

"Unless you spend time creating more efficient systems, you won't get more time for necessary things." DH



Is this the best way to do it?

In our business, we always ask, "Is this the best way to do it?"

As a young man in Iowa working for my father's nursery business I asked myself that question many times. When I went out on my own, I was able to indulge my passion for constant improvement. I'd like to share with you our way of doing things better in three important areas:

- ▶ time management
- ▶ staging
- ▶ per-person productivity.

Time management

Dwight Hughes Nursery in Cedar Rapids, IA, specializes in 2-in. shade trees. We grow most of our own material, and the same people who do the growing landscape with those plants.

Time management is why we're successful at it.

It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that you don't have time to make changes in your business. But unless you spend time creating more efficient systems, you'll never free up more time to do what's necessary.

Our firm has succeeded in expanding our business without adding to our four employees. Also, we've attracted some positive notice in the industry by drawing repeated press notices for our contributions in materials handling and robotics.

One of our time management strategies focuses on materials handling systems. To me, materials handling means everything from having the right vendors, to doing good maintenance on your equipment, to hiring and keeping people who will maintain quality equipment, to modifying, designing and redesigning the machines we use.

It's preferable to have a system handle materials and not a person. For fun, count how many wheels per person you have. Then compare your answer with our current count of 140 inflatable tires, or 35 wheels per person!

Tools for productivity

We've been working for over a decade on the Tree Boss, a robotic, hydraulic, one-person tree handling system. It allows one person to pick up, tilt and move a tree either onto or off of a trailer. One person can unload 80 6-ft. evergreens from a supplier's trailer in an hour, leaving the trees positioned at the planting site or holding area. Contrast that with the time it takes to manually unload, carry and position trees.

The first version of the Tree Boss enabled us to double our nursery inventory and sales volume without adding people. The Tree Boss never calls in sick and doesn't participate in our pension-profit sharing plan. And one of them pays for itself in half a season.

Staging takes smarts

In most Green Industry companies, staging eats up a lot of time. I know many companies that need more than an hour to stage their work in the morning. Our average time to get ready to roll is 12 minutes.

A big part of that is materials handling. With the Tree Boss, we can get our B&B shade trees loaded the night before, or we can do it early in the morning. Also, our shade house, poly house and open container holding area are close to each other and to our main building. We drive a truck up a main aisle and load it easily from both sides.

Some of our ideas are simple. For example, we

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my way

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store fertilizer tablets in a dog food dispenser mounted on the wall. It takes a person seven seconds to fill a container with tablets from that dispenser compared to 47 seconds it took by hand. Also, we keep tools on wall racks in designated spots. Our shop has an ironclad rule: When you use a tool, you clean it and put it back where it belongs. We also use double-decker storage — equipment with wheels stays on the first floor and everything else is elevated.

Per-person productivity

America is obsessed with the idea that bigger is better, but I don't have to tell this readership that volume and profit are two

different animals. So, we measure the health of our business in dollar volume per person. Each person represents a volume of \$125,000 to \$150,000 in landscape business, including materials. I don't see many businesses that generate more than \$100,000 of production per person per year.

Thinking in these terms helps you get moving in the right direction and also helps you know the importance of each worker.

If you're always asking the question, "Can we do this better," the answers will come. I thought of our sharp-pivoting 'airplane trailers' while sitting on a plane at O'Hare Airport, watching a tractor make tight turns while towing a jetliner.

The reward from your ideas is success.

You'll be generating more production per person, and you'll have fun in the process.

— Dwight Hughes is president of Dwight Hughes Nursery in Cedar Rapids, IA. He is recognized throughout the industry for innovation. Dwight is a board member of the American Nursery and Landscape Association's Horticultural Research Institute, and has attracted national attention for his work in developing robotic equipment for use in the Green Industry. His book and videotape, "Systems for Success," detail his thinking and methods. For more information, call 319-396-7038.

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