

Getting it together

Landscape construction and installation contractors explain how to become a lean, mean efficiency machine

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Landscape construction and installation projects can be complicated, but let's face it: you don't have to be a rocket scientist to make sure they go smoothly.

Most contractors would say a project went "smoothly" if it was completed on time, a quality job was done, a profit was made and the customer was pleased.

But that's easier said than done, right? In these booming times, you're busier than a one-armed backhoe operator, and the least bit of inefficiency could send your project tumbling down. You've got to make the most of your time because you've got a tight schedule and there are no laborers to be found anywhere.

There are answers, and they come from the guys with dirt under their fingernails who know that an auger isn't the nickname of a Texas football team.

Integration and the machine

Roger Braswell knows what efficiency (or lack of it) can mean to an operation. Back in the late 1970s, when he founded Southern Tree & Landscape Co., he saw lots of headaches being caused by the landscape and irrigation process being a two-contract operation.

"There were a lot of coordination issues and a lot of responsibility issues on things like plant livability," Braswell recalls. "Each contract pointed to the other."

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, it became standard to have both landscape and irrigation jobs bundled to one landscape contractor, and that contractor would then subcontract the irrigation. Eventually, landscapers went into the irrigation installation business and did all of the work in-house. Still, the productivity was not there.

"First, you needed to grade everything, then rough in your irrigation and set your sprinkler heads, then plant shrubs and mulch the beds, then clean up the landscape, then energize the whole irrigation system," Braswell explained. "The going back and forth was a timing nightmare because one guy was always waiting on the other."

What Braswell decided to do at Southern Tree was integrate the process to improve productivity — equip a crew to do the whole job without having to mobilize and re-mobilize.

A lot of contractors have followed Braswell's lead on integrating the landscape and irrigation process, and

what makes their job easier is the Toro Dingo digging system. He imported this system from Australia in July 1995, and sold the exclusive rights to manufacture the Dingo to Toro in 1997.

The Dingo allows contractors to accomplish tasks faster with fewer workers. Described as a mobile hydraulic power plant, it has over 35 attachments, including augers, buckets, backhoes and tillers. Braswell has recently started a new company called Powerhouse Equipment, Fort Mills, SC, dedicated to dealers who sell the Dingo and its attachments and teaching contractors how to increase their productivity.

Productivity aside, Braswell believes landscape companies have bigger challenges facing them in the future. "It's going to be interesting to see how nimble companies can be at turning from new construction to renovation and understanding how to market that," Braswell says. "Also, companies should be thinking about how to prepare for a downturn in the economy."

Roger Braswell started a new firm.



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— Chris Aldarelli, president, Aldarelli Enterprises

Communication equals efficiency

At Aldarelli Enterprises, Ocean, NJ, communication is the name of the game. "Our foremen are out there communicating with homeowners and those in charge of commercial sites all the time," Chris Aldarelli, president, says. "They touch base on a daily basis, step by step, so there's no going back after a job is complete. We're using a vast variety of people who speak to customers to keep everyone on the same wavelength and keep everyone happy. If your customers are happy, you'll get paid and you can move on to the next one."

Communication also occurs within the crews. Aldarelli schedules meetings every day to go over the next day's activities, and most duties are scheduled two to three days in advance. He needs to know what drivers are picking up, whether or not there are orders in for materials and how long it will take to get those materials. Every Thursday, he crunches numbers to make sure the company is doing okay financially. Wasted time, he says, is costly.

"If I lost an hour a day, I would lose \$1,400 a day and \$250,000 in a year," Aldarelli says.

One thing he has done to save time is install fuel tanks on company property, which he says saves about 20 minutes per crew per day. At the end of each day, the crews can gas up all of the vehicles so they are ready to go the next morning.

Extending the workability of sites

Tim Korte, vice president of operations for The DiSanto Companies, Cleveland, OH, says that properly matching equipment with tasks maximizes productivity. He really likes

equipment that can be used in soggy conditions, especially since the ground in Ohio can be wet through May.

"Four-wheel drive tractors, Pettibone forklifts, concrete buggies and soil slingers all are really useful to us because they extend the



Tim Korte says that a landscape firm can improve profits if it can work on wet sites.

workability of a site," Korte says. "Access to a site is what keeps us productive in spring, so any time we can get gravel or top soil to areas that ordinarily wouldn't be workable or do our work with machines that can extend out from sidewalks, we're grateful."

As far as scheduling is concerned, Korte says there's never an empty hole. "We have a job site for the guys to go to no matter what the weather's like. If one site is closed, we can go to another."

Get with the program

Pete Estournes, operations director of Gardenworks, Inc., Healdsburg, CA, has

turned to the Jim Houston Estimating Program as a way of getting organized and becoming more efficient. A business program designed specifically for landscape companies, it shows how to set up a budget overhead recovery system and budget estimating system, breaking it out among different field operations. "If you dig a 100-ft. trench, it says how long it will take and how you can track production rates," Estournes explains.

Gardenworks has also signed on to the Pro Challenge Training Program, which locks the company into a year-long commitment to employee training. "Some of the things we have to come up with are job descriptions to use for performance reviews, criteria and goals for our employees to follow so they can get to the next level, and Spanish-English classes," Estournes says.

As if two programs aren't enough, Estournes and his partner also subscribe to a Project Manager program that allows them to be more proactive in scheduling and gives them timelines to organize and dispatch crews.

Contracting out saves time, too

Terry Culver, director of operations, ILT Vignocchi Landscape Architects & Contractors, Wauconda, IL, has learned enough lessons to know how important it is to have the right equipment for a job.

"So many times in the past we would look at a job and say we could do it because we had the equipment," Culver says. "But afterward we see that if we had had a

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— David Snodgrass, president, Dennis' Seven Dees Landscaping

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piece of equipment that was more suited to the job, we could have completed the project in half the time. Now, we contract out those projects."

Culver's current equipment includes a John Deere skid steer ("It's more efficient because it has a greater lift capacity," he says), articulated front end loader ("Fabulous for yardwork and snowplowing") and crawler, and Ford backhoes and tractors.

to make operations even more efficient.

Communication is a big issue, too, which is why Peabody's uses Nextel radio communication. "Supervisors have to report in at midday to the production managers about what they are going to need and what's going on," Peabody says.

Crunching numbers

Like Gardenworks, Realty Landscaping, NJ, manages its projects with an estimating program. "We realized that, in the past, we were telling our guys to just go out there and

find good labor, but one of the company's biggest problems is getting its clients to make commitments to projects quick enough so that plant material can be obtained in a timely manner.

"The owners of our company anticipated the problem of getting plant material, so they bought blocks of it early on," Plechtner says. "Still, it's hard to get things like red maples, and costs are incredibly high."

Preparation is key

David Snodgrass, president of Dennis' Seven Dees Landscaping, Portland, OR, is all for preparation. Just ask his employees, who every morning find themselves standing in a circle looking at each other.

"We do stretching exercises," Snodgrass explains. "It brings us together and helps us bond and establish our culture. Even though it may not be efficient to have everybody report to the home office as opposed to the job site first, I think it pays off huge."

Snodgrass also prepares his troops for each project with preconstruction conferences. Whether it be a small project or large project, the salesperson, supervisors, foreman and estimator all gather in the same room to fully understand the project before going on site.

"In the past, we would go to a job site that wasn't ready, or we weren't ready, and we would end up wasting a couple of days," Snodgrass says.

With commercial sites, Snodgrass' staff will ask the general contractor if certain things have been done in preparation for their work. Even if the contractor says yes, his staff will go out and check on it themselves. "If things aren't done, we'll give the general contractor a list of things to be done before we go out there again," Snodgrass says.

Keys to an efficient operation

1. Know the project inside and out before arriving at the site
2. Make sure all materials are ordered and equipment is obtained
3. Make sure the general contractor has prepared the site for you
4. Have workers report directly to site to save time
5. Expect weather problems and prepare accordingly
6. Keep in constant communication with workers, managers and customers

No punching in at this office

Some time back, it became obvious to David Peabody, president, Peabody Landscape Construction, Columbus, OH, what he needed to do to make his employees' work day the most efficient it could be: direct job site reporting.

"We get them straight out to the work site instead of bringing them here to the office first," Peabody says.

The other part of that time-saving maneuver is preparation. Peabody makes sure that all supervisors have their full hours and full job costing reports ready, and that they have in hand what they need to get the job done. Managers are located in different areas to expedite the flow of materials to job sites. He is considering opening up a satellite office on the city's East Side

get the job done without giving them any goals to shoot for," says David Plechtner, regional manager for Realty Landscaping.

Realty's estimating program will tell the company how many labor hours will be spent on any exterior work project conceivable. Then, the job is estimated on a factor system, and finally on a cost/plus basis.

"What we're left with is a list of materials and total amount of man hours needed," Plechtner says. "Our foremen fill out their time sheets, those get loaded into a computer, and we can then track our productivity."

As far as making sure no time is wasted during the work day, Plechtner says that his company will often set up a satellite office on a project site where crew members can report directly every day.

The H2B program has helped Realty