8 an hour (on weekends), which would you pick?

And even if someone takes a job on a golf course maintenance crew, he or she might be waiting for something better to come along. So a high turnover rate is another problem.

"This is a *really* tough issue," says Lyne Tumlinson, director of career services for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA).

It's a *really* tough issue because there is so much below the problem's surface. For starters, maintenance budgets at many public and private golf courses have been reduced to the point that they can't be reduced anymore, Tumlinson points out. So courses must find the money somewhere if they decide to pay employees more.

The labor problem also feeds on itself. Because employees come and go, superintendents must retrain workers, which costs time and money. It also equates to more inexpe-

rienced employees, which could have a negative impact on course conditioning.

And who takes the heat if the course appears as ragged as an aging rock star? The superintendent. And, yes, superintendents are known to lose their jobs over this matter.

While some superintendents have solved their labor woes by hiring immigrant labor through the U.S. government's H-2B visa program, others struggle to attract and retain reliable workers. *Golfdom* conducted a recent survey that asked superintendents: What are your main management and job challenges? Many listed labor problems as their answer. And several respondents qualified their answers with lack of good pay for course workers as being at the root of their labor problems.

"We tend to have a lot of staff turnover," Phil Fitzgerald, superintendent of Steele Canyon Golf Club in Jamul, Calif., responded in the survey. "I have not had a full crew for more than six months in the last 10 years. This is a direct result of very low wages for staff other than the superintendent and assistant superintendent."

There's an obvious question linked to this dilemma: Is it time to increase the pay for golf course maintenance workers to attract more potential employees and to reduce turnover?

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The happy crew from Walloon Lake Country Club: (front row from left) Spencer Henley, Ben Hayes, Jay Wheatley, Jamie Dunson, Hannah Bissonette and Carl Reiter; (back row from left) Charles Brannon, Matt Rankin, Brandon Belton, Mark Gardener, superintendent Dan Bissonette and Bill White.

If you're a good boss,  
chances are more  
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It doesn't take Charles Schwab to conclude that increasing employees' pay can improve the situation, perhaps dramatically. Boosting course workers' wages can provide them with more satisfaction and motivation, among other things. Superintendents can then benefit by having harder-working and more reliable workers, which translates into less turnover on their crews.

Many superintendents agree that money will solve many of their workplace woes. But they also say that money alone may not satisfy employees. They stress that it's also vital to empower employees and let them know they are valued.

Because it was difficult for him to keep his crew members feeling empowered when he thought they weren't receiving just compensation, Richard Mullikin, superintendent of Bonita Bay Club East in Naples, Fla., decided to approach his club's owners about the situation. Other superintendents at the five-course facility joined Mullikin. They

voiced their concerns that something had to be done to reduce turnover.

"We needed to prevent a mass exodus from here for higher-paying jobs," says Mullikin, who oversees two 14-person crews on two Tom Fazio designs at Bonita Bay. All are full-time employees.

To increase the hourly wage, Mullikin and the other superintendents agreed to trim money elsewhere. They won't increase their maintenance budgets next year, and they agreed to cut back on new equipment purchases.

Mullikin says the labor problem ensued when the club eliminated overtime pay in 2002 to cut spending. "The problem wasn't originally about the starting wage," he adds.

The overtime pay helped inflate some employees' paychecks, especially those who were working 55-hour weeks. They missed that money when it was gone.

"We probably had about a 20 percent turnover," Mullikin says.

A pay raise was also needed because

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competition is stiff for labor throughout Florida. Construction is a vibrant industry in the state, especially in the aftermath of the hurricanes that have ravaged Florida in recent years. Construction companies attract potential golf course laborers with good-paying temporary jobs.

"The competition for that work force is getting tougher down here," Mullikin says.

So last December, Mullikin says Bonita Bay's owners implemented a raise from \$8 an hour to up to \$10 an hour.

"That put a smile on everybody's faces," Mullikin says. "It's amazing what 50 cents to 75 cents more an hour can do."

In addition, the company also awarded hourly employees a bonus. "Some people received \$1,000 before taxes, which is pretty sizeable," Mullikin says.

Like Mullikin, superintendent Dan Bissonette also recently got the go-ahead from the private club members at Walloon Lake Country Club in Petoskey, Mich., to begin paying his maintenance crew workers more money. Walloon Lake increased hourly wages from \$8.40 up to \$10. Bissonette says the club's

members, comprised of successful business owners, realized they had to make the move to attract potential employees. It also helped that the course doesn't have any debt.

"They realize it takes money to at least get people in the door," Bissonette says. "We can pick and choose after they are here. You don't have to take what you are given."

Bissonette's crew consists of eight seasonal laborers in addition to an assistant superintendent and mechanic. The latter two are the only full-time employees. Two of the employees work from April through November and the rest are summer help comprised of college and high school students.

It had been difficult for Bissonette to retain the summer workers by paying them \$8.40 an hour. Last summer, Bissonette hired 24 people throughout the golf season. "We had only six people last until the end of the year," he says, noting that some workers quit because they thought the pay was too low for the work they performed. But the wage increase this year paid off almost immediately. One hard-working employee turned down a higher-paying job to stay at Walloon Lake after receiving the increase.

Bissonette says it was time to increase the hourly wage. "Can we afford to give golf course maintenance personnel a decent living? For the sake of the game, I don't think we can afford not to," he says.

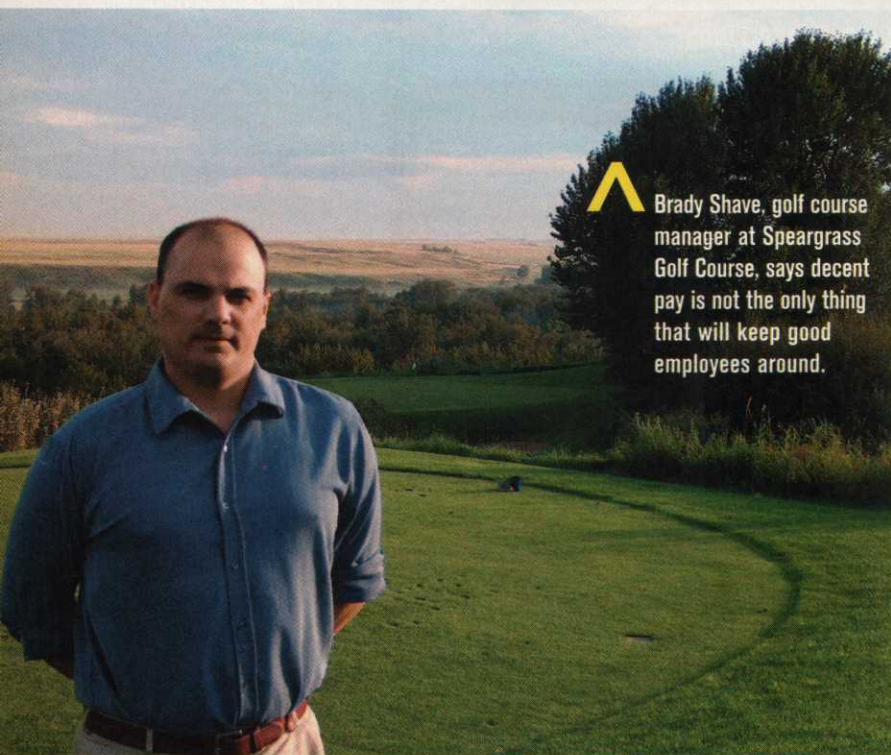
When Bissonette began at Walloon Lake 16 years ago, the club had a small and low-paid staff. Soon the club upped its employees' pay and had enough job applicants that it had applications on file.

"But we got away from that, and we didn't have anybody on file while other clubs were offering 401(k)s, health benefits and clothing allowances to their staffs," Bissonette says. "Hopefully, we're back in the game."

At Speargrass Golf Course, located in a small town about 30 minutes from Calgary, Alberta, golf course manager Brady Shave recently increased pay to seasonal workers to about \$12 an hour (Canadian). That might not be enough, though.

Competition among businesses is steep for laborers in the area, and Shave has had a difficult time attracting potential employees to

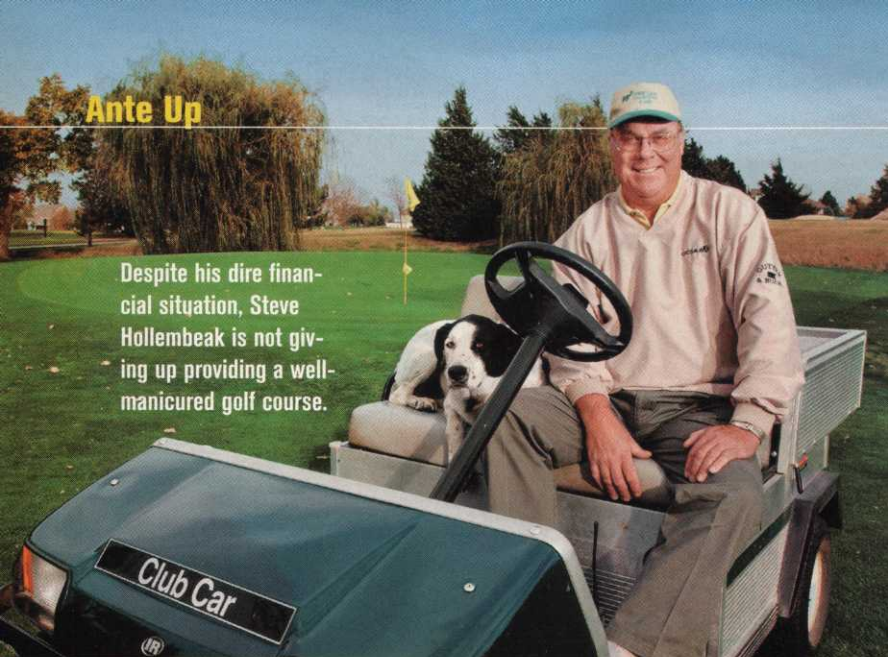
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**A** Brady Shave, golf course manager at Speargrass Golf Course, says decent pay is not the only thing that will keep good employees around.



Despite his dire financial situation, Steve Hollembeak is not giving up providing a well-manicured golf course.



## Despite Labor Woes, Superintendent Maintains

Somehow, Steve Hollembeak is making ends meet at Winfield (Kan.) Country Club.

The certified superintendent, who has been at the club for 27 years, has watched his maintenance budget decline dramatically with the club's membership the last few years. Gone are the days when Hollembeak had nearly \$290,000 to spend. That's when he employed a well-paid assistant and eight experienced crew members, and could purchase almost anything he needed.

But a struggling local economy and new competition in the area caused Winfield's membership to drop from 300 to 200 since 2001. The club's maintenance budget is now about \$200,000. Hollembeak employs three full-time employees from March through November and a part-time mechanic.

Hollembeak was asked earlier this year to cut another \$20,000 from his already-depleted budget. "When you only have two line items on the whole budget that are more than \$4,000, there are only so many places you can cut," he says.

So the 53-year-old superintendent, who doesn't even employ an assistant, slashed his own salary about 75 percent to help balance the bottom line.

Needless to say, Hollembeak's crew is inexperienced and shorthanded, and there is no money to hire more experienced employees.

"There's really no market out there for us to get members," Hollembeak says, knowing that only more members will infuse his maintenance budget with more capital to spend.

Hollembeak is not complaining, though. He's not bitter about cutting his pay. He understands the circumstances. He's also not giving up on providing members with a well-manicured course. Despite the financial strain on his budget, Hollembeak has found a few creative methods to help him get the work done. He struck a deal with one member who mows the course's fairways for free membership dues. Another member, who knows Hollembeak's situation, mows the intermediate cut a few times a week for free.

"I bought him dinner the other night," Hollembeak says. "That's a small price to pay."

Hollembeak has also implemented four member work nights a year. About 15 to 20 members usually show up to trim trees and perform other tasks.

Hollembeak says he doesn't have any answers about how to improve the situation. He'll just try to keep on keeping on.

He does know one thing, however. He doesn't want to leave.

"This is home," Hollembeak says.

— By Larry Aylward

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Speargrass, a daily-fee, 18-hole course that opened in 2003. Because of its distance from the populated city, Shave says it's more difficult to attract employees. And it's getting even tougher because of the increased price of gas.

"We rely more on the smaller towns around to attract labor," Shave says.

One of those towns is Strathmore, located about 20 minutes from Speargrass, which has outfitted the course with several employees. But Shave is concerned that Strathmore, which is booming with new businesses, will cease to be the providing ground that it has been because of new employers coming to town.

"It's tough to get a 20-year-old to drive 20 minutes at 5:30 in the morning to make \$12 an hour when he can sleep in and go to work [somewhere else] in the afternoon for the same amount of money," Shave says.

Shave's crew numbers 14 people. About half of his employees work from March through October and are considered full-season laborers and return from year to year. The remaining half is comprised of college and high school students hired for summer help. They are the workers Shave has a hard time attracting and retaining. "We're not always their first choice so we have to offer a little more to entice them to come here," Shave says.

Year-end bonuses help. At Speargrass, if seasonal employees make it through the season, they'll receive an additional 50 cents for the hours they work. If a crew member works 1,000 hours, he or she receives a \$500 bonus.

"It gives them something to work for, and it also gives me a little protection that they won't leave a few weeks early," Shave says.

But Shave says he's learned that employees desire more than money. Doing more for them than just paying a competitive wage will help keep them around. At Speargrass, workers can take advantage of inexpensive housing near the club. The club owns a farmhouse nearby with four bedrooms, and employees can live there for \$200 a month. Then they don't have to drive very far to work. That matters when gas is more than \$4 a gallon in Canada.

"Maybe they can justify making a little less money to work here if the cost of living is less," Shave says.



In addition, Speargrass offers free golf to employees and offers its clubhouse restaurant food at half price.

Shave says attracting employees is a lot like marketing a course to golfers. "It's not so much about wages or price, it's about value," he adds.

Tumlinson says the easiest solution to combat the labor problem is to pay employees more money. But while there has been a slight upswing in rounds nationally, Tumlinson says the people making the financial decisions at golf courses are wary of pouring a lot of money into their facilities.

"Everybody needs to be careful of the bottom line," she says. "The superintendent needs to understand that as well as everyone. ... Everybody needs to be cognizant of what the employer's needs are, and at the same time the employer needs to be cognizant of what the employees' needs are."

"But if the cash flow is not there, there might be some creative ways to increase the entire compensation package even if it doesn't come down to the salary or the wage," she adds.

Tumlinson likes what Shave does at Speargrass to attract potential employees and retain them. She suggests superintendents incorporate such fringe benefits into hiring packages. Superintendents should also include more fun events into work schedules, such as barbecues. Such simple events, which can also include employees' family members, put an entertaining twist on the job.

"I know several superintendents who do fun and creative things with their crews to help them enjoy their jobs more," she adds.

It also pays (pun intended) to be a reputable employer, Tumlinson notes. If you're a good boss — a fair person who cares about your employees, values them and empowers them — chances are more employees will want to stay with you, even if a higher-paying job beckons, she adds.

"If your employer makes your job enjoyable every day — even if you're just raking bunkers — it really says something for the employer, the golf facility and the superintendent," Tumlinson says. ■



## Money, Money, Money

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