

Cash in on low-cost

by JAMES E. GUYETTE / Contributing Editor

Money spent on employee education programs can mean happier, higher-skilled and more productive workers. This, in turn, can lead to less downtime, less turnover and fewer workplace accidents (an employee indoctrinated in proper safety procedures is less likely to get hurt).

Pat McGovern, owner of International Data Group in Boston—one of the nation's leaders in corporate training—sets aside an amount equal to 3% of the company's payroll for training each year. However, landscape managers need not budget that much, simply because many low-cost and free training programs are available in this industry. It just takes a commitment on your part and a little bit of searching to locate the best opportunities.

An in-house training program at California's Stockdale Country Club has resulted in an "almost perfect" safety record and a better work atmosphere, says superintendent Corey Eastwood. "You have less damage to the machines and less disruptions of the members," he adds. "We use a lot of courtesy—and that's part of the training."

New workers at Stockdale are personally taught and shown the proper care of each machine by the facility's two mechanics, plus there are weekly training sessions. "We go over the operator's manuals," Eastwood explains. "We take each piece of equipment at a time (to study), and when we get done we start over again."

Because Stockdale is located in a warm climate, most workers stay on throughout the year, which means less turnover. In areas where turnover is a concern, an outside training program may lead to a more motivated and stable workforce.

Just look

The landscape side of the industry is not much different.

"We try to get involved in as many programs as we can," says Ron Wilson, a general manager at Natorp's Landscape, Nursery and Garden Stores of Cincinnati, Ohio. "The safety training has been a tremendous help to the company."

Kate Goewey, Natorp's safety director, says the company gets increased performance and fewer injuries on the job. Ownership is particularly pleased that much of the training has been free or at low cost—and all they had to do was look for it.

Many manufacturers and suppliers are more than eager to provide free training sessions on the various products that they market—just ask. A good place to start looking locally is as close as your community's fire department.

A free session on "fire safety" at Natorp was most enlightening, says Goewey, "because most people do not actually know how to use a fire extinguisher." Goewey adds that any type of safety education will improve the work environment.

The makers of the Bobcat line of equipment conducted free training on their machines, and the workers also got an education on proper chain saw techniques.

The Blount Corporation's Oregon Chain Division markets chain saw replacement parts rather than the whole saw, but they do indeed provide training all over the world.

"We do it for free because a chain saw doesn't know the difference between a log and a leg," says George Ruggles, who heads the Oregon training seminars. "We go through a pretty structured program that many people find beneficial." The two- to three-hour sessions rely on hands-on

demonstrations and a graphic video presentation that grips the students' attention. "We don't have much trouble keeping them awake," Ruggles reports.

The ability of the speaker is important, says Goewey, adding that any instructor's program should be reviewed by a top member of the staff before presenting it to the workforce.

Training tips

- ▶ Make your seminars part of your work week—pay your people to be there.
- ▶ Ask suppliers and other local sources (landscape associations, garden clubs, parks departments and schools) for speakers.
- ▶ Have a top member of the staff review the instructor's program before it is presented to the workforce.
- ▶ Send employees to training sessions that deal with techniques they can use on the job.
- ▶ Explain starting, break and finishing times at the beginning of the session.
- ▶ If possible, issue hand-outs and workbooks for each subject.
- ▶ Divide sessions into 18-minute (maximum) modules.
- ▶ Emphasize basic techniques. Use step-by-step lists whenever possible.
- ▶ Engage as many of the trainees' senses as possible (see chart). Hands-on demonstrations and graphic video presentations will keep employees alert.
- ▶ Beware of training consultants who offer boilerplate solutions to complex management concerns.

training programs

"Generally, we're familiar with the speakers," Goewey explains. "I either go myself or we ask around. We won't send anyone to hear a speaker sight unseen." A clunker of a class means that "the people will get bored and they won't learn anything."

Pay people

Use some caution in deciding which workers to send to which presentation, she suggests. Make sure they are learning techniques that are germane to their job assignment. Sometimes just one employee can be sent, but be certain that he or she has the verbal skills to adequately impart the lessons learned to fellow employees. "They will bring that information back to the crew so they don't lose a whole day of work," she notes.

The workers should understand that training is a priority and not just free time. "Make your seminars part of your work week," advises Goewey. "That means you will pay your people to be there. Although it is common for businesses to use the excuse that the seminar benefits the staff's personal professional development, and therefore you're actually providing an educational service to your employees, let's face it—training benefits your business and that's why you offer it."

Making the choice to offer a training program to employees can be a tough decision for management, simply because of the nature of the business: you're either too busy or else you're laying people off. It's therefore important to be selective in the kind of training program you offer.

Goewey recalls a program in electrical hazard training that cost a whopping \$700 per person. "Can I send 12 people to that? No. Can I devote the time to that? No." A tree crew foreman was sent, and he reported back what was learned.

Beat the bushes

Programs offered by the cooperative extension service rate high with Goewey: "That's wonderful. It's a minimum fee and they bring in the experts—they pay for the experts and there's nothing wrong with that." Gardening procedures, pruning skills and other techniques are taught in an easy-to-understand style by masters in the field. "They're hiring the experts—your work is done; all you have to do is send your people."

The Red Cross is big on safety seminars,

RETENTION OF TRAINING INFORMATION, BY METHOD

Reading	40%
Writing	40%
Listening	50%
Seeing	50%
Doing	80%

as might be expected, but other sources can offer useful education. "We make great use of the Bureau of Workers Compensation seminars," says Goewey. "You've already paid for that in your state" via the fees being charged the business. Sessions are offered in subjects such as ergonomics, power equipment operation and proper use of hand tools.

Beat the bushes to find quality instructors. Ask your suppliers and other local sources, such as landscape associations, garden clubs, parks departments and schools. Some speakers do it for free; others charge, but find out any fee ahead of time before signing up.

If you are a company owner, make sure you are committed to the learning process—especially if you have concerns

over management-type issues. "We can educate groups of workers in a relatively short amount of time, but the real change happens with the management," says Don Willig, a senior consultant with Management Concepts Inc. of Dayton, Ohio.

Many times an owner will be convinced that he or she needs to be all-knowing and in on every decision and technique discussed, but eventually to be successful they have to hire other managers to get the job done. "At some point they have to bite the bullet and get someone to help them or else they will compromise their whole business opportunity," Willig warns.

An owner who has prepared a business plan ("What do we want to be when we grow up?") is better able to deal with outside training. Also, ask colleagues in the business to help find experienced trainers. Beware of a training company that offers boilerplate solutions to complex management concerns.

"No two organizations are typically the same, so you want flexibility and experience in this industry," says Willig. "There are unique things in the green industry that need to be recognized." Steer clear of a training firm that charges a high up-front consulting fee, he adds.

Each staffer at any given company can be made better by receiving advanced training, Goewey believes. "The benefits of a training program are well worth it. In our business, we must be teachers as well as sales people. Not only do we assist customers with selection, we have to help them keep those selections alive and growing." **LM**