

# Fish

where they're bitin'

**How one manager found all the 'good' people he needed to succeed in the lawn service business**

BY BILL HOOPES

In my management training experience, the single most surprising discovery I've made and confirmed many times is that managers simply will not recruit. Not can't recruit — won't recruit.

My earlier article (*LM* September 1999) emphasized seven keys to management success. Number 6 involved the need for a human resources strategy — a plan for finding, hiring and keeping people. This article expands upon that and offers a plan that every manager can use to find, then hire, the people you want.

### He's really you

You need to know that Max Terrier is real. He is a successful lawn service manager whose real identity I'm protecting because that's the way he wanted it.

Max became a "superstar" while managing a lawn service branch in south Texas. He boasted no business degree, only some prior experience working in the fast food

ILLUSTRATION: BOB LYNCH



business. And Max wasn't particularly lucky. He learned the most effective process for hiring and managing people by trial and error.

He did possess some important traits that I refer to as the "Terrier Factor." Max had the ability to do two things that helped him succeed:

\* He learned to focus on a *well defined objective*.

\* He played the business game with *dogged determination and discipline*.

Together, that simply means he focused his energy on the most important targets and believed in himself to the point that he was able to ride out temporary setbacks and keep working.

### Just an average manager

At first, Max was like many managers — consumed by lots of little fires and working endless hours to keep up. To Max, the 'recruiting plan' amounted to a message to the office manager, telling her to "run the ad again, Sheila." And it never seemed to work. But Max, like lots of us, ran the ad anyway. After all, you have to get the word out; you have to 'fill those chairs.'

Without going into the oft-repeated details of our shrinking labor pool, let's review the lessons Max learned.

After hours of planning and thinking about how he would pull off a successful season, Max went about his hiring as always — tapping the labor pool he could easily reach in the classifieds. He was like the rest, returning to the local classifieds again and again when time was short and creative thinking absent. On the spring that changed him forever, he came up short, hiring five of the seven people he needed. Still, he plunged into spring, sure he'd find a couple of guys somewhere.

On one particularly bad weather week

in March, two technicians walked just when he needed them most. And, as you already know, he was unable to replace them. In four weeks, Max lost over \$30,000 in much needed revenue. But it wasn't just the revenue shortfall that stung; Max was behind during the most competitive time of the year. And with every passing day, more customers threatened cancellation if they didn't receive service.

He thought about the old lawn care adage: "When you blow it early, Round One never ends." Max did what he always did and reached for the Maalox.

Why did this happen again? Two management mistakes caused the problem:

1. Max made poor hiring selections. With less-than-adequate candidates to choose from, he settled for losers; and
2. Max didn't know how to replace those that left. Both problems are recruiting failures. Max knew he had to solve these problems, but he needed a plan.

### The light bulb goes on

Sitting in his office one evening when he'd rather have been at home, Max picked up a copy of *Field & Stream* magazine. Flipping through the pages, he noticed an article titled, "Get Smart: Fish Where They're Bitin'." The article described a strategy fishermen use to quickly and consistently locate large schools of fish. It explained how successful fishermen bring in a great catch every time.

He thought about it all night. The next morning, when his office manager dutifully reported, "the ads are in," Max thought again about the article and knew his message (the bait) wasn't where it should be. It wasn't where they are biting.

In the next few days, while the phone remained silent, Max accepted that he

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## Max's recruiting plan of action

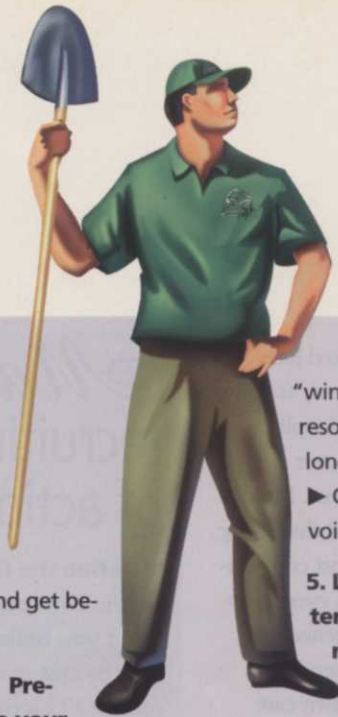
**1. Define the fish you want to catch: Find people who believe what you believe.** Max realized he had the best chance of succeeding if he could staff his company with people who were interested in his job vs. any job and felt comfortable with his philosophies, values and procedures. He had to consider them in terms of:

- ▶ **Experience** — what did he want new hires to know?
- ▶ **Skills** — what did he expect new hires to be able to do quickly?
- ▶ **Personal values/ethics/standards** — are they consistent with his?
- ▶ **Development potential** — how much growth did he expect?

**2. Fish where they're bitin': Identify high potential recruiting sources for the kind of people you want to locate.**

- ▶ Involve yourself in local community college/technical school projects or activities as a sponsor. Your marketplace needs to know you are alive.
- ▶ Visit local high school vo-ag or vo-tech classes and JVS programs. Get to know teachers and counselors. Communicate your need.
- ▶ Sponsor community environmental improvement projects for publicity. Word of your company will travel fast.
- ▶ Write to a list of certified applicators in your area (lists available from your state's department of agriculture).
- ▶ Check state and local extension ser-

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To Max, the 'recruiting plan' was a message to the office manager, telling her to 'run the ad again, Sheila.'

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vice training and re-training programs. Many are looking for placement destinations.

In other words, do what Max finally did and get beyond the classifieds!

### 3. Use the right bait: Prepare to communicate your message effectively:

- ▶ Develop catchy, easy-to-read recruiting literature. There are plenty around to use for ideas.
- ▶ Print up concise job description/ career opportunity sheets for use in quick two-minute interviews (when you meet a potential candidate).
- ▶ Use business cards with a benefits-oriented recruiting message.
- ▶ Rewrite your hiring ads to emphasize a good work environment, controlled hours, vacations, benefits, recognition, team activity and fun — not just tasks. Your message must 'sell' your company.

### 4. Go fishin' in new waters: Get the word out:

- ▶ Try weekly tabloid papers vs. the daily publication.
- ▶ Move your newspaper ad out of the classifieds (try the sports section).
- ▶ Give your ad a new, interesting heading ("Tired of empty promises?" or "Want to know what you've been missing?").
- ▶ Advertise in community colleges, career centers and technical school papers.
- ▶ Try drive-time country radio (saturation 10-second spots for two weeks).
- ▶ Offer a finder bonus to current staff

"winners." Referrals are a great resource and they stay with you longer.

- ▶ Canvass customers with in-voice stuffers.

### 5. Learn to set the hook: Interview effectively and make better selections.

- ▶ Confirm you have a positive "drive-up" first impression. Don't let them drive away — it happens.
- ▶ Confirm your staff is acting and looking professional. Candidates believe what they see is what you are.
- ▶ Let your staff know when interviews are scheduled.
- ▶ Provide a friendly welcome.
- ▶ Be ready for a private, uninterrupted interview. Clear your desk.
- ▶ Rehearse the interview; don't 'wing it.'
- ▶ Opening — explain the job, requirements, rewards. Confirm understanding (5 minutes).
- ▶ Probe with careful, open-ended questions (10 minutes).
- ▶ If you like what you see and hear, make a hire/no hire decision without wasting more management time.
- ▶ If positive, answer candidate questions (10 minutes).
- ▶ End the interview with a challenge: "If I put you on my team, will you give me your personal commitment to stick with us for at least six months? It will take me that long to really teach you the position."
- ▶ If you get a 'yes,' ask the candidate to go home, think about it and call you at 8:00 a.m. sharp! Some do, some don't. Those that don't, you don't want.

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would need to learn how to go fishing again. He knew he had bait, but perhaps not the right kind for the fish he needed to attract. And just maybe Max was fishing in the wrong part of the lake.

### A new day, a new fishin' hole

These are the steps Max Terrier took to rework his recruiting/hiring strategy:

**1. Reset management priorities.** Max understood that he, and only he, could be the fisherman. The process could not be delegated to his assistant and it would not happen without him. Max had to make time to 'go fishin'.' This meant he had to reorder his time use priorities.

**2. One hour per day.** He set aside a minimum of one hour each day for recruiting. No matter what, Max worked on recruiting for an hour, in addition to paying regular recruiting visits to career days and local events where prospects might be found. He decided the best hour for him was immediately after the crews went out in the field in the morning. That became the time he took no calls or interruptions, and he devoted himself to building his company team.

Max worked through a process of evaluating the recruiting possibilities in his town. He made contacts, learned how to get visibility, where to be and when to be there. All this took Max one hour a day, which is not unreasonable when you consider that the goal is to find and attract the most important management resource of all — employees to strengthen your firm.

**3. Commitment to his plan.** Max made huge progress when, after a lot of thought, he decided to accept the level of personal discipline required to make the process work. For him, a psychological tool he'd

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read about called "auto suggestion" made it easy. He made up two posters on which he wrote these slogans: "People first, everything else second," and "I'll spend 1 hour each day recruiting."

Max placed the posters on the wall where they would be impossible for him to avoid: directly across from his desk.

#### 4. Program yourself to make it happen.

It may sound simplistic, even naive, but this process of recommitment to a new approach worked for Max as it will work for you. Once you *think* something is a good idea and make a mental/emotional commitment to making that thought a part of

your life, you begin to *program your subconscious mind to make it happen*. Max used this technique to make the necessary changes in his thinking and routine and he succeeded in developing, and implementing, a much improved recruiting strategy.

It all began for Max when he decided to reset his priorities: Put people first. Then, he acknowledged that more time should be devoted to staffing, including a long-term commitment to the process.

#### You need people to make a team

The sidebar beginning on page 37 presents Max's five key steps to improving recruiting effectiveness. In the process, Max

learned that people take lots of time, but people are also your most precious resource. No manager can succeed on individual effort alone. Like Max Terrier, you need a motivated staff. And the sooner you accept the need to place the highest priority possible on recruiting, the sooner your staffing problems will go away.

Max Terrier learned you never stop recruiting! **LM**

*The author is director of training and development at Scotts Lawn Service in Marysville, OH. He says Max Terrier is a composite of two real people who worked for him in Texas.*

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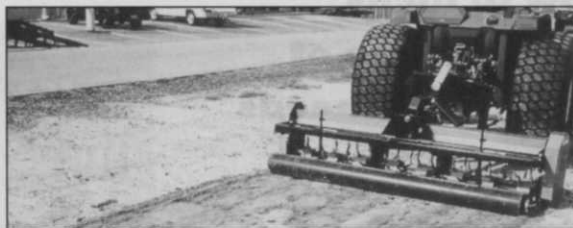
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# How to supervise 'special' people

**When you hire young employees, older workers and the frequently unemployed, you have special management challenges. Learn how to focus on each type of employee's needs**

BY DONALD W. JACKSON

**H**iring and retaining employees can be challenging at best. We all want knowledgeable and dependable workers, but most landscape organizations are only as solid as their weakest employee. Since our industry is largely seasonal and dependent on staffing through fairly low-paying, manual labor positions, it is critical to make hiring the best possible employee a top priority.

These 'special' employee types can be suitable and productive candidates with the proper supervision.

## Hiring the frequently unemployed

Many seasonal and entry level positions are filled by individuals with less than perfect work histories. Either they have had significant periods of unemployment or are transient and continually move from job to job.

Also, they may not have graduated from high school or earned a GED equivalency degree.

Those who are frequently unemployed may have family responsibilities that can

be financially and emotionally demanding, and their sketchy work histories can sometimes be traced to having had little guidance to prepare them for workplace responsibilities.

Often, they are inexperienced in functioning within a structured work environment and may not have developed social skills involving relationships with coworkers and supervisors or adhering to workplace rules.

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## Hiring: Three faces with special needs

### EMPLOYEE PROFILE # 1

## Frequently unemployed

### Robert Mills

Age: 34

Height: 5'9"

Weight: 175 lbs.

Marital Status: 4 children: ages 5, 6, 11 and 15

Education: GED equivalency degree

▶ Robert has had four jobs in the last five years, with frequent periods of unemployment over the last 15 years. These lapses

often last between six and nine months.

▶ Robert does not have any criminal record and has no history of alcohol or drug abuse.

▶ He has worked primarily as a diesel engine mechanic, heavy equipment operator and as a laborer in landscape and nursery operations.

▶ Robert is known to have a hot temper, which has caused him to be somewhat difficult to supervise over long periods of time.



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### Training ideas

Remember the letters "SSR" when you train frequently unemployed individuals. It is important that all training be simple (S), specific (S) and as relevant or "real life" (R) as possible. Also remember that visual aids help a person understand the concepts you're teaching.

Be thorough in all training and encourage personal interaction to assure they understand the topics you cover. Reinforce key points when on the job. Encourage and reinforce positive behavior and accomplishments.

Finally, try to establish and promote cooperation between current, trusted employees and newly hired seasonals or entry-level people.

### He's just a kid!

High school and college age students offer our industry another source of labor, and although many are ambitious and genuinely looking to succeed, their goals are often short term and usually measured in weeks or months rather than years. The quality of a young person's home life,

along with the level of guidance from other adults, can vary widely along with their maturity.

There are obvious exceptions, but the overall affluence and level of disposable income among this age group is relatively high compared to previous generations. As a result, in a period of a strong national economy like the present, it's the employees who end up vying for people in this age group.

A positive work environment means more than a competitive wage at this age. This may mean better working conditions and flexible work hours. It is important to be adaptable and timely in making changes. The computer age has forced technology changes to move at a very high rate of speed. Capable and intelligent young employees seldom have much patience waiting for improvements their supervisors promise.

Younger employees often need to feel a sense of purpose from their jobs. Completing a task simply because their supervisor instructs them to do so may not be sufficient for a stimulated and forward-thinking student. Try to communicate the intention

and rationale of each job assignment to the best of your ability.

Finally, be realistic in your expectations and objectives. We are sometimes quick to fall back upon the "when I was their age ..." philosophy in evaluating the productivity of younger employees.

### Appreciating older employees

Many industry organizations rely heavily on older employees. That's because they may be critical to the operation's success, as well as an important influence on the dependability and motivation of other employees.

Factors that wear on older employees relate to their physical and emotional well-being. Influences such as heredity, living conditions, diet and financial responsibilities can impact an older worker's health and productivity. Family-related stresses can include dependent children and grandchildren. As with any age group, the ability to cope with job-related and personal stress varies greatly from person to person.

Because the number of older employees in our industry continues to grow each year, more landscape managers are realizing how productive they can be:

- ▶ Job-related turnover is often much less with older employees compared to younger workers.

- ▶ Older employees are frequently more safety conscious, maintain a more consistent attendance record, and, due to their many years of experience, are often more skilled at their jobs.

- ▶ Older workers matched to the right job can be very productive. Tasks that require accuracy, judgment and dependability over swiftness are frequently better suited to them.

- ▶ These employees characteristically bring assets to the table that can be of great value to their immediate supervisors and the organization. Through experience, they have learned to see the "big picture" and

#### EMPLOYEE PROFILE #2

### Young employee

**Richard Thomas Jr.**

Age: 19

Height: 6' 0"

Weight: 195 lbs.

Marital Status: Single

Education: High school graduate

- ▶ Richard took a year off to work after high school before attending college.

- ▶ He is an only child and was raised in a single-parent home. Both his mother and his high school guidance counselor advised Richard to work for a year to give him time to mature.



- ▶ Overall, Richard was a B+ to A- student in high school but was particularly gifted in the areas of English, speech and debate. He is entering Wake Forest University in the fall as a psychology major. Richard will most likely go on to law school.

- ▶ Richard has matured significantly as a result of job responsibilities and is currently employed as a summer crew leader with a landscape maintenance company in southeastern Connecticut.

EMPLOYEE PROFILE #3

## Older employee

Samantha Hunt

Age: 59

Height: 5'6"

Weight: 145 lbs.

Marital Status:

Married with two

grown children

Education: Degree

in Business Man-

agement from The

Ohio State University



▶ Samantha was employed for more than 35 years with a large farm equipment manufacturer based in the Midwest. She was a regional sales manager with the company when she elected to retire early at age 57.

▶ She worked the next two years as a pickup and heavy truck salesman at a dealership just outside of Cincinnati before assuming her current position as commercial sales-customer service representative for a large midwestern nursery and landscape operation.

▶ Her extroverted personality, high standards and dedication to detail have allowed her to quickly excel in her current position in the landscape business.

are able to look at jobs with a more long-term, global perspective. This is especially important when the job requires contact with clients — older employees are frequently more attuned to the nuances and delicacies of good "people skills."

### Make it legal

Good ethical, moral and legal standards are important to the longevity and overall success of any business, and such standards are no less important within our industry.

The selection, training and retention of

quality employees is important at all job levels. Unfortunately, too many employers subscribe to an open or "swinging door" philosophy when it comes to staffing.

It takes time and effort to develop quality employees at all levels and learn how to

manage them, but it's worth the effort. Try it. You will reap well-deserved benefits!

— The author directs the horticulture, landscaping and turf management program at The Williamson Free School, Media, PA.

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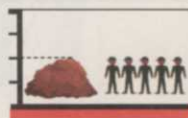
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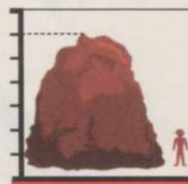
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# H2B:

## The legal alternative

**Savvy contractors are already making this system work for them and there's room for more legal immigrants. Don't miss this opportunity for quality workers!**

BY ROBERT E. REAVES

**A**sk most landscape managers to make one wish and, in most cases, they would wish for a reliable, skilled workforce made up of local citizens. That wish probably won't come true, since most Americans shun hard labor positions in the landscape industry. Illegal workers from Mexico now make up a large portion of the seasonal landscape labor force in most areas of the country.

Work site raids have become a low priority of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). It has now initiated a less intrusive process: making appoint-

ments with businesses and auditing employee work documents. The major enforcement focus is now at the border, where the U.S. Border Patrol is expected to swell to more than 20,000 members in the next few years.

Unless we build a wall extending the length of the U.S.-Mexico border or send in the military, many believe there's no way to control the influx of illegal immigrants into this country. As long as they see the United States as the promised land, the steady flow will continue. And this means plenty of workers for low-skilled jobs in the landscape industry.

### Devil in the details

The U.S. government is looking for ways to get a better control over the illegal alien situation. One idea that seems to be gaining ground with congressional leaders is a streamlined visa program allowing companies to hire foreign workers on a temporary basis.

Joe Greene, director of the INS district office in Denver, is skeptical. "With a guest worker program, the devil is always in the details," he says. "How do you control people to ensure that if they come in to work, they leave if it's temporary?"

There's an existing visa program for seasonal workers known as H2B, which allows up to 66,000 immigrant workers into this country per year. Controlled by the U.S. Department of Labor and the INS, it

grants American companies permission to hire foreign workers on a temporary basis — up to 10 months at a time — as long as they can prove they were unable to find U.S. workers to fill the positions.

H2B's biggest advantage is the higher probability of finding workers already skilled in landscape maintenance. And because the worker is legally in the United States, there won't be the usual problems with the INS. Many landscape contractors say the source of Mexican workers with green cards has dried up, another reason to use H2B.

### Advantages for the workers

What's in it for the foreign worker? Under the H2B visa program, workers receive protection under the Fair Labor Standards Act, which stipulates that workers are to receive overtime, at least minimum wage and pay income taxes.

Many criticize H2B, especially the paperwork that comes with it. To facilitate the process, some landscape contractors hire an H2B agent — labor contractor — to take care of it. Labor contractors locate workers with landscape skills and see their clients through the entire process.

### Do-it-yourself options

Is it a requirement to use an H2B agent to secure H2B workers? No.

Although it is more time consuming to handle the entire process on your own, it is

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entirely feasible. You'll also save around several thousand dollars the agent would have charged as a fee.

The first step is to work with your state's workforce commission and the U.S. De-

partment of Labor. Make sure you put a dollar value on the time it takes you to work through the certification process. Compare it against the cost of using an H2B agent.

Even if you use an agent, you will still be required to write letters. Remember,

the H2B agent can't provide you with shortcuts around the legal process. In other words, don't get a false sense of security that the INS and U.S. Department of Labor will "look the other way" because you are involved with the program or working with an agent.

Use of the H2B program in the industry continues to grow. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the program is so successful that the number of workers certified has more than doubled in the last two years.

"Two years ago, the Dallas regional office did not even certify workers in the H2B program for landscape and related jobs. We thought there were enough U.S. workers," says John Bartlett, certifying officer with the U.S. Department of Labor's Dallas office.

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## Top five reasons H2B workers quit

1. Housing is too expensive. Most H2B workers can only afford \$25 per week. The H2B housing should not be a direct company rental or it would fall under HUD standards.

2. Bad attitude from the foreman or supervisors. Use of foul language drives workers away.

3. No ride to and from work.

4. No evening recreation. These men are many miles from their families.

5. "Us" versus "them" atmosphere at work. They don't feel they are part of things.

*Note: Check your local Labor Certification Office at the U.S. Department of Labor/Employment Training Administration for more information.*

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"The Texas Workforce Commission proved to the U.S. Department of Labor that this was not the case."

### Give yourself lead time

How long does H2B certification take? According to Bartlett, the average certification time frame is now 60 to 90 days.

For some contractors, the jury is still out. Several irrigation and landscape contractors admitted they were beginning to use the program, but were unwilling to make a statement at this time. Two major green industry trade associations said they could not officially endorse the program and preferred not to make an official comment.

Ed LaFlamme, branch manager of Tru-Green LandCare in New Haven, CT, brought in 10 H2B workers in 1999. He

had mixed results, noting that several workers asked to return to Mexico. "Before a contractor brings these workers all the way from Mexico, he should carefully screen them beforehand. You need to look for flexible people who are experienced and want to work in the landscape industry," he adds.



Ed LaFlamme

### Increase your success rate

"One of the most difficult factors with H2B is figuring out how you will assimilate foreign workers into your community and your company," says Scott Evans, owner of C. Scott, Inc., a labor placement firm located in Bay City, TX.

Evans says the first step is to become a bilingual company. "Teach your staff Spanish and hold English classes for the Spanish-speaking workers."

The second step is to recruit from friends and family of existing employees. "When the employee knows a person in your company, they can blend into the company and community much faster," he says.

"It's also important to prepare a welcome package for each H2B worker. Give them a company greeting letter and a company pad to write their families on their first day. Offer to mail the letters for them."

Don't forget the welcome meal. "After a long trip from Mexico, a meal is always appreciated," says Evans.

*Robert E. Reaves is a turfgrass specialist with Van Waters & Rogers Inc. in Austin, TX.*

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# Develop your own Career track

**These companies took care of their employees, only to watch them grow into competent managers and supervisors. Can you do the same with your people?**

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

**I**t's hard enough just finding good people to hire but what about developing those who have more responsibility? How do you determine the laborer who has what it takes to be a foreman or the foreman who could grow into a middle manager?

How do you even hold onto people long enough to develop them? The good ones often leave to start their own businesses.

We visited with three companies who have answers to these questions:

## **Environmental Industries Inc.**

Environmental Industries Inc., of Calabasas, CA, is the largest privately owned landscape contracting company in the

United States. One of the areas in which they are known to excel is developing people from within into supervisors and then into managers. *LM* asked Bill Arman, EII's vice president for human resources, to explain that success:

*LM: Developing people from within into supervisors and middle managers is something the industry traditionally does not do well. How do you do it?*

**Arman:** The first step is to start with the end in mind. We try to visualize what types of businesses we are going to be in, what customers we are going to be relating with and what skill sets and technologies we will need.

Then we make our future thinking clear to the organization. We teach our people what the skill sets are that we will need for the future. We also have a process in place to analyze what they've learned so that the learning is stronger than just taking a one-day class and a two-day seminar.

*LM: What kinds of things do you teach people as you develop them from within in this process?*

**Arman:** We look at three main areas. The first area is the customer: how to look at the work from the customers' perspectives.

Second, how to deliver customers' concerns effectively and efficiently.

We look at production: How do we obtain it? We want to be well organized and to execute fundamentals (what we call

Best Practices.)

Third, there is the culture. We try to create the culture in our organization that has people transferring this knowledge to others as they work. We create that culture by financial means, by recognition of people, by offering varied experiences and cool assignments.

*LM: Do you have success developing people from within?*

**Arman:** That's primarily what we do — develop from within. You measure success by retaining qualified people who are doing their jobs. You can't look at your overall retention because keeping people who are not doing their job is not a good thing either. You have to reward the good performers, give the others a chance to improve, and take those who don't improve and give them a chance to succeed elsewhere.

*LM: And do you also learn from other industries?*

**Arman:** Yes. We have "tours" where we visit other operations that are not related to our business; for example, UPS, Federal Express, Home Depot and large organizations that are successful with lots of people development. And we observe, watch, ask lots of questions, meet with their human resources people and learn everything we can.



**Bill Arman**

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### TruGreen-LandCare

Rex Gore is the south Texas regional manager for TruGreen-LandCare. Until last year, he was president of Clean Cut Inc.,

an Austin-based landscaping company that is now part of TGLC. Clean Cut grew at an average rate of 30% a year over a 13-year period, meaning their hiring and retention needs were staggering.

**LM:** So you had to retain the good people

you had, hire new people and develop and promote people from within — in a way that sustained 30% growth year after year.

**Gore:** That growth rate means we retained most of the good people we had, and hired a bunch more.

**LM:** And you clearly succeeded.

**Gore:** I believe so. When we sold to TruGreen, we had become a \$22-million/year business with 400 people. By the way, the business is still growing under TruGreen, and we're doing things much the same way, with some modifications to suit our corporate style.

**LM:** Do you hire supervisors and managers from outside or develop from within?

**Gore:** As far as managers, we have some people who came up through the ranks from crew positions. But more typically, mid- to upper-management comes from recruiting at colleges, especially more recently. In almost all cases, supervisors and foremen were hired as laborers within our companies. By displaying capabilities, and with some reasonably decent training, these are people who have developed into competent supervisory personnel.

**LM:** You must have had success retaining them long enough to develop them into supervisors?

**Gore:** Yes. As I'm looking through the list of foremen (reads names aloud), about half of these are people who started as laborers six to eight or 10 to 12 years ago.

**LM:** Why do you think they stayed with you long enough to develop into foremen?

**Gore:** It's not brain surgery. It's trying to hire pretty good people, then screening them rigorously. That means when you find people who don't show good attitudes or capabilities, you need to make that cut reasonably quickly at the laborer level. From there, there's always some people in any group that have leadership capabilities,

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## 5 ways to develop people

Landscape Management talked to Dave St. John, GreenSearch, an Atlanta-based consulting firm that does both management personnel searches and HR consulting. He shared some of his observations about developing productive supervisors and managers.

What do the successful companies do differently from the rest of the green industry? Several things, St. John says:

► **Owner visibility and concern.** "The successful ones, where we've seen long-

tenured people, are owners who personally stay involved. They're instrumental in hiring the people, they watch their progress and they look for the things in their behavior that indicate they can shoulder a heavier load."

► **People instinct.** "The successful owners we've seen also have an instinct about people. They know when someone is ready to move on to accept greater challenges. They can differentiate between technical challenges and the broader, more conceptual things which give a sense of supervisory ability."

► **Leadership observers.** "They watch for informal leaders who other people naturally start to follow."



Dave St. John

► **Clear communication.** "Good owners have the ability to state what they want from people and not how the people are to do it. That gives the emerging supervisor a platform from which to be creative and show what he or she can do.

"There isn't a particular route for supervisory development, especially for companies that don't have well developed recruiting processes. The basic element is very good people judgment on the part of the owners and senior decision makers."

► **New responsibilities.** "As for growing people into middle management, it's like the NBA draft. The further up you go on the totem pole, the fewer people from which to choose. To bridge someone from supervisor to manager, start giving the candidates more diverse things to do — things that are new and different. You might have them run two different segments of the business, lead three different kinds of crews or deal with new customers."

"Diversity of task really tests their scope. The difference is that a manager now has to manage results, not activities. Management's a different game. A supervisor is a team player; a manager is the team coach. There's a big difference!"

— George Witterschein

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and it's a matter of finding them and recognizing them.

Keeping people is a function of several things: You've got to pay competitively, give them opportunities, treat them fairly, demonstrate concern for their welfare and appreciate they are human beings with needs.

**LM:** *How do you show concern for their human welfare?*

**Gore:** Anyone who has had success developing good people has been in situations where they're helping them out in a time of need. When they're struggling with an illness, you have to be tolerant. You should strive for perfection in this, I suppose, but even if you're only pretty good at it, you'll get good results.

**LM:** *Because so many other companies are so bad it?*

**Gore (laughs):** That's probably the case. There are a lot of things in life that aren't extremely urgent today but must get done or they will make life difficult in the future. Getting a job sold, getting a job done or collecting the money from that job — all those are urgent. Hiring someone who might be a good laborer and ultimately a good supervisor is important, but it's not urgent. You have to remind yourself that it's important. At some point, it becomes urgent if you don't make it important.

**LM:** *Still, it has to be hard to keep up with that yearly growth rate.*

**Gore:** It takes a lot of work, but it also makes it possible to keep good people and develop them from within. That's because growth provides opportunities for people with leadership capabilities and motivation.

#### **Robertson Lawn Care**

Robertson Lawn Care, Springfield, IL, does mostly lawn care for an upscale clientele

## One company's experience

Keesen Enterprises Inc. in Englewood, CO, is a landscape contracting business with 140 employees and \$4 million in revenue. Landscape maintenance is its main business, along with irrigation, landscape construction, spraying, fertilization and snow removal. President Duane Keesen, a third-generation Colorado landscaper, speaks about the H2B program from experience.



Duane Keesen

"We were having an exceptionally difficult time hiring over the last couple of years," Keesen says. "Several years ago, we initiated an H2B program here and got off to a slow start. Eventually we went to Scott Evans, and we brought in 60 people last summer and 18 people in the winter.

"It was a wise thing for us to enter the program. What it cost us we probably tripled in profit. One of the reasons is that we bring in the people as a group and there is only one training period, which our bilingual supervisors do in-house. We find that jobs are getting done much faster than before. In the past, if somebody could walk, we would hire him.

#### **It doesn't work in other industries**

"I've gotten calls from other industries — drywall, roofers, concrete, construction — wanting to know how to get into this program. They would love to, but can't. We in the landscape industry are spoiled. We can get into it, but so many don't because of lack of understanding, or fear, or inability to provide the cash up front.

"To those who say they can't afford H2B, I say this program is the way to go because it's the right thing to do. The Bible tells us that if you build your house upon a rock it's going to stand, but if you build it on sand it's going to wash away. If you build your business on illegal people, you're building it on sand. You cannot promote within and before you turn around, you'll have huge fines.

"The only other possibility is to pay wages that compete with the roofing, sheet rock and general contracting markets. I'd love to do it, but it isn't there. If the construction industry cannot get good workers, we certainly can't at a lesser rate."

Each of his new employees has a sponsor, a company employee who makes the newcomer feel welcome. "Last year, when everybody first came up, it snowed. They had someone who could tell them what kind of boots to get. This works very well. We've only had to send two people back to Mexico. One had health problems and the other went to work for someone else, which is illegal."

Keesen and a lawyer have begun a campaign to persuade Congress to change the law to allow H2B workers to apply for a green card after a few years working here. The employer would then get back the prized H2B slot (remember, there are only 66,000 of them a year) once the green card is in place.

"My guess is that half or more of them would stay with us once they had green cards. But if they didn't stay with us, at least they would become available to the landscaping industry in general." (Keesen Enterprises, Inc., Englewood, Colorado; 303-761-0444.)

but is a small company and a growth company at the same time. Jack Robertson is president.

**LM:** What's your operation's size?

**Robertson:** At peak we have eight employees. Since starting our business in 1977, we've grown our customer base every single year.

**LM:** You've been able to achieve that



**Jack Robertson**

growth record with the same size workforce.

**How?**

**Robertson:** By being efficient. Our people's knowledge and experience is a huge part.

**LM:** Much of that knowledge and experience

belongs to your two senior service managers, Brian Cox (in his 20th year with the company) and Mike Harris (in his 19th). How did you manage to hold onto two good people for 20 years?

**Robertson (laughs):** If I knew the answer I'd bottle it!

**LM:** Perhaps it's not such a mystery.

Your formula for success boils down to something like this: Hire people whose values resemble yours and give them what they need to feel comfortable and satisfied with their jobs.

**Robertson:** We share bonuses yearly and throughout the year with our people, but the benefits package is minimal. We've been lucky in that Mike and Brian both have wives with good medical coverage.

**LM:** What does your company do right?

**Robertson:** No matter what business you're in, if you work that closely with people for that period of time, you become like family. And we're certainly like family here. For example, we like to do outdoor

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## U.S. unemployed

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Average: 5,915

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activities such as hunting together. There are other things that are just as important to us all. For example, we have kids that are not yet grown. It is important for

everybody to give the kids attention, and that means time. We're extremely flexible about things like letting people off to go to the track meet or the music recital.

I also want them to feel free to tell me

that they're going to take the time. That has worked well for us.

**LM:** So it's a matter of shared values.

**Robertson:** People and family come  
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## Why the labor crunch?

- "Unskilled native-born people, if they're going to work for \$7 or \$8 an hour, are going to do it indoors in a



Scott Evans

McDonald's where it's air conditioned in the summer and heated in the winter." — Bob Wingfield, Amigos Labor Solutions, Dallas

- "1976 was the lowest birth year

in the United States in the last 50 years. So the demographic pool of 24-year-olds — a typical landscape worker's age — is very small to start with." — Scott Evans, C. Scott Inc., Bay City, TX

- "Do Latin American laborers harm America? No! These H2B people don't take jobs from people — they fill an incredible need. And the belief that Mexicans coming here to work in our industry are abusing the system couldn't be further from the truth. These people make a real contribution to our society. Americans often don't realize what would happen if (they) weren't here. Except for maybe South Dakota, the whole country would shut down! Under H2B, only 66,000 people are allowed in a year. That's less than one for every community in the U.S."

— Bob Wingfield

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first. It's easier to say that sometimes than to actually do it, especially when you're chief bottle washer for the business. But it's worth it.

I think Mike and Brian enjoy coming to work because they feel we have the same

values. They also enjoy their work because we do everything only one way, and that is the very best way that we can.

We do things a lot differently around here. I've been to a lot of lawn care offices, and while some are very nice, some aren't. But we designed a new one six years ago so

that it would be fun to walk in the door every day. And when you visit our office, you feel that.

In a sense, we've designed the whole company that way!

— The author is a contributing editor for

*Landscape Management*

## Working with a labor consultant

One response to the scarcity of labor is to look elsewhere, yet who has the stamina or resources to take on government regulations involved in importing workers from Latin America?

Specialists have sprung up to assist you and here's a sample of what some of them told *Landscape Management*:

**Bob Wingfield** is president of Amigos Labor Solutions, Inc. in Dallas, which last year brought in 1,100 non-green-carded workers from Mexico for over 100 landscapers in 28 states.

"We've found out that the quality of the people you get under H2B exceeds anything you can get here in the United States anymore. The current source of green card workers from Mexico is dried up and those who do have green cards may be too old to go out and do green industry jobs, and they've become Americanized. The H2B program allows younger people to come in, with more of a work ethic.

\* "We offer our clients a simple turnkey deal, starting at \$650 per worker and varying with the quantity. The client must also pay for a legally required newspaper notice. In exchange for that, we do everything, with no surprises and no hidden fees.

\* "Another thing we offer is continuity. We find out the H2B workers who our clients liked from previous experiences, and we try to hire them

back again the next year. Out of the 1,100 workers we brought in last year, over 95% stayed." (Amigos Labor Solutions Inc., Dallas, TX; 214-634-0500; [www.amigos-inc.com](http://www.amigos-inc.com))

**Angelo Miño** is personnel director of Signature Landscape in Olathe, KS, and also has his own consulting company, Summit, in nearby Lenexa. Summit's mission is aimed at human resource directors.

"I teach them how to solve the problems of the different immigration regulations and laws," Miño says. "And I do a lot of consulting about how to work with Hispanics and use



Angelo Miño

the multicultural background of their labor force as a big plus.

\* "Many industry people believe that there is only the H2B program, but in fact there

are about 18 permanent programs. Usually every year, there is a temporary program, often as a disaster relief effort, of which most people know nothing. We had a program for workers from Honduras after their hurricane. Right now, the INS is preparing a temporary program for workers from

Colombia and Peru.

\* "We also offer an emergency line for clients who have sudden problems — like a surprise visit from the INS. And I have a subscription service where companies receive regular news — for example, those temporary programs." (Summit, Lenexa, KS; 913-438-3364; [mariu48@excite.com](mailto:mariu48@excite.com))

**Scott Evans** was a landscape contractor in Bay City, TX. Today, he's president of C. Scott Inc., an H2B resource firm.

"I got tired of my guys coming from Mexico all cut up from barbed wire. Every document they showed us looked perfect. But I began to ask myself: Why are these guys cut up if everything is perfect? I looked for an alternative, and I stumbled on the H2B program. I've been doing it for three years for other people. In 1999, we brought in around 1,800 to 1,900 people for 42 clients, most of them in the Green Industry."

\* Evans' staff of four bilingual people charges a set consulting fee per client, regardless of the number of workers the client wants to bring in. "The paperwork is substantial, but it's much the same for one person or for 5,000," he says. The initial retainer is \$3,500, followed by another \$2,100 at completion. After that, the charge is \$1,200/year for the required recertification. (C. Scott Inc., Bay City, TX; 409-245-7577; [www.silc-h2b.com](http://www.silc-h2b.com))