

Labor Management in the Tree Business

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A CLOSE LOOK at labor in the American tree business reveals deep-twisting problems. Problems of how to cope with what we have; how to improve what we have; and how to hold what we have.

There is nothing new or outstanding about these labor problems, for all industry has the same labor situations. Only ours seems to be a little more unique and difficult.

This article will cover *five* important segments of the tree business. There are innumerable others to discuss; but for the sake of clarity and brevity, we shall confine ourselves to:

- A. Tree Climbers
- B. Field help in general
 - 1. Rates
 - 2. Fringe Benefits
 - 3. Lost Time
 - 4. Safety
- C. Labor-saving Equipment
- D. Office Efficiency
- E. Management's Attitude Toward Tree Help

A. Tree Climbers

Let's first look at the heart of the tree business—the "good tree climber."

This skilled person is rapidly becoming extinct. He is more difficult to find, hire, and hold. The underlying makeup of a qualified tree climber is his individuality. Here is a person quite different from any other in any industry. He is, in fact, quite dif-

ferent from others in the same business. On an average, a good tree climber is a floater, sometimes a "prima donna," proud, and very individualistic.

To cope with these idiosyncrasies can be a tremendous task for any foreman, personnel manager, or owner.

Generally a climber works only for wages. He is not concerned with fringe benefits or extra offerings of tree companies. He likes good working conditions and prefers "take downs" to routine tree trimming. Usually a good climber caters to the more difficult tree removals.



Inclement weather keeps men indoors busy with equipment maintenance.



Impressive array of modern equipment includes trucks, staff cars, skyworkers, stump pullers.

Author Micha believes in efficiency and applies it throughout his entire operation.





Radio equipment increases truck efficiency, especially in disaster work.



Grinding machines, brush chippers, chipper body dump trucks, and other rolling stock.

Tape recorder, electric machines, radio, voice box provide efficient communication.



In this way he can best utilize his talents.

Most tree companies *must* take it upon themselves to find ways and means to hold good climbers or at least "stem the tide" of constant movement from one company to another.

It is impossible to give a con-

crete answer on how to hold climbers. Possibly one is through the use of increased mechanization, i.e. hydraulic lifts and similar equipment. This will help make the climber more available to jobs he dislikes. Less foul weather work; more opportunity (through training and experi-

Effective labor management in a tree business is crucial to success, Author Micha points out in this pull-no-punches article. There are phases of work where money can and must be saved, but there are other places, equally important, where the author believes more money must be spent. Management must take a close look at its attitudes toward labor. Continued success of the majority of tree firms hinges on decisions coming from self-scrutiny. Author Micha, an experienced arborist himself, presents some valuable money-saving tips for all arborists.

ence) to work up to foreman's levels; and improved fringe benefits, i.e. bonuses and commissions.

B. Field Help

Probably the most maligned work group in the whole tree business is the groundman. These are the men that do the "bullwork" or heavy ground work. They are expected (and sometimes forced) to work in all kinds of foul weather. Some companies consider them expendable; they are *not* usually allowed to think for themselves and they are generally the lowest paid.

This is the group that needs the greatest amount of thought and consideration. Itemized improvements are as follows:

1. Training.
2. Giving sufficient time to thoroughly learn good groundmen's techniques.
3. Plan work loads to allow these men to work inside during foul weather.
4. If work must be done during inclement weather, have sufficient foul weather gear available to them.
5. As the good groundman progresses, prepare a clear path for him to follow onto the next level.
6. Give him tree-climbing training, especially if he

shows a desire to do this type of work.

7. Pay adequate wages, commensurate with jobs of a similar nature. Consider what other companies in the tree industry are paying and pay accordingly.

Since we have reached the heart of the tree labor problem, let's discuss this more thoroughly.

The following excerpt is taken from a talk given by Dr. Paul Tilford, Executive Secretary of the National Arborist Association.

Example of Average Hourly Rates Paid

Midwest and Western Areas

Year	Foreman	Climber	Groundmen
1950	\$1.50	\$1.30	\$1.12
1952	1.76	1.46	1.20
1954	1.91	1.62	1.37
1956	2.10	1.75	1.46
1958	2.20	1.87	1.52
1960	2.22	1.93	1.52
1962	2.25	1.98	1.61
1964	2.40	2.07	1.67
1966*	2.65	2.25	1.85

*(Author's projected rates)

Now let us compare our tree industry with the average of other occupations. This compilation is taken from the Department of Labor Occupational Wage Survey for 1963. (Plus my own 1966 projected wage scale)

Occupation	Akron, Ohio	Projected Midwest 1966
Carpenters	\$3.21	\$3.36
Electricians	3.24	3.39
Mechanics	3.26	3.41
Painters	3.06	3.21
Pipe Fitters	3.24	3.39
Janitors	2.71	2.76
Truck Drivers	2.93	3.01



A well-filled, orderly stockroom prepares a tree business for any need. Here Mike Milazzo (left) and Harold Seaver take inventory. Note peg board on far wall which makes valuable wall space useful.

Reviewing the preceding charts, it would appear field men for our industry are drastically underpaid.

Fringe Benefits Valuable?

During a recent meeting of the New York State Arborists Association, the subject of fringe benefits was discussed.

Needless to say, it was a very interesting topic of discussion. Fringe benefits offered to field personnel ranged from practically nothing, to adequate pension plans plus bonus. The greatest majority of smaller tree companies paid a Christmas Bonus to their men. Even this offering

had its problems, especially when the company failed to give a bonus due to a poor year. This raised havoc with the men because they came to expect it every year. Employees admitted they were not overly fond of this type of compensation.

Other tree companies offered well thought-out pension plans with the company contributing from half to the total amount of pension payments. Most of these companies indicated their pension plan was working quite well. Others stated their pension plans did not work as planned, for it did not "stem the tide" of constant labor turn-over. They felt the tree man in general is not interested in the future, but in immediate cash in hand. All in all, though, pension plans have merit as fitted in each individual company's needs. More exploration of this avenue of approach should be carried out by tree companies in America.

The greatest fringe benefit that the tree men respected and admired was a guaranteed 32- to 40-hour week for the entire year. Those offering this inducement seemed to be having a steadier day-to-day work force.

Lost time was also discussed at the meeting. This likewise did not end with any conclusive result.

All admitted the morning cof-



A private, fully equipped payroll office increases accounting efficiency. Payroll clerk Don Lopa (seated) prepares draft for Foreman Carman De Nardo. Window adds to the office privacy.

fee break was here to stay and no force on earth could curb it for any length of time. All companies participating in the panel felt holding the coffee break to a minimum was the most adequate step they could take. Supervision and qualified foremen were necessary to curb excessive coffee break time.

Other lost time elements were touched upon: travel time, inclement weather, dump time, breakdown time, and tool time. Most tree company owners gave close supervision as the strongest answer to correct lost time situations. One item — inclement weather — brought much response from the participating audience.

Some companies just sent their men home if poor weather persisted beyond an hour after dispatch time. Others paid an hour or two for show-up time. Finally, the more progressive companies used inclement weather for tool and equipment repair and safety meetings.

It would appear that those companies sending men home without pay were in the minority because of the unfairness to the men that took the time to come to work. There is an area here for improvement in the tree industry.

Safety Still Paramount

Safety, a far reaching topic, was insufficiently discussed during the New York State Arborists meeting. It was impossible to adequately cover all of its many ramifications. One of the most important segments of safety is lessening the incidence of accidents.

Hundreds of training programs, devices, and meetings have been used to keep accidents to a minimum. Minimization is still the biggest "bug-a-boo." Only the tried and true method of constant day-to-day hammering, plus close field supervision seems to work.

One company used a unique program of offering a safety bonus cash award for good accident records. It went something like this: For every accident-free month, the foreman received \$20 and the climber received \$5. In

addition to this monthly award, a year-end initial jackpot of \$3,000 was to be split up among all the men working a full year.

For each accident recorded, \$20 was deducted from the total pot. After 12 months, the remaining money was divided. The best-record men received more, and so on down to the last man.

It was reported after three years in operation the total number of accidents was not sufficiently reduced and the program was scrapped for a year end Christmas Bonus to deserving men.

Numerous other programs have been devised and tried. It seems to remain that "on the

stumps, the topping operation will be handled with a two-man crew and aerial lift or tree crane. Follow up simultaneously with a two- or three-man cleanup crew using a brush chipper, a large enclosed dump chipper truck, and a heavy-duty winch truck for the large butts. Finally follow up the same day, or a day later, with a stump grinder and operator. If the contract calls for soil and seeding the stump holes, then some companies will subcontract this more-or-less landscape detail. Other companies may use the new heavy duty 4-in-1 bucket waders on rubber to load most of the heavy wood and brush.



A Dodge Power Wagon with tank, pump, hose, and a guardrailed rear platform is heavy-duty equipment for roadside spraying. In the background is a hydraulic Skyworker for utility line maintenance.

job" safety lectures, constant exposure to safety thoughts and methods, plus close supervision are still the only real ways to eliminate constant accidents.

C. Labor-saving Equipment

Equipment in today's tree business is changing to meet the demands for speed and efficiency. The use of tools, equipment and other devices to save time is now an important part of a well-operated tree company. The aerial lift is one of the best of the latest labor-saving devices.

When 10 years ago it took a five- or six-man crew to do removals and trimming, today two or three men do the same work with a "Bucket."

Let's use an example to point out some of the newer methods of labor utilization using modern techniques.

For removal of 20 to 30 municipal trees (in wires) and their

Average costs for these removals can and do range from \$70 to \$95 per tree, sometimes lower.

Our industry needs more efficient equipment such as:

- A. Large equipment on rubber to grind the entire tree with the exception of the large butt.
- B. More efficient heavy-duty hydraulic loading equipment.
- C. Greater velocity mist spray machines.
- D. New systemic fungicide and insecticide materials and devices so one man can treat trees in all kinds of weather.

D. Office Efficiency

Another area of improvement to the tree business is office efficiency. Here again is a topic of far-reaching proportions. Today,

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on an average, small- to medium-size tree companies have a bookkeeper-combined-payroll clerk and one or two secretaries.

Many businesses are over-staffed with office personnel. I cite an example of a medium- to large-size tree and landscape company. At one time, between the tree and landscape business,

it had a comptroller, two bookkeepers, two secretaries, and a receptionist. By hiring a more efficient secretary, leasing out payroll to I.B.M., radio-equipping trucks, and hiring an independent accounting firm, this business was able to pare down the office staff to two people.

As you can see from the photograph, this secretary uses many laborsaving devices: radio phone, telephone-switchboard, sound box to garage, and field tape recorder (from which to type let-

ters and verbal orders). All these devices, and more, can go into making a more efficient organization, thus reducing overhead.

One of the greatest assets to tree companies is to radio-equip their trucks. Hundreds of times a week the savings go on as problems are answered, road locations given, and new work assignments made. With radio equipment companies can check crews' progress, report emergencies, and handle assignments almost immediately by giving detailed information to foremen on the scene.

E. Management's Attitude

In conclusion, management's attitude and its attitude towards employees is, and must be, the prime consideration to improve our industry. Gone are the days of a huge labor pool from which to draw men. Today, the overall industry in America dictates the patterns we must follow. I do not advocate unionization. I feel the tree business as a whole must improve its wage structure along with better working conditions, fringe benefits, and create a more stable lifetime job status.

Tree companies do not have to constantly raise their prices to meet the above needs. They can do this by giving every phase of their operation close scrutiny; look for efficiency, hire more efficient personnel, improve records and inventory materials, lease time-consuming tasks to others, sub-contract work in which they are inefficient, attend management schools, hire outside organizations to aid in efficiency studies, and finally be broad minded enough to try new techniques, devices, equipment, and advice to help them become more efficient.

Today most small tree companies cannot afford to work for 30 or 40 good tree customers. These customers are fast becoming extinct. Estates are splitting and tree firms must multiply their customers 10 or 20 times in order to stay solvent and maintain rates.

Therefore management's attitude toward labor will be dictated by its own forward thinking attitude to improve itself and its business.



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