



Not every landscaper is plagued by travel time. But for those companies whose workers must travel long distances to job sites, there are increased expenses, lost profits, fewer completed jobs and additional frustrations and stress. But there are solutions, which we here provide in the nick of time.

Jim Grow, vice president of Pennink Arrimour in Huntington Valley, Pa., is a 30-year green industry veteran, and has been with that company for 12 years. Grow tracks all maintenance operations, no

A few of those unusual things his people do at sites include cleaning pallets, off-loading docks, pressure-washing dumpsters and cleaning goose droppings from jogging paths. To perform these duties with as little disruption as possible to customers, workers must get a very early start.

The satellite office concept has helped Pennink and other companies avoid traffic jams.

"Once you get beyond 30 to 35 miles, you start to be inefficient, and not cost effective with travel," explains Grow. "So we try to limit the distance our crews have to travel to maybe 40 minutes."

A satellite office may be a full-blown mini-office and garage (with adequate parking of course), or a locked equipment trailer.

Mechanic house calls

Due to the increasingly sophisticated equipment being needed and used for landscape maintenance, crews aren't as readily equipped to repair equipment on their own. Grow therefore sends a mechanic to the dedicated sites for weekly service or maintenance.

Crews may also bring

equipment to the closest office site on a day with less work, and the mechanic then does normal preventive maintenance and repair.

Grow says the equipment is usually seen once each week. Six full-time mechanics do the work, with split shifts, between 6 am and 10 pm.

"The key is to keep your crews as well stocked and as well maintained as you can," says Grow. "They don't have to do a lot of running around. Keep them prepared."

Routing routines

Another important time-saver is in the actual job routing.

"The crews have to know where they're going," says Grow. "They need to be able to walk into the office in the morning, see if there are any changes to their schedule and go!"

To operate that efficiently, Grow believes, crews have to be well-trained so they are not constantly stopping for all kinds of reasons.

"We basically insist that they get trucks loaded the night before.

Getting there

Travel time is a cost burden you have to solve by creative routing, satellite offices and early starts. It should also be included in customer costs. And guys, ask for directions!

By JOHN B. CALSIN, JR.

small accomplishment in a 235-man company.

Grow starts with the obvious: being an "inter-state" company, the crews come in at 6 am, "to beat the traffic and alternate travel times around rush hour," says Grow. "If we're traveling a distance, we hope they're at the job site before rush hour."

These crews handle the commercial side of the business, which is about 65 percent of sales. Residential crews start later in the morning.

Some crews will report directly to the site. Trucks and trailers are kept at certain client's properties, those that have facilities and allow it.

One of those clients is a large pharmaceutical company in northern New Jersey, with multiple branch locations. Specific crews direct-report and move between the drug company sites.

Saving travel time might become more important in the future for non-traditional landscape reasons. To land and keep certain contracts, Grow says, "there are a lot of unusual things that you get in to. What ever the client wants you to do."

At Pennink, account managers are responsible for crews, and they run those crews as a small business."

Geography lesson

Knowledge of the neighborhoods and cities is important, because let's face it—not everyone can fight their way out of a paper bag, and should not be expected to look at a map to set up a route.

As basic as this sounds, some wasted travel time could be solved by putting a different employee on the routing and scheduling.

Fullbach Services, Inc., Louisville, KY., is also working to eliminate the travel time blues.

Jon D. "Dave" Fuller, is the company's executive vp, and also a former PLCAA board member.

Fullbach is located in an enterprise zone, which, says Fuller, "puts us out of the city, where most of the flurry of economic development is. So, we're pretty far removed from the majority of our customer base."

The location might provide some tax advantages, but, says Fuller, it creates certain travel-related "situations".

A solution for Fullbach is an industry-specific computer program, for routing and scheduling. The program also does job costing, billing and financial reporting.

"Not that this is the do-all, end-all, but Clip allows a landscaper to do map codes, and then sequence jobs. It's a pretty slick program."

Fullbach has a highway department account that involves lots of shrubbery maintenance. Due to the distance involved, Fuller was motivated to set up drop sites for equipment, with highway department permission.

"I have found different spots in the city that we begged for, negotiated for or rented. We find a remote location to set up our center of operations and have all the material delivered to that remote site."

The drop site saves lots of lost time by not having to return home to load up on bulk material.

Security glitch

Theft prevention at remote sites is certainly important, and Fuller says some sites are not safe enough to leave equipment there. The company has a landscape job 90 miles from the office. Saving travel time on that job requires "getting everything delivered that you can to the site. Then, you go the old fashioned way, rent a room!

"Dead time is a real factor. You can be as efficient as you want on the job, but if you have [numerous] hours of dead time, it's not such a good deal. That's where

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you've got to track this travel time."

Tim Aalbu, president of Aalbu Landscape Maintenance, Inc., Portland, OR, blames the traffic for most delays, especially with rush hour and road work.

"Heavy traffic in the area is one of the reasons travel time has grown. The population growth in the Puget Sound area has been tremendous, and it's dramatically increased our travel time. Then, there's the fact that we have spread ourselves out geographically as far as our jobs go."



Fuller: drop sites save loading, unloading time.

Aalbu uses drop-off containers to store tools.

"We call them 'satellite offices' but it could be as simple as a large cargo container on a job site. The crew reports there and works out of it. Another one is set up at a large corporation. We have a full-time crew on that corporate site, so the people report there."

The container is 8 ft. tall, 30 ft. long, 6 feet wide. The client supplied it,

thankfully.

"We also have one additional crew that works out of that site. They report in and pick up their equipment and go out from there," says Aalbu.

What's it contain? "We pretty much just keep our normal maintenance equipment in there. If they need something extra, like an aerator, we supply it out of the main office," says Aalbu.

"A good on-site supply for one crew would be a 36-inch intermediate walk-behind mower, a 21-inch mower, edgers, line trimmers, blowers, and then some basics—rakes, shovels, maybe a few chemicals. That takes care of their basic needs. They radio to us if they are in need of anything other than normal maintenance type equipment.

Money savings

"I guess we're saving probably two man-hours each day, plus fuel and maintenance on vehicles and wear and tear," estimates Aalbu.

"We looked into self-storage units, but they will not allow you to have any source of fuel in them whatsoever; not even a cup."

But there's one more problem they haven't been able to solve.

"We're doing a chain of about 200 banks in four states, and we have to use a

ferry to get to some of them. But you can't transport equipment on a ferry with fuel inside it, so you have to completely drain the fuel tanks and refill them back on shore."

"It's unproductive time," says Larry Schultz of Nair's Lawn Care Service in Medina, Ohio, about drive time. "

"We've had the routes rescheduled or rerouted by one of the managers. That way it's well thought out. We beat the rush hour. Maybe get them out an hour before rush hour."

Schultz says there are six different routes that are used to serve the company's more than 300 customers.

And it's not just about distance. Delays such as too many left turns and red lights, are sliced out of the route as often as possible.

"We'll take a back road with one stop sign as opposed to a main road with five lights. That is so unproductive."

Road work maps are available from some state DOTs. Ohio provides one, and Nair's uses it every day.



Fullbach crews benefit from industry-specific scheduling/routing software.

Fuel savings is another benefit of clever routing, "and you also make sure vehicles leave with full tanks so they're not looking for gas stations that we don't have credit cards for," reminds Schultz.

"Wasted time hurts. You can waste 20 minutes at a gas station, with buying snacks, using restrooms, and waiting in line

as another company's truck and trailer are fueled.

Dan Jacobson, who co-owns Landstyles, Inc., Willoughby, Ohio, with partner Ralph Tirabassi, keeps maintenance crews on fixed schedules.

"We generally keep them within the same area, so they're not bopping around from one area to another," says Jacobson.

Equipment loaners for breakdowns in the field are made possible by helpful distributors.

"We have things set up with some of our vendors for maintenance equipment. They can pick up a loaner piece of equipment and keep on moving. With smaller equipment, we carry extra weed-eaters and leaf blowers, so they can continue working.

"We try to establish good relationships with equipment vendors, so that when we need something, they will bend over backwards to help us," explains Jacobson.

Landstyles also has a landscape equipment mechanic on call to service larger equipment in the field. □

John B. Calsin, Jr. writes for LM out of West Chester, Pa. Terry McIver contributed to this story.

Travel survival skills

❶ What is the condition of the equipment, including vehicles and trailers. Can they take hard travel abuse? If needed, can your crew change a tire on a trailer, or do you need a mechanic?

❷ Keep crews well stocked so they don't have to make trips back to the garage or "run around" to buy something.

❸ Have daily schedules with map routing and/or directions for the crew to take with them.

❹ Tell crews about all alternate routes, for those times when expressways are clogged.

❺ Real basic: some wasted travel could be eliminated by putting a different employee on the routing and scheduling team.

❻ Be flexible in case a customer needs to change his service day on short notice.

❼ Consider travel time as an expense, and charge the customer for it. Cut out as much travel "fat" as possible.

❽ Study your geographical area and mark all your accounts. Are there areas with numerous customers bunched together, and are those areas an extended distance from the shop, say 25+ miles? Maybe it's time to consider a satellite office, or remote storage site for vehicles and equipment.

❾ The storage company you pick has to allow outside storage of trucks and trailers.

❿ Buy a computer routing program.

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