



Clarence Davids Inc. of Blue Island, Ill., knows the value of a good employee. The company recently celebrated its 40th anniversary by having all its workers included in this birthday photo.

EMPLOYEES: WHAT ARE THEY WORTH?

Depending on the part of the country you do business in, the laws of supply-and-demand govern the value of finding good employees and keeping them.

by Jack Simonds, contributing editor

The average landscaper or lawn maintenance operator has a permanent staff of about 32, hires 30 seasonal workers and pays seasonal help about \$6.23 an hour.

Those are among the findings in a seven-point random telephone poll to 21 landscape and lawn care operations throughout the United States.

Different sizes were chosen when

contacting green industry businesses.

Landscape firms ranged in annual gross earnings from \$3 million or more employing up to 120 permanent staff and 220 seasonal hirings to firms with five permanent staff, six seasonal hirings and annual gross earnings between \$100,000 and \$250,000.

In the LCO category, annual gross earnings were not available, but staff

sizes ranged from two to 10 permanent employees and seasonal hirings ranging from two to 20.

The poll shows the average nationwide salary for a crew leader is about \$14,405, a scale which fluctuates greatly between regions.

The Plains States leads all regions with an average supervisor or crew leader salary of \$24,750. The Far West

LM MINI-SURVEY

AVERAGE ANNUAL SALARY, CREW LEADER/FOREMAN, BY REGION



AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE, LINE-LEVEL TECHNICIANS, BY REGION



Source: Landscape Management phone survey

closely trails at \$23,034. In descending order are the Midwest, \$20,825; the Southeast, \$16,375; the Southwest at \$13,188 and the Northeast at \$13,077.

These figures combine those responding in both landscaping and LCO categories.

In hourly wages, the Far West—California, Oregon and Washington—leads the nation with an \$8.08 average hourly rate for seasonal workers. That average is followed by the Northeast, \$6.40; the Southeast, \$6.30; the Plains States, \$5.75; the Southwest, \$5.50 and the Midwest, \$5.35.

No employer we spoke with reports paying only the federal minimum wage, which will rise from \$3.80 to \$4.25 on April 1. The largest hourly seasonal wage we found is \$11 in Southern California. The smallest is \$4.75 from a New England company.

The LCO market

Neal DeAngelo, 1991 president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) says the organization addresses itself to pay scales, benefits issues and the traditional high turnover rate in the industry when members meet in educational sessions at its national convention.

He says that where pay scales may easily vary between regions of the country, so too will both the job pool and the availability of good staffers, factors which can influence pay scales.

"There are pockets throughout the country where (the job pool picture) is entirely different than other areas," DeAngelo says.

The job pool base, which in part may serve to dictate hourly rates in an area, not only can vary from place to place, but also year to year; a fluctuation not lost on the PLCAA president.

Like colleagues across the country, DeAngelo, an operator of a lawn care company in Hazelton, Pa. since 1978, has seen the job pendulum swing at his own business.

"Within our own company, two years back we had a rough time. You'd have a classified ad in for an eternity and get very little response to it. Last year we had no problems with available help," he says.

Other LCOs and landscapers across the country give mixed reports of the labor force in their area (see related story.)

DeAngelo also feels some confidence for the industry as the national economy experiences a

recession of varying intensity from region to region.

The lawn maintenance industry, he recalls, survived nicely, even "boomed" during the early 1980s mini-recession.

"It was one of the biggest boom times in the industry," DeAngelo says, speculating that homeowners then spent more time at home, paying more attention to maintenance and cosmetics of their properties. He says also that people traveled less and tended to forestall purchasing big ticket items.

"Lawn care is not a big ticket item (and) people put more time and effort into their homes (in recession)," says DeAngelo.

The landscape market

Eldon Dyk, 1991 president of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), sees an overall shortage trend for entry-level workers.

"And I'd say the (short) labor supply will be pretty much all over the country," Dyk says, "although some areas will be affected more than others.

"The availability is not as it used to be," he adds.

In hourly landscaping crew wages, the Far West—California, Oregon and Washington—leads the nation with an \$8.08 average hourly rate.

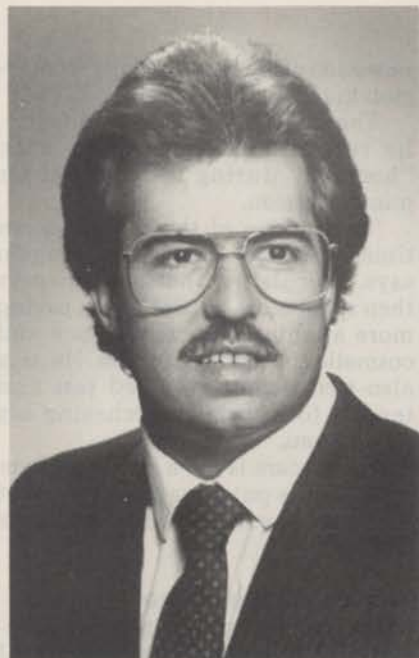
Dyk points to two factors in the labor shortage: fewer young people (18 to mid-20s) in the population and greater competition from national fast food restaurants and other chains.

Also, Dyk notes that pools of migrant and other foreign workers are dwindling as well.

Readjusting entry-level wages should be discussed, something the ALCA's Crystal Ball Committee is undertaking now.

Extending health benefits to line workers also is discussed by industry watchers which "immediately raises the cost of doing business," says Dyk.

Benefits, entry-level wages and the labor pool combine to form the "crunch



Neal DeAngelo: no 'big ticket'



Eldon Dyk: 'crunch issues'

issues" before the industry as the country look toward Recession, 1991.

Dyk, operator of a landscaping firm in Denver, Colo., says his area—including Texas, Oklahoma and other oil-dependent state economies—has been in a slowdown for five years.

In that time, he learned some lessons.

"You have to do business a little differently. You operate in a different mode: cutting back on overhead and staff and tightening your belt," Dyk says.

Still, Dyk believes, landscaping overall "looks good."

"You simply have to be more conscious of costs in order to survive well," he says. **LM**

GLUT OR SHORTAGE?

▷ Warwick, Rhode Island landscaper Gary Rouvelas at Garden Hills Florists, Inc. puts it bluntly: "We've got the pick of the litter."

▷ In Danville, Calif., landscaper Roger Fiske of Fiske Landscaping, chooses the word "horrible" to characterize the availability of good workers to draw from when seasonal hiring time approaches.

In a national economy tarnished by recession, the job pool for both landscapers and LCOs seems dictated by the slowing economy's effect in the immediate region.

Consider:

● Winchester, Mass. landscaper Brent Totman at Mahoney's Rocky Ledge Farm notes that two years ago the industry in his area was "standing on its head" to attract good workers. "I now have a stack of resumes on my desk. It is changing very quickly," he says. Also, landscaping as a career is beginning to be more heavily promoted at the high school level in his area, he notes.

● Minneapolis, Minn. landscaper Charles Glossop of Green Masters Industries nearly always enjoys success with walk-in-off-the-street workers for operations in Minneapolis proper—but has difficulty acquiring workers in affluent suburbs where the job market is more competitive.

Rural Minnesota LCO Thomas Rieff of Crystal Lawn Service in North Mankato submits a different picture. "It is tough," he says, "to offer only seasonal (employment) to people looking for permanent positions."

● Fiske thinks response to classified ads is a good barometer. Five years ago, he says, such an ad would net up to 80 calls a day. "Now we get maybe eight calls, and if five who are qualified will take the job, we're lucky," he says.

● Mixed reports emerge from the nation's breadbasket. Nebraska LCO Steve Brownrigg at Down to Earth Lawn Care sees the labor pool in his area as "good relative to other states" but adds he has difficulty securing "qualified, thinking people willing to work outdoors."

Billings, Montana's Jay Wirth of Wirth Landscaping notes his labor pool is a tiny one, but he enjoys drawing from a rural

population where he says the work ethic is strong.

His only real labor problem: "Sometimes it is just trying to find the skills that we need," he says.

If recurring themes do surface nationwide, two seem to be the difficulty in attracting good permanent entry level staff and then keeping them. Englewood, Colo. landscaper Shannon Wilson of Natural Surroundings, Inc. says she, her partner and three permanent staffers recently held a meeting just to discuss those very issues.

"What can be frustrating is not having good people hang with you long enough to get promoted," she laments.

For Greely, Colo. LCO Jay Woods at American Turf and Tree Care, securing good workers is a catch-as-catch-can proposition. "Sometimes you land a good one," he says. "Other times it just doesn't work out."

It seems the industry's traditional vexing turnover rate is more acute in high cost-of-living pockets of the U.S. But Clearwater, Fla. landscaper Christopher Phillips of Landscape Technologies, Inc. reports a different picture.

"I know that labor shortages are supposed to be the problem of the '90s, but we don't have any problem getting help. But we're lucky, we're in a good labor pool," he says.

South Florida LCO Bill Lester of Lawn Care Plus says when he needs more manpower, he relies on a system of contacts built up over the years and easily secures good people for short-term work.

These snags, however, continue to be the difficulty in attracting newcomers either seasonally or as permanent beginning staff primarily because of the low entry-level pay scale and the lack of benefits in many cases. The labor-of-love aspect of lawn maintenance and landscaping might be best seen in the thoughts of Salem, Ore. landscaper Tony DeSantis of DeSantis Landscapes.

"Finding dependable people with a work ethic gets tougher all the time," he says. "The work is hard, you get dirty and you're out in the weather."

—Jack Simonds □