



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

Hiring 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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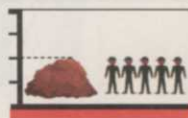
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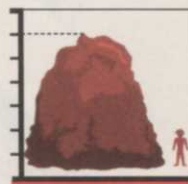
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