



The key to making continuing education successful is making its goal clear and always making it fun.

Education: We keep at it

Off season, in season, middle of the season. How do you keep up with the changing face of the industry? How do you keep your employees motivated, trained and feeling a part of the industry as a whole? One way is through continuing education.

Continuing education helps bind people together. It is a chance for employees, managers and owners to be productive while breaking the course of a normal business day. In-house sessions or road trips help reinforce what employees already know and teach what is new.

We use continuing education through trade magazines like this one, company training programs and external seminars and programs taught by experts in a variety of fields. What do you do? Do you make it available to everyone in your organization? What about industry association alerts and updates? Are you sharing the latest information from your local vendor or what you learned about a promising new wall stone material to replace something you've always used?

Start small, think big

It doesn't have to be a major project. In fact, continuing education starts at the small scale-level. It starts with making resources available — magazines left on conference tables for employees to browse while in the office, or copies of articles displayed for your employees to see. I read a lot of material, and much of it I wouldn't necessarily introduce to my staff. However, when I see pertinent and timely information, I simply make copies for them. People respond well to that because it keeps them abreast of what is happening. They also know I think it is important for them to be included and up-to-date on information.

The key to successful continuing education is finding the type of resources that apply to your operation — from planting and designing to team management to customer service to accounting practices. If you listed all of your organization's skills, you would be surprised at how many different tasks your organization engages in and how many people work in those areas. Make those areas focal points for increased training to maximize and improve your operations.

Work your organization

One of the important benefits of belonging to a professional organization is exposure to continuing education. Many Green Industry organizations have continuing education programs. Get on a mailing list to find out more about them.

Your customers and their businesses probably belong to different organizations, and some of their seminars may cover a particular subject that you want to learn. For instance, we searched for a training session on paperwork management. We wanted a resource that would help streamline an effective change to satisfy our objectives and manage the administration more effectively. I asked a customer in the telecommunications field, thinking that they might get different types of advertisements than those sent to us. Many of the seminars promoted to his company crossed subjects we found most useful. Not many Green Industry professionals were at those meetings, but maximizing profit, eliminating red tape and increasing employee efficiency certainly isn't exclusive to our field.

Go to the shows

Trade shows are an excellent way to familiarize yourself

with new techniques, equipment and information. Often, trade shows have seminar speakers that lecture throughout the day. Local colleges and the Internet are excellent resources for finding out about relevant information and business seminars as well.

Finally, if you've been a long-time member of a particular organization, perhaps you have seen some of the same classes or programs offered through the years and have continued to frequent these programs. Or, because you've seen or attended them before, your interest has waned. Are you attending less often than before? If you have seen similar programs over the years, it indicates that they are some of the most popular, fun and instructive programs offered.

Don't get stale

But why go if you've already gone?

Material varies from year to year, even for the same programs. What you may have heard three years ago may be different now. I have taken different employees in different years to the same seminar. I get to see some of the same faces that I haven't seen in several years and keep track of how people are doing.

People who share ideas make the experiences you have at seminars fun and new.

My staff appreciated learning about the new plants and it also let us speak to some growers about plants we'd like to see.

People who share ideas make each experience

new. There is always something to be gained by going to a program you've been to before or think you know everything about because you'll always find a new approach, make a new contact and rethink something you've done one way for years.

The key to making continuing education work is making its goal clear and making it fun.

— The author is president of Natural Landscape Design and Maintenance, Inc., Keego Harbor, MI

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