

The Labor Crunch:

Finding Good People

Finding and hiring people with potential might be Job 1, but it's easier said than done. This series will show you alternatives and ideas from many industry experts

Demographics are against you, and they won't improve anytime soon. The fact is, the United States birthrate has slowed enough to cause a real problem in the workforce. There are not, and will not be enough people to perform the work that economists project to be there in 2001, 2010 and beyond (some say for 30 years).

Add to that the difficulty of day-to-day landscape installation and maintenance work, the lowest unemployment rates in years, the high competition for employees across all industries and the lack of year-round positions in many landscape organizations — it's a recipe for disaster.

Immigrant labor has relieved some of the pressures and new government H2B regulations make it easier to get legal employees (even then, it's not cheap), but the fact remains that immigrant labor is only a partial solution. And most likely, the political pressures for the next few years will keep the United States from allowing huge masses of immigrants in to solve the problem.

As more 'baby boomers' opt for professional landscape services and as the economy continues to roll as predicted, your opportunities will grow. And as more people continue to retire early and job openings grow with the economic boom, your hiring opportunities will continue to shrink. You've got a problem.

Want ads won't do it anymore. Internet searches, industry recruiters and programs that bring professionalism to the industry help, but don't solve the problem. The answer lies in working long-term to find new sources of employees, hiring and keeping them, providing satisfying and challenging career paths and responding to their needs for benefits and possibly alternative systems to get the work done. These could include new work schedules, more company services or investment in additional labor-saving equipment.

Our series on labor solutions starts here and will continue in upcoming issues. This month, we look at the labor picture and give alternatives to traditional recruiting and hiring. We'll follow-up with more ideas on training, building alliances, retention and improving your organization.

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THE LABOR CRUNCH

Rx for winning in the service industry



Does it seem more difficult to find “good” people? Good people are everywhere — they just don’t want to work for us. Here’s how to get your recruiting act together.

BY BILL HOOPES

Every day, experts analyze factors that impact success in our business and we develop business strategies with the same basic resource list. It doesn’t seem all that difficult until we encounter the most critical resource of all—the human resource.

Wanted: Effective people

No service business can realistically expect to reach objectives or maximize results without an effective people strategy. Service is demanded, designed and delivered by people. We see the failed efforts of good people again and again. And we are forced to conclude that, if the people plan flops, the business plan flops.

But are human resource problems that big of a deal? After all, everyone knows at least one manager who has survived some sort of horrific staff problem and gone on to succeed. Some do make it in spite of human resource problems but they never maximize results. In fact, a team cannot execute (or grow) nominally without a trained, effective staff.

So what’s the quick answer? (This is America, the information age — give it to me fast so I can get back to work!)

► Developing a core of effective team players doesn’t happen overnight.

► Staffing must be an ongoing process. It takes time and effort — lots of personal, hands-on effort and a little luck to boot.

► This “people problem” didn’t develop quickly and it won’t be solved quickly.

► In some cases, management’s perspective on what it takes to develop and maintain a long-term, productive staff in the service industry must be rethought.

The struggling manager

I recently spoke with a struggling lawn care manager, working hard to make spring a success and finding that his only real problem was people. The marketing worked, the weather was as predicted and the trucks, equipment and products were ready and waiting.

Then, as the work increased, so did turnover. His response was to run the ad. Sadly, his ad had lots of company in the classified section.

“You must do more,” I advised.

“No time now,” he shot back. “We’re getting behind — gotta put the fires out!”

Can you guess what happened next? He spread the same workload over fewer people and more quit. And so it goes.

Year after year, managers repeat to themselves “I’m all staffed up” and cross their fingers, hoping their worst fears won’t come true. The problem is that they are “staffed up” with the wrong people. Warm bodies, while appearing to be adequate, only do one thing predictably: drain your labor budget!

Like I said, “You have to do more than run the ad.”

Recruiting doesn’t come easy

Let’s talk more about the difficulty of attracting the best people. Woody Hayes, “Bear” Bryant, Vince Lombardi and Jimmy Johnson had no problem attracting football players to their teams. But nobody wants to be on our team...or so it would seem. Recruiting “the right stuff” is tougher.

Still, I’ve observed that for every prize (especially a prize considered worth having), there is a contender in pursuit. In that respect, the game is the same. What has changed is the public’s perception of our industry. For me, that perception is part reality, part fiction. And because a job candidate’s vision of a career in the service industry is cloudy at best, that is precisely where we need to go to work.

Let me restate a fundamental idea: our people problems in the service industry have nothing to do with an absence of “good” or “adequate” people. In fact, there are just as many good people around today as at any time in this country’s labor history — maybe more. But they don’t want our jobs! That is the single most distressing problem we face, but it’s also our greatest opportunity.

In the past few years, why has the 18-to 25-year-old labor segment been “turned off” from our industry? Are you sure it’s as simple as “nobody wants to work anymore?” I’m not sure of that, and I’ve seen enough to know I’m right about this.

Let’s review some of the reasons younger workers do not want our jobs, or why they quit soon after they take those jobs. The key reasons include:

1. Our industry has changed and our jobs have changed with it. I recall the “glory days” of lawn care service:

- four applications per year (not six to eight);
- little or no aeration or seeding;
- few bothersome customer calls;
- not having to sell more and more — very little telemarketing;
- practically anyone could hold a job in our business and do the work at a reasonable pace (in a reasonably pleasant work environment with business enough for all who wanted it).

2. We’ve evolved. Landscape and lawn care firms, once operating in a sim-

Checklist for success

Look at this typical industry manager’s checklist for success:

- Business/personal objectives clarified
- Market niche (need) identified
- Mission statement on paper
- Business plan complete
- Marketing strategy set
- Capital
- Physical plant/equipment
- Vendors/suppliers
- Human resources necessary to execute — Houston, we’ve got a problem!

This planning sequence is typical. Most landscape and lawn care managers can work out a logical plan and have the best intentions, but it all seems to unravel when we get to the people part.

Is there a strategy in the world of Y2K that will help you succeed through people? Yes.

Is it quick, easy and manageable? And will it fit into my already overloaded day? No.

You have two choices: adapt to the realities of the 21st century labor market or continue to suffer frustrating failures.

— Bill Hoopes

pler world, now face more irritating and confusing regulation, some of which relate directly to our ability to be productive through people.

One example comes to mind. In some states, even if you are able to hire effectively, veteran employees are routinely given excessively high daily production goals (creating instant alienation), while the new hire proceeds through what can be weeks of

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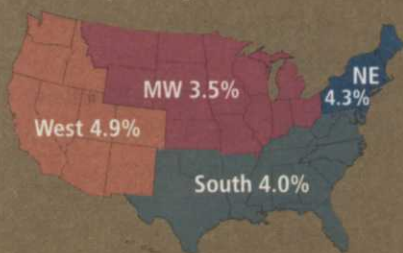
LABOR FACT

1999 U.S. unemployment rate

Seasonally adjusted, in percent

Average: 4.25%

January through November



Editor's note: 4.0% unemployment is the traditional threshold for 'labor shortage.' Bureau of Labor Statistics does not keep unemployment data for the Green Industry; numbers are not broken down by detailed industry.

SOURCE = US BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (BLS)

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 required "training" before qualifying for the certification test. Fail the test and new hires face another month of waiting.

While all of this is going on, your best person quits. "It's just not worth it," he says on his way out the door. So regulations, needed or not, impact our workplace.

3. There is fierce competition at both ends of the competitive spectrum. New business entrants (sometimes former employees) offer extreme personal service at one end. At the other end, large conglomerates deal out lower prices made possible through economies of scale.

The result? Everyone is forced to work harder, offer better service and charge less. We are forced to demand productivity more than we ever have before, while in-

sisting that our employees take time to do a better job.

In many cases, we are failing to do anything more than create turnover. While the few really large companies realize increased productivity through customer route density, the latest equipment and technology, most jobs in our industry have evolved into a succession of endless, pressure-packed days, few Saturdays off and an atmosphere far different than the one some enjoyed 20 years ago. Today, candidates that once gave us a close look now push the reject button and go elsewhere.

With the unprecedented 17-year economic expansion we are enjoying, high school, tech school and four-year graduates now have the largest variety of career options in history. Many candidates we were

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LABOR FACT

What exactly is H2B?

By now the once obscure acronym 'H2B' is well known in the Green Industry. But what is it exactly? It's a visa classification of the U.S. State Department.

The 'H' is the category of the visa ('T' would be a NAFTA visa, for example); '2' refers to the educational level, in this case 'below college' or unskilled; and the 'B' stands for 'business.' The last is one of two dozen categories — for example, you may also have heard of H2A, in which the 'A' stands for 'agriculture.' The categories are very specific, and the distinctions between them are hair-splitting. But for the Green Industry, H2B is almost always the applicable program.

H2A carries no numeric limits with it, but H2B caps at 66,000 workers yearly. Interestingly, the industry has yet to reach that 66,000 number, despite the labor needs. (*Landscape Management* has heard different quotes for 1999, ranging from 50,000 down to 32,000 workers.) The bureaucratic complexity of the H2B process probably accounts for that.

But if you can get past the red tape, perhaps with the help of a company specializing in H2B, you've got labor that definitely won't be sent back to Mexico if the Immigration and Naturalization Service pays your job site a visit. That's worth something!

— 'Labor Facts' are contributed by George Witterschein



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once able to attract and keep now see a limited opportunity with a lot more work and less leisure time than before. They simply opt out, partly because they can.

Attack the people problem

First, we need to attack the mistakes we made along the way. We can make great strides in improving our human relations status if we can correct four basic mistakes that are at the root of our troubles:

1. Unclear message. I implied that the public's perception of our industry as a career destination has become negative. Changing that perception starts with individual managers and operators.

Sadly, I've observed that too many managers have no clear self image as a person or a manager. Start there. If you are not totally clear about and comfortable with who you are and what your business

stands for, how can you communicate it to a job candidate surveying the opportunities?

If you are one of those who still thinks people work for money alone, think again. Today, more is required to attract and keep people and it begins with a clear, communicable picture of what you are about.

2. Poor recruiting. For many reasons that are partly related to the image problem, we may be ineffective recruiters. That must change.

3. Weak priorities. Too often, we are consumed by putting out fires — failing to correctly prioritize our time and efforts. We can do better and spend our time better.

4. Poor environment. Finally, we don't maintain positive workplace environments for our people, and we must do that if we want to improve our lot.

—The author is director of training and development at Scotts Lawn Service in Marysville, OH.

Don't ask why,

just do it!

When you become the industry's 'ambassador' in your area, you might discover that good employees will find you

BY PHIL FOGARTY

When I entered the lawn care industry in the early 1980s, the atmosphere was a little on the hostile side. For those of you who remember that era, it won't surprise you that in

my first spring of ownership I was in two different city council chambers for hearings on lawn care. The day after one of the hearings, my company was on the front page of a local daily newspaper (we had the contract for that city's park system) with pictures showing picket signs held by little blond-haired boys: "Please don't make us the guinea pigs!" they pleaded.

At the time, I thought it was a dirty trick to play on the new entrepreneur. I barely knew how to calibrate a spreader and I had people with television cameras asking me for comments. I stammered and swore I would never be that ill-prepared for a chance meeting with the press again.

Those dark days turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I reluctantly became an official representative, or ambassador, of my industry.

The political atmosphere has changed a bit but the advantage I gained by being thought of as the

official representative of my industry in my market has not. Ambassadorship is representation of a group, but it can be so much more.

This ambassador thing is amazing because it does so much good for so many people. It is a true win-win-win situation. Your industry benefits from your efforts — that's good. But let's be a little more self-ish here and also check out what it can do for your company and for you personally:

1. Industry image—Instead of allowing others to define your industry, you are out there promoting your profession. There are countless free opportunities to influence the public opinion. Is that important? Just ask Bill Gates, whose recent position in Gallup polls may have saved his skin (for now). Gates enjoys a 68% approval rating by consumers these days. He knows that presenting a positive image to the consumer will ultimately influence political opinion, which in turn decides much of the business climate in which he operates.

Okay, so political opinion may not be concrete enough for you. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to charge a little more for your expertise and time? Let's face it, John Q. Public doesn't think we are brain surgeons at this point. Our image is improv-

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LABOR FACT

The going rate for landscape

► U.S. average hourly earnings in dollars Nov. 1998 through Nov. 1999

Average: \$13.18 (include preliminary figures for Oct. and Nov.)

Average weekly earnings rose by 3.6%, seasonally adjusted, between November of 1998 and 1999. After adjustment for inflation, average weekly earnings grew by 0.9%. Before adjustment for seasonal change and deflation, average weekly earnings were \$463.68 in November 1999, compared with \$451.10 in 1998.

► 1998 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates

Laborers, landscaping and groundskeeping

Median hourly \$8.24

Median yearly \$17,140

(note: these are median figures; no average available)

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ing as our professionalism rises, but you can speed up the process exponentially by playing an active role and "selling" our trade and its benefits to everyone. Why isn't everybody standing in line to be the ambassador? Don't ask why!

2. Company positioning — So much of selling is trying to differentiate your company, service and product from the competition. "Industry representative" equals "industry expert" in the eyes of the public. You and your company are now pre-sold as the best in your area. What an incredible advantage when the biggest clients in town are looking for the solution to a prob-

How to get started

- *Create a media database* complete with community service leaders and other influential people. Include these people in all formal communications and marketing efforts throughout the year. If you don't have a newsletter, start one this month.

- *Have a five- to 10-minute talk prepared.* There is ambassador training through RISE and PLCAA, as well as videos available to help create a format with which you are comfortable. Become familiar with the issues surrounding our industry so you can be the person others look to as a spokesperson. Don't hesitate to call another ambassador in another market for tips on how to structure your presentation. (PLCAA can help with names.)

- *For good practice and experience* with public speaking in general, become active in your local Toastmasters group.

- *Practice on your staff, family and friends.* Remember, selling is the transfer of enthusiasm from one individual to another.

- *Attend and speak* at every career day you can, especially at elementary and secondary schools.

- *Make yourself available* to radio stations and local print media. A simple letter introducing yourself and letting them know what you could offer in the way of tips for better landscape care or an article on a new way to improve a property may be all that is necessary. Offer to be a speaker at a local garden club or community service organization such as Rotary, Kiwanis or Lions. Leave the technical jargon at the office and talk enthusiastically about the emotional connection people have with your product or service.

- *Consider teaching* at a vocational or technical school in your area. Many community colleges are interested in industry experts as "visiting professors."

- *Take these one step at a time* and be patient with the results. If possible, solicit the advice of a local public relations expert to get you started.

lem or an alternative to business as usual.

And how about the best employees?

Who would they rather work for—a company that pays pretty well or the "industry expert?" (But you probably don't need to hire anybody these days.) What a recruiting tool! Why isn't everybody standing in line to be the ambassador? Don't ask why!

3. Personal growth — "This ambassador stuff sounds like a stretch of the abilities. I didn't sign up for any speeches when I decided to run this company — I just want to sell fertilizer, so leave me alone, will ya?"

In the world of selling, we know that what we are really selling is ourselves — every day, in every situation, all the time. By preparing yourself to sell your industry and your company (to a group or to the media), you move out of your comfort

zone fast. I am still uncomfortable with public speaking but I do not know of a better way to compete with the big guys and their multimillion-dollar marketing budgets. And by the way, the "big" companies also train their managers as ambassadors.

With so many advantages and so much to gain, why don't others assume the role? Don't ask why! Maybe they have convinced themselves that it isn't worth the time or the risk. It doesn't matter.

You now know what an incredible tool being an ambassador is. And someone in your market is going to assume the ambassadorial role. As the wise man said, "If not you, then who and if not now, when?"

—The author owns Crowley's Vegetation Management and serves as a consultant with JP Horizons Inc., Cleveland

FFA seeks partners

In a tight labor market, one organization wants to supply the entire green industry with workers

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR./CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

The Green Industry is scrambling for employees, searching for new labor sources. Have no fear, the FFA is here. Future Farmers of America's membership includes 452,000 students who love to work outdoors. With consolidation putting the pinch on family farms, FFA says these kids are looking for alternatives to keep them working outdoors and offer them job security.

To that end, industry representatives huddled with FFA leaders last October to plan a curriculum for 10,000 high school teachers, promoting green industry careers.

"Most people in the Green Industry don't realize we already have moved the focus beyond the traditional animal husbandry disciplines," says Bernie Staller, COO. "We've already tailored some programs to address issues like urban forestry, biotechnology and landscape architecture. It's not just about animals anymore."

Training the trainers

Roscoe Vaughn, executive director of the National Council on Agricultural Education, says Western Kentucky University will unveil the curriculum on Oct. 31.

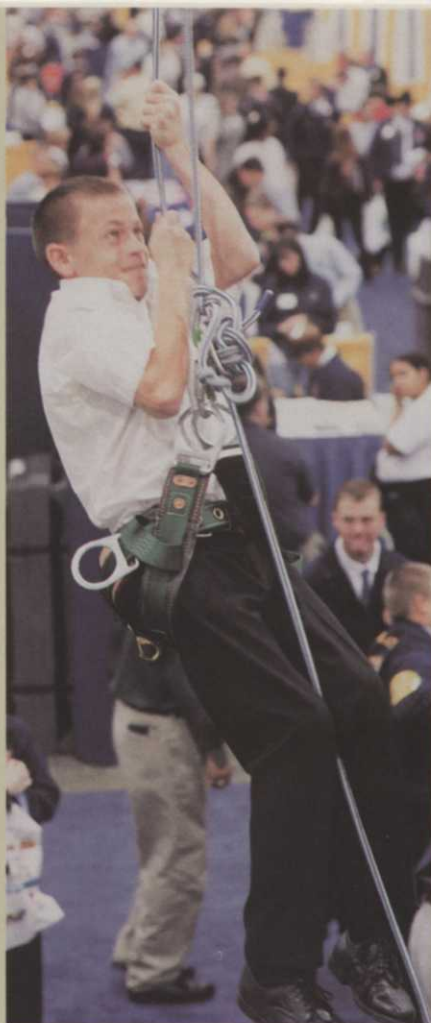
"We've talked about expanding the horizons of FFA for years, but this is the first time we've been able to do it," he says. "This is where FFA is going to grow, and right now our curriculum isn't as strong in the Green Industry as it is in other areas."

He hopes to have the curriculum established at 2,500 to 3,000 schools by 2001. Once the curriculum is complete, the council will bring teachers to Indianapolis to teach it. They will return to the field and educate their peers.

"We're setting up a 'training the trainers' program," Vaughn says. "We believe that will be the quickest way of getting our message out."

If FFA students realize other opportunities exist instead of focusing solely on farming, both the FFA and the Green Industry will benefit, Vaughn says.

"We'd like to offer these students something other than the family farm, and opening up other fields to our students is a way to do this," he adds. "If we can create a sense of excitement among our students, there's no telling where this might go."



Tap into this

How can you tap into this pool?

► Contact your local high school guidance counselors. They will allow you access to students who could be your future work force. They will also help you network with local FFA teachers.

► Sponsor an FFA field day at your business. Bring students to your business and show them what you do. Experience is the quickest way to get these students excited about careers in the green industry.

► Volunteer to speak at a local FFA meeting or teach a class in an area where you need employees. It will relieve the pressure on FFA teachers and offer another point of contact with the students.

► Create an internship. Provide the FFA students with an opportunity to further their education and gain tangible work experience at the same time.

► Provide a scholarship. With a little investment on your part, FFA students will further their education with your help. Your company will be at the top of their minds when graduation comes around.





THE LABOR CRUNCH



SOURCE: FERRIS INDUSTRIES

You can find mechanics worth a pot of gold

Irish legend says if you catch a leprechaun, he'll tell you where he hid his pot of gold. Likewise, landscaping lore says that if you find a good mechanic, he's worth his weight in gold

BY CURT HARLER/CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



It's a bear to find a good mechanic," laments Virgil Russell, executive director of the Equipment and Engine Training Council (EETC), Austin, TX.

Dominic Morales, chairman of the golf/plant sciences department at Delhi College, Delhi, NY, says the biggest demand is on golf courses where equipment must be maintained on the spot and there is a large inventory of equipment with little outsourcing.

"We get 150 job offers for our 25 grads each year," says John Piersol, chairman of the department of golf/landscape/forestry at Lake City Community College in Florida. "There is a bidding war on for a good tech."

Indeed, some shop owners feel they have to have a pot of gold in hand before they go looking for a technician. That, of course, depends on a mix of knowledge and experience.

Jack of all trades?

"In a small shop, the mechanic is a jack-of-all-trades," Morales says. "The larger the shop, the more likely the mechanic will be specialized."

"If you hire a technician, they should be trained in 2-stroke, 4-stroke and diesel en-

gine systems," Russell says. Electronics is another key area. With hydraulics playing an important part in many dealers' products, knowing hydraulics is a valuable extra. For a good mechanic trained in the fundamentals of his trade, there is not much difference in dealing with 2-stroke, 4-stroke or diesels, the instructors maintain.

"Training on diesels is not that big a step from gas engines, but it is becoming more important," Russell continues. "A lot of firms like Scag have small diesels," he notes. It is clear that the ability to read a manual is more important than knowing a particular engine — especially considering that engine sizes and types are likely to change quite a bit in the next decade.

Morales likes to see technicians trained in related areas such as sharpening and grinding. Delhi offers a three-credit course on handling mower blades. Welding ability, too, is important in any shop.

For Piersol's money, the person should be trained both in management skills and mechanical skills. "Some people think all a mechanic needs to do is turn a wrench and fix stuff. But if your shop is a mess, it costs you money."

Piersol lists ability to organize a shop, stock the right spare parts, do preventive maintenance, read engine manuals and perform other management functions as being just as valuable as mechanical ability. The market seems to agree.

"When they start, we tell students that wrench-turners go for \$7.50 or \$8.50 an hour. Students who have good management skills make \$12 to \$16 an hour," Piersol says.

"You are depending on a person who must have multiple skills," Morales adds. Delhi offers both a one-year course for students and a one-week course for professionals, including a turf equipment management course in February. The one-year course is packed: this year there are 18 people in a class which is usually capped at

15 students. "Large, private golf courses need to have a person who is proficient in all aspects of mechanics, including electronics and hydraulics," he says. This applies equally to large landscape and grounds operations.

Valuable certification

Perhaps the most valuable certification is the Outdoor Power Equipment Technician Certification (OPE) offered by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute. OPE certification is the industry's equivalent of the ASA (Automotive Service Association) certification for car mechanics.

In fact, John Kane, executive director of the Engine Service Association (ESA), Exton, PA (www.engineservice.com), says it is not rare for a technician to pass the 4-cycle part of the test and fail to be certified in the diesel area. In any case, certification lasts for only three years.

Specialty accreditation will become more common as companies like Kohler make certification a requirement for working on engines. Some equipment companies offer training as part of a sales package. Remember to figure in the cost of a mechanic who is not available for other tasks on school days (but that cost is still far less than a partly trained worker). Much of the impetus for OPE came from manufacturers concerned that there would be no trained mechanics to do their warranty work. Most major equipment manufacturers have representatives on EETC and ESA.

Watch out for pirates

Right now, too many landscaping firms are simply pirating good workers from shops in the next town. While this merry-go-round is great for the technician's income, it is not the answer to finding a proven worker at a fair wage.

"Demand is driving up their wages," Morales states. He says many of their students come from the automotive business

Where's the real pot of gold?

If your firm is in the market for a good maintenance technician, be prepared to shell out some big dollars.

Even for recent graduates with a good school record, pay is high. "These jobs pay \$25,000 to \$40,000 to start," says John R. Piersol, at Lake City Community College in Florida. "They have the potential to go to \$50,000 or \$70,000."

Other costs, like maintaining a parts inventory and the cost of space for the shop, need to be added to the mechanic's salary and benefits package.

In the past, most certified technicians came from servicing dealers. Today, that group is well salted with golf course workers and a scattering of landscapers, says ESA's Kane.

Golf courses seem more prepared to pay the price than the typical landscape outfit. In fact, the small operator and even the mid-sized company with several crews in the field is probably priced right out of the market when factors like maintaining inventory are added into the equation.

In short, it might be cheapest in the long run to leave a case of good beer or a dozen donuts with the dealer's mechanics now and then than it is for a small operator to try to hire a trained technician.

or from the large tractor and agricultural markets. These people have solid, basic skills as mechanics but need to be trained for specialty areas.

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) has model programs it has developed to give workers

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LABOR FACT

How landscape work compares

Weekly wages (average 1998)

Groundskeepers and gardeners, except farm	\$306
(closest BLS comes to weekly wages of landscaping laborers)	
Brickmasons and stonemasons	\$573
Truck drivers	\$516
Drywall installers	\$493
Printing machine operators	\$495
Carpenters	\$490
Concrete and terrazzo finishers	\$483
Carpet installers	\$476
Roofers	\$441
Bus drivers	\$428
Operators, fabricators and laborers	\$415
Machine operators, assemblers and inspectors	\$406
Painters	\$402
Construction laborers	\$390
Woodworking machine operators	\$379
Sawing machine operators	\$366
Construction helpers	\$335
Janitors and cleaners	\$327
Textile, apparel and furnishings machine operators	\$293
Food preparation and service occupations	\$288
Farm workers	\$281

Editor's note: \$306/week tends to roughly confirm a green industry wage of \$7 an hour for laborers with a small amount of weekly overtime beyond 40 hours, as well as the BLS median hourly wage of \$8.24 for landscaping laborers.

Our thanks to: Mike Wald, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Regional Economist, Atlanta, GA

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necessary mechanical skills. Delhi and Lake City Community College offer a similar program to students. Delhi's program will be three years old in the fall of 2000. At that time, it will be able to do OPE or specialty certification. At Lake City, Piersol wishes he had more students to fill the 15,000-sq.-ft. facility. He says one way to get more and better workers is for landscape industry leaders to get into the high schools and tell students about the high-paying opportunities for workers.

One strategy Piersol suggests is hiring people in high school and then offering them a paid internship as they complete their technical program. He says the auto courses are a good place to look for workers, as well. But, he maintains, the best way to get to the student is to talk to the teachers and guidance people at the high school and to parents whenever possible.

A shop that brings a couple of students in as part of a co-op program will have first pick of the better mechanics upon graduation. "You're handpicking your future," Piersol says.

EETC's Web site, www.eetc.org, is a good place to start reviewing qualifications. Russell also suggests getting involved with a local vo-tech school. Right now, EETC has accredited 14 schools in its program and has 80 more pending. Accredited schools are authorized to teach either at the high school or the adult education level.

Kane says ESA may post a list of certified mechanics by region on its Web site to get trained people and employers together.

Don't give up

Landscape contractors and grounds managers are going to have a tough time getting good mechanics. While an in-house mechanic is an accepted fixture on a golf course, many landscape managers blanch at the thought of shelling out \$50,000 or more a year in salary and benefits. But that

Mechanics' jobs pay \$25,000 to \$40,000 to start, with the potential to go to \$50,000 or \$70,000

is what the mechanics' market demands.

Russell says there is no hard-and-fast economic rule when changing over to in-house service. "If you're using a dealer and getting good service, stay with the dealer," he says. "If service is lousy, then look into going with your own technician." In either case, he says, it is a good idea to make sure the worker is OPE certified.

When figuring the cost of repair service, be sure to include equipment downtime, Piersol reminds. If a contractor keeps an extra mower around just to use when others are in the shop, that's a cost.

"Don't take this out of context, but a 19-year-old student with an internship has just enough knowledge to be dangerous," says Morales. "I'd prefer to place them as an assistant and let them move up. The perfect job is to put them in a shop where the chief mechanic will retire in 12 months or so."

He notes that leasing equipment — doing preventive maintenance in-house but sending equipment back for major work — is another option.

Even if you elect to stick with dealer service, check to be sure the dealer's mechanics are OPE certified. Look for specialty certificates that attest to the technician's completion of factory-sponsored courses. The alternative is to sit out on the lawn after a rainstorm and hope to catch a leprechaun who can lead you to the golden mechanic.

— *The author is a frequent contributor to Landscape Management and is based in Strongsville, OH.*



THE LABOR CRUNCH

Irrigation:

Looking to fill the 'trenches'

Irrigation's labor shortages are just beginning to develop. Future growth in irrigation business and pressure to conserve water will make it all the more important to hire good people

BY BRUCE F. SHANK/BIOCOM

The term "in the trenches" has a special meaning for the landscape irrigation industry. While irrigation seems simple, it is more complex than most occupations. Finding individuals who thrive on hydraulics and specific plant water needs and who aren't repulsed by getting down on their hands and knees in mud is a potential restriction on the growth of the industry.

Business growth, labor shortage

Irrigation contracting is growing at a double-digit pace and employees are needed to meet the demand. Conservation will play a major role in landscape management as population exceeds water supply. The price of water will take a quantum leap very soon, forcing us to choose between no landscape or efficient ones. The irrigation contractor will be the professional resolving the dispute.

The problem is not limited to the South and West. Labor shortages may be worse in the North and Northeast, especially in metropolitan areas where unemployment is low and the cost of living is high. These areas do not have equal access to the

valuable labor provided by Mexican immigrants.

These immigrants are not just a source of labor; they have the potential to rise to foremen and designers and are most tolerant of "the trenches."

The Irrigation Association (IA) has estimated there are approximately 8,000 dedicated irrigation contractors in the U.S., along with nearly 30,000 landscape contractors installing irrigation. These contractors are performing more than \$2 billion dollars in irrigation installation every year. This doesn't include golf courses, highways or parks.

Altogether, they employ roughly 150,000 installers and 40,000 construction foremen. The number of irrigation consultant/designers is approximately 6,000.

Put them altogether and you have 200,000 people depending on the landscape irrigation industry. At a market growth rate approaching 20%, another 40,000 irrigation specialists are needed every year without a loss of current workers.

Irrigation is, at the very minimum, a two-tiered occupation. While irrigation contractors often start out as one-person operations performing smaller residential jobs, they quickly evolve to handle design and installation. As the company enters com-

mercial installation, a third tier opens up with the construction foreman. Large firms create a fourth category differentiating between experienced installers and laborers.

The critical core of the market is the designer and the construction foreman. Both of these roles require education and experience. However, the bulk of the work is done by the installer and laborer.

The current labor shortage in pure numbers is primarily at the installer level. However, without trained and experienced construction foremen, the market is in gridlock. A construction foreman often serves as the designer on smaller jobs. He is the one who allows the owner or manager to concentrate on marketing.

It's more than an image problem

There is tremendous opportunity in irrigation, but not without solving major personnel problems. Some contractors report that they have a harder time keeping irrigation installers than landscape installers. They do special things for their irrigation crews to keep them on board.

When contractors need to hire irrigation foremen and installers, they often poach other companies' trained employees. One firm with a three-year training program for foremen discovered that competitors were paying double to steal their trained employees! Attempts to draw irrigation specialists through classified ads turn up disenchanted workers or people with no experience. There simply aren't enough trained installers available.

The problem is so severe that The Brickman Group, one of the top companies in the industry, now subcontracts its irrigation installation. Illinois laws view irrigation as plumbing, and public health officials and state legislators in Illinois have linked irrigation to public health, placing licensed (call them union) plumbers in charge of the state's public water supply. Union wages make the labor shortage in ir-



'When the labor source is insufficient, does licensing and certification really help, or does it complicate matters further?'

rigation a virtually unsolvable problem.

DiSanto Co., one of the oldest landscape companies in northern Ohio, is looking outside of its region because local classified ads have stopped producing qualified candidates. Matthew Matisko, a DiSanto landscape architect, says turnover is far worse than landscape installation. Winter layoffs continue to present problems.

Water Works Irrigation, a successful installer of residential irrigation systems in Cape Cod, MA, finds other work during the winter for its loyal crew members.

"The demand for our services is strong because Cape Cod has become a destination for vacationing and retirees," adds Paul Merlesena, owner. "The only thing that keeps me from growing is the lack of qualified help. My guys know how much they

mean to me. They are going with us to the Caribbean on a supplier reward trip because they made it happen!"

Are certification & licensing all wet?

When the labor source is insufficient, does licensing and certification really help, or complicate matters further? In fact, licensing and certification identify the industry's more career-oriented people. They require a commitment to learning and reveal those who are unskilled and only in irrigation for the short term. They provide a rationale to increase wages because they insure value.

While only a handful of states have licensing programs, any irrigation contractor can use IA programs to groom foremen and designers. IA's 20+ different classes can be presented to groups across the country for training and certification. More than 700 people took advantage of training sessions at the recent IA Show in Orlando.

Community colleges are waking up to the need. The first IA student chapter was formed in November by the students of Lake City Community College in Lake City, FL. Cuyamaca College in San Diego recently opened a \$5 million water conservation garden to complement its landscape irrigation efforts.

Does this tell you there is a respect for irrigation knowledge?

The growth of irrigation will be huge. The population will go in one direction only and water consumption will go with it. Water rationing, whether by price or quantity, is just around the corner for much of the world. Irrigation must be part of the solution, not the problem. But that can only happen if we have knowledgeable professionals in the trenches. **LMI**

— The author owns BioCOM horticultural communications company in Palmdale, CA. For more information on irrigation and training programs, contact the IA at (703) 573-3551 or www.irrigation.org.