

Recruiting smarts

Prestigious Naples, Fla., firm attracts top talent by giving college students an opportunity to show their stuff.

Looking for fresh talent for your landscape company? Follow the example of Smallwood Design Group and Smallwood Landscape. Develop a college recruiting program. The respected Naples, Fla.-based firm has been refining its college recruiting efforts for the past 18 years.

Jo Ann Smallwood describes it as a win-win situation. A well-run program benefits the participating landscape company, the student, and the student's university.

"At Smallwood we have found that one of the best ways to assure our recruiting needs is through the cooperative work experience or internship program," says Jo Ann. "We gain motivated, skilled, quality-oriented, committed employees, and colleges gain the opportunity for interns to develop their skills in real-life applications. Interns gain experience they wouldn't otherwise have in college."



Jo Ann Smallwood, at the ALCA Conference, told colleagues of some of the benefits of a college recruiting program.

Smallwood's first experience with interns was with the University of Florida Department of Landscape Architecture.

Over the years the company built a rapport with both the department and its head, Harry Smith, who retired in 1996. It's now developing a relationship with his successor Terry Schnadelbach.

'Real world' experience

While landscape design/construction is just one facet of a budding landscape architect's professional training, Schnadelbach says students appreciate the chance to apply in the real world what they've learned in the classroom or laboratory.

"The intern program gives students first-hand experience in construction, and particularly how design interfaces with on-site conditions," he says.

There are about 100 students (undergraduate and graduate) in Florida's landscape architecture program. There are similar programs (and those for landscape construction and horticulture, too) in other universities and community colleges in the United States. Many partner with industry in structured programs.

Smallwood Design/Smallwood Landscape, in fact, recruits at a number of educational institutions, including Lake City Community College (FL), SUNY Cobleskill (NY), University of Georgia, Mississippi State, Ohio State, Penn State, and Louisiana State Universities.

But, it's not a simple matter of showing up and announcing that you've got openings and rounding up the best and the brightest prospects. Not by a longshot.

Smallwood Landscape, for instance, donates to the U. of Fla. student scholarship program ("This is our way of saying 'thank you' and showing appreciation," says Jo Ann.), and it also visits the campus and presents the students with a project to complete. After they complete the task, several people from the landscape company return to the campus to offer a critique and also to share their insights with students. This represents a four-day commitment for the landscape firm.

The Naples company values its interns and, realizing that many are a long way from home, tries to make their experience with the company as comfortable as possible, including furnishing them with employee housing, including special amenities, close to its office, and subsidizing part of the cost.

"The internship program is designed to provide a variety of working and learning experiences for students. Students become potential employees," says Jo Ann Smallwood. "These future employees make better employment decisions, and industry gains a recruiting edge as well as an opportunity to view a potential employee in action.

"At Smallwood we found that our most important asset is our employees." □