



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

**T**he 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-



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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](http://www.irrigation.org).