

SOLUTIONS TO THE WORKER SHORTAGE

Improving the American workforce during the next 15 years is critical to economic growth.

In fact, to the extent that economic growth depends on an educated workforce, it is estimated that we must upgrade the skills of some 25 million American workers by 40 percent by the end of the century if we are to maintain a growth rate of even three percent.

As it is, there promises to be a shortage of skilled workers and high unemployment in many categories. White males will make up only 15 percent of the additions to the labor force between now and the year 2000. The rest will be women, minorities and immigrants.

The result could be a workforce desperately in need of education to meet the demands of higher skilled jobs and a significant population of inadequately educated employees for even entry level jobs.

A system

U.S. Lawns Inc. franchises landscape maintenance companies. When the company began three years ago, the greatest concern of our franchisees was in estimating and sales help. We provided heavy support in this area. As they matured and grew, we provided help with bookkeeping, cash flow, customer service and technical problems. Now, however, the major concern for our franchisees (and the area in which we are trying to provide the greatest level of assistance) is people. How to find people, how to select the right people and how to train people efficiently are all major issues with our franchisees. We at U.S. Lawns try to solve these very different problems in three very different ways.

Recruiting

The first and most obvious problem is recruitment. Some companies import workers from areas where there is a surplus, like Texas. Workers can also be imported from South America or Mexico under temporary work permits.

Another source of help, especially in the summer, is the school system. Coaches and guidance counselors are very helpful in supplying names of interested students, particu-

larly those coaches who wish to keep their players in shape over the summer. Landscape maintenance is a wonderful way to keep athletes "fine-tuned" over a summer vacation.

Work study programs are also appropriate, especially when hours are flexible. Our largest franchise is experimenting with working at night on commercial properties with high-powered lights. It is cooler; some individuals like to work



Dr. Cabot L. Jaffee is the chief executive officer of Electronic Selection Systems of Orlando, Fla. He is also Chairman of the Board of U.S. Lawns Inc., a company that franchises landscape maintenance services. Dr. Jaffee, who has been on the faculties of the University of Tennessee and the University of Central Florida, is a member of the American Society for Training and Development.

the evening or night shift; and—with the exception of weeding—activities can be carried on with high-powered lights. This is opening up a new possible market for employees.

Many cities have youth programs which provide a source of potential employees.

For many people in drug rehabilitation and offender programs, work is a wonderful opportunity to deal with their problems in a positive way and develop job skills.

Boys' and girls' clubs also provide a source of good potential workers who are interested in learning workable skills.

Perhaps the most exciting and innovative approach so far

has been our "High Potential Franchise Program" in which talented high school, college or vocational school graduates are assigned to work for an existing franchise for two years. Money is withheld from their salaries and placed in an account for them. U.S. Lawns matches the amount withheld; at the end of the two years, they purchase a franchise themselves. (If they withdraw from the program before the two years is up, their money is returned with interest.)

Obviously, there are many other ways to source a good workforce for the industry. Speaking at schools, participating in career days, getting involved in community activities—all open up potential sources of workers.

Selecting

After you find workers, the next step is selecting the ones who are likely to be successful. This is especially important at the foreman or supervisor level as these people significantly influence the turnover rate. U.S. Lawns applies this same philosophy when selecting franchisees.

A good selection test to determine people most likely to be good supervisors will go a long way in decreasing turnover. We recommend to our franchisees that they check references, interview applicants carefully and use tests we supply them to help select good supervisors.

Retaining

Once you select a potentially good person, offer ongoing support to help him or her do the job better. What we recommend is ongoing supervisory training in how to coach and counsel employees, how to discipline employees and how to make sure employees' problems are dealt with fairly and quickly.

When we are competing with fast food companies, service companies and so many others, the importance of reducing turnover is great. We try to create a feeling among our workers that they can move up in the organization and become supervisors themselves.

If at all possible, profit-shar-



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ing or other types of incentive plans help retain workers. These plans make them feel as if they are contributing to the overall success of the company and are being rewarded for it. The keys to retaining employees are good supervisors—and good supervisors come from selecting people with good skills and training them as much as possible.

A lesson of the '80s that will only grow in importance is that

People, rather than machines or capital, are the critical factors in the service economy.

people rather than machines or capital are the critical factors in fueling this needed growth in the service economy. It is also clear that education relates very strongly to individual opportunity. People who receive job training earn 25 percent more than individuals who do not.

This is the message we must give to our employees. We will help teach them valuable skills, we will offer them career opportunities and perhaps, most importantly, we will treat them in a way which makes them feel rewarded by what they do.

So, what appeared to be a simple and straight-forward problem is really not. It's not just a problem of finding people. It's a problem of selecting and developing good supervisors in order to cut down on turnover and therefore create less need to find new people. It's also a problem of what each organization must do to create feelings of career opportunities among all employees—which will also cut down on turnover.

No one part can totally solve the problem.

There will be shortages of employees. Innovative approaches will be necessary. But the successful organizations will be the ones that do the best job of keeping their people.

—Cabot L. Jaffee, Ph.D. □

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