



THE LABOR CRUNCH



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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.

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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.

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