

# The Hispanic

## Our industry's appetite for landscape laborers from south of the border just keeps growing and growing

BY RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

**T**he green mountains of central Mexico, once the source of most of the world's silver, are giving up yet another precious commodity — workers.

U.S. industry is tapping rural Mexico for able-bodied laborers with the same desperate eagerness that the Spaniards of the 17th century sought precious metals. This time the Mexicans, many of whom are grossly under-employed, eagerly oblige.

In fact, they're so willing to work that they often go to incredible lengths — and often at great danger to themselves — to do so. As many as 50,000 migrants sneak across the border illegally each month, say authorities.

Most are seeking employment. Many intend to stay in the United States.

A smaller number of alien workers enter the payrolls of U.S. firms through sanctioned programs. The most popular with landscapers is H-2B, an alien worker program that allows seasonal employment of unskilled workers when domestic labor is unavailable.

Labor-starved landscapers snatch up both sources of labor. But the firms

that want to make sure their foreign-born workers will be around the entire season are increasingly using H-2B.

H-2B, born during an overhaul of U.S. immigration laws in 1986, has a quota of 66,000 workers annually. About 93% of H-2B certified workers come from Mexico, says C. Scott Evans, operator of the labor solutions firm SILC-H2B, Bay City, TX.

The rules for U.S. businesses wanting to participate in the program are relatively simple, but most landscapers discover that completing its many requirements are tedious and that rounding up the workers can be daunting, particularly the first year they need H-2B workers.

The program, in addition to giving landscapers a source of labor, has spawned a handful of "labor solutions" entrepreneurs.

For a price, these labor specialists will find

the alien workers and wade through the documentation that qualifies them for U.S. employment.

### The price of labor

How much does it cost to obtain H-2B certified workers? The price varies depending on which of the several labor contractors you deal with. Generally, the more workers you need, the lower the price of each one. But at least one labor contractor charges a flat fee no matter how many.

If your landscape firm requires 100 or more workers, you may pay as little as \$325 annually per worker, says Robert Wingfield,



RANDY LYHUS

# Partnership

who's been finding Mexican labor for landscapers for more than a decade at Amigos Labor Solutions, Dallas. But if you only need a few laborers, you could pay as much as \$650 per employee, he says.

But Scott Evans, SILC-H2B, says: "I've never quite figured out how to charge per worker." He charges a flat fee no matter how many workers a company needs. He says the amount of legwork needed to gain H-2B certification for 10 workers is essentially the same as it is for 1,000.

Even so, somebody still has to recruit and make sure the workers have the necessary paperwork in Latin America.

The take home message: Check out the qualifications of the labor contracting firm. Ask for the names of clients.

Putting a price tag on human labor seems like a cold-blooded way to calculate the worth of fellow humans. But don't forget that H-2B workers base their actions on dollar signs, too.

Labor in Mexico is abundant and cheap. The average salary for an auto worker at a Mexican assembly plant is \$.90 an hour compared to U.S. workers, who makes over \$20 an hour for essentially the same

work. And when H-2B workers arrive in the U.S., they expect to work at least 50 hours a week at fair laborers' wages. Most send a portion of their earnings back to Mexico to support families, and many return to their homes in November or December with \$4,000 or \$5,000 in their pockets.

Most companies that already have H-2B workers have little difficulty keeping them (at

least the ones they want) or adding to their numbers. That is, if they treat them fairly and with proper respect.

There's the story of the landscaper in southeastern Michigan who grew complacent with his Mexican construction crew and was lax about getting everyone back. After struggling through the first two months of the following season with labor he had managed (with great difficulty) to recruit locally, the business owner literally

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Robert Wingfield

## Seasonal labor users join forces

U.S. companies using the H-2B seasonal alien worker program are banding together. About 180 individuals and companies have already joined the fledgling National H2B Users Association (NHUA), reports C. Scott Evans, Bay City, TX, who is heading the group.

Individuals and companies that are dependent on the continued availability of seasonal labor from outside U.S. borders make up the majority of NHUA's membership. These include landscape, construction and hospitality firms, among others. The group also includes companies that recruit and place H-2B workers, says Evans, president of one such firm, SILC-H2B.

Evans says that he will be at the Green Industry Expo, Indianapolis, IN, Nov. 5-7, to promote the NHUA.

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greeted the return of his seasonal foreign employees with hugs. Not only that, but he began treating them with newfound respect.

"The best recruiting opportunities come when a company can recruit within itself or within its community," says Evans. "You'll get good workers by asking your existing foreign workers if they have rela-

tives or friends who would like to work for your company.

"This solves a lot of problems. The new worker will already have a friend when he arrives, he will likely have a place to live and he will have a ride to and from work."

**Get a move on it**

You may or may not be in a similar situa-

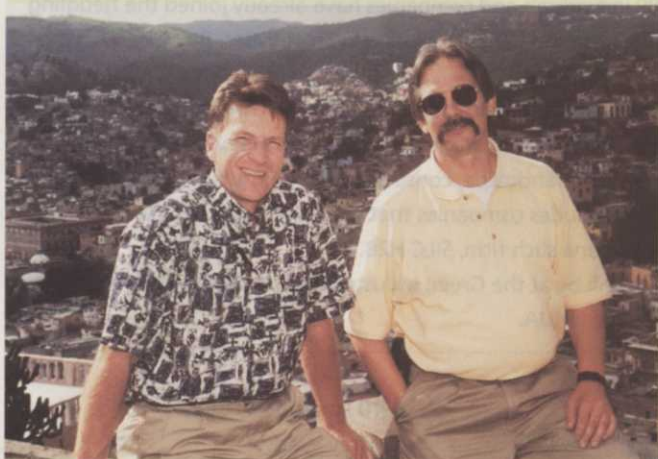
tion, but if you're considering employing legal Hispanic labor in your landscape operation for next season, begin the process now. It's going to take you about 120 days to meet the requirements.

To qualify for seasonal workers through H-2B, you must convince authorities that you can't find a sufficient number of local or domestic workers. This isn't a difficult

**More value from trained workers**

**S**everal years ago, Jeff West, who runs the labor recruiting company GTO International LLC, Rochester, MI, traveled to Mexico. His goal was to establish a week-long program to train Mexican workers for seasonal employment in the U.S. Green Industry.

He felt, and continues to feel, that a trained worker — any trained worker — is more valuable to the U.S. Green Industry than an untrained worker.



Jeff West, left, and Douglas "Buck" Buchanan operate GTO International out of offices in Rochester, MI, and Guanajuato, Mexico.

West's goal was to train Mexicans how to operate mowers and other landscape maintenance and construction equipment. But he also thought they should be advised on more practical matters, such as simple English language instruction.

"We wanted to give the people in the program an idea of what to expect when they arrived on the job in the United States," says West. "We wanted to let them know that the

streets aren't paved with gold and the work will be hard. We wanted to get them off to a good start because we knew that the first year on the job is the hardest."

At the time, West was director of golf at a championship caliber golf course in southeastern Michigan that needed seasonal workers.

Also, he was just beginning his own company to access and deliver Mexican workers to U.S. companies who needed seasonal help.

Mexican officials liked West's idea. They whisked him to 10 different locations within the country in as many days, seeking a suitable site for the training program.

West selected Guanajuato, a quaint jewel of a colonial city with about 100,000 residents. It's set in a narrow mountain valley in central Mexico, easily accessible because of good roads in all directions and an international airport at nearby Leon, a city of about 1 million people.

That first program turned out to be both a success and a failure, says West.

"We lost money," he explains. "Obviously, we couldn't charge the workers money to participate, and when we asked landscapers if they would pay more for a trained worker, they said no."

On the plus side, almost all of the 20 workers who completed the program turned out to be excellent employees, returning to work for the same employer each spring. In fact, several now speak English and perform skilled tasks.

West continues to travel to Mexico to re-establish a training program for Mexicans seeking seasonal employment in the U.S. landscape industry.

He also remains convinced that, in the long run, U.S. firms will see the value in hiring better-trained workers.

"The best recruiting opportunities come when a company can recruit within itself or within its community." — C. Scott Evans, SILC-H2B

task. In most parts of the country, there is a shortage of local applicants to work for the wages you pay laborers. Even so, most landscapers seem more inclined to pay labor contractors (see our list) to recruit foreign workers than wade through the paperwork themselves.

Wingfield, of Amigos, says that every year, U.S. businesses get closer to filling the H-2B quota of 66,000 workers, so companies planning to use H-2B should get a move on it.

"The landscape industry isn't the only industry that needs and wants these workers," says Wingfield. "Anybody who has a seasonal need can get them."

Well, almost anybody. Landscape com-

panies in the states of Arizona and California have difficulty convincing authorities that their labor needs are seasonal.

In other states (or particular regions within a state), a complicated set of federal regulations has set the wages for laborers so high that contractors can't afford to meet them. The H-2B program mandates that alien seasonal workers be paid the prevailing wage for labor in the area the company operates in. In Long Island, NY, for instance, this wage approaches \$13 an hour, too high a figure for most contractors there.

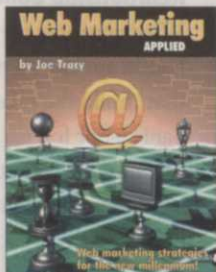
"I think the U.S. Department of Labor

and the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) are trying to tweak these programs," says Wingfield. "I don't think they expected the response from all of the industries."

For example, authorities in some states are demanding to see some landscape company payroll records to make sure their Hispanic workers are truly seasonal.

Even so, H-2B remains the most popular and surest route to gaining landscape labor. That's not likely to change in the short term, insists Wingfield.

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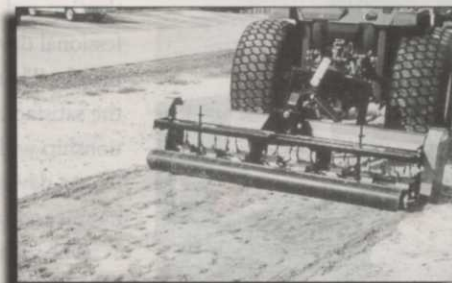
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# How to build the Hispanic relationship

**Doing a few little things for your Hispanic workers will keep them happy...and coming back**

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN



Jacobsen Landscape Design & Construction draws much of its Hispanic workforce from communities surrounding its Midland Park, NJ, headquarters.

**A** number of forward-looking companies are building on the fact that Hispanics come from another culture and have different motivations. The business rewards are many: less turnover, more motivation and productivity, and upward professional development of talented Hispanic people. There's also the human reward like the satisfaction of being in a personal relationship with your workforce, plus the day-to-day satisfaction of working with a happier group of employees.

One such company is Jacobsen Landscape Design & Construction in Midland Park, NJ. The 22-year old firm employs 50 to 60 employees in peak season. About 80% of their field workforce comes from nearby Hispanic communities — the people are either citizens, green-carded or temporary.

"If I didn't have these guys, I wouldn't be in business," says president Glenn Jacobsen. "There is no local Anglo labor force here. I realized that pretty early on, and I established a relationship with some Mexicans. That was the beginning.

"I help people," Jacobsen continues. "That's my philosophy. If they're going to work for me and be committed, we'll help

them as much as we can. Like anyone else, they appreciate that kind of treatment. And if they can help me, it's a two-way win."

Apparently, that's just what has happened. The early core group of Mexican workers has, in turn, greatly assisted his business. Many of them are still with the firm — in any given year, nearly all of his Hispanic labor force comes back after the winter lay-off — and they've brought their relatives and friends to apply for positions as well.

## Relationship builders

What accounts for their loyalty? Jacobsen Landscape does a number of specific things that "build the relationship" with the Hispanic labor force.

**Fairness.** "Whether you're Hispanic or any other nationality, the key is treating people fairly to get their respect," Jacobsen says. "If you're fair to people, they're fair to you. And if you take advantage of people, they're going to take advantage of you. Fairness doesn't apply just to your Hispanic workers — it's a whole philosophy of business. I deal with my clients and my other employees that way."

**Respect their family orientation.** "This is something you do on a personal level every day — asking about their families and so on. The family unit is very important in Hispanic cultures. I learned that early on with the Mexicans, but I also know that it holds true with most of the South Ameri-

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can countries. I have a lot of respect for that," he adds. "In turn, they helped me with hiring because they felt that this was a good place for their friends and relatives to work. Some were not treated fairly working elsewhere in the industry, and being treated well here impressed them."

**Recognize the nationality.** "We've found that it makes sense to keep people from the same country within a crew," Jacobsen notes. "They do have different cultures and different ways of doing things, so if you keep them together, they seem to develop better rapport."

**Career and personal enrichment.** "I have quite a few foremen who have come from this group — it's something that happens naturally. If they're here long enough, and if I see that they have skills and the desire to stay, I encourage them to move up. A lot are bilingual," he adds. "We're hooked in with a private language company that teaches them English, so I'm subsidizing their development." It's another example of the company's "Benefit them, benefits us" philosophy. The four-month language program includes a code of conduct covering attendance, completion of homework and passing grades. Students who keep to the code receive a bonus.

**Sessions with a consultant.** "The idea to help with their immigration paperwork was something that Angelo Miño pointed out to us," Jacobsen reports. "Angelo is a consultant who helps Green Industry companies with their Hispanic work forces. I met him at a trade show and we hit it off immediately because we think along pretty similar lines about the value of helping people. We brought him in to communicate with our people last December, and we're going to have him back at least once or twice this year." (See sidebar.)

**Personal assistance.** Jacobsen helps its immigrant laborers with the kinds of bureaucracy they often find daunting: immigration paperwork, drivers' licenses, car loans, mortgages and others. Office Manager Donna DeLuccia draws a lot of that responsibility.

**Cultural exchange.** The company has now sponsored two annual exchanges of culture based around Thanksgiving Day. "It wasn't my idea — it came from one of the guys," admits Jacobsen. "I wanted to have a celebration at Thanksgiving, instead of at Christmas, because by then many people are back home already. But one of my Hispanic people said, 'Can we add a Mexican feast?' I agreed. They prepared the Mexican feast, and I reimbursed them and gave them time off to do it. We did an American Thanksgiving (meaning turkey and mashed potatoes), and they prepared a Mexican feast based on roasted sheep and rice. The whole production force was there. It was a pretty successful event — the people really do like that form of acknowledgement."

**Holidays.** "We are aware of Mexican and other holidays, and we observe them," Jacobsen explains. "That's showing respect for their heritage. We don't give days off — it's really just a matter of posting it on the bulletin board. They want the acknowledgement and want to see that you understand when their important times are. Our American holidays don't mean too much to them, other than a day off. When we offer recognition of their own holidays, it goes a long way."

#### How Jacobsen wins

Has the company's philosophy solved its hiring problems in a painfully tight labor market? Yes, but not entirely. Jacobsen still has labor and hiring issues. "I don't know if I will ever get to the point where I

## Latin American holidays

observed at Jacobsen Landscape:

Mexican Independence, September 15

Ecuadorian Independence, August 10

Peruvian Independence Day, January 18

(Mexico) la Virgen de Guadalupe, December 12

(Ecuador) Batalla de Pichincha, May 24

won't," he says. Most of his pain comes from success — because the company is growing so rapidly.

"We had over 20% growth last year. With that, you need to have a good supply of people. We're at a pretty strong hiring level, and every year we seem to get better. But the company's growing so rapidly, it's tough to have the people ready for the positions. If we weren't good with our people, we'd never be able to support that kind of growth. For example, 95% of the people we laid off for the winter last year came back in the spring. I think that's a pretty good ratio, and a good indicator that things are working. We're proud of it."

**What about other sources of labor?** The company may eventually have to turn to the Federal H2B program for more workers, despite the well-known hassle factor. And Jacobsen has recently developed a rapport with the local Ecuadorian community in New Jersey — again, the fruit of the fairness policy.

They had an Ecuadorian group come in last year for the first time. "I asked them to bring more guys in this year, and they have," says the company president. "Once you're fair, they usually bring in friends and relatives!"

— The author is a contributing editor based in Mendham, NJ.

# Four factors for success

**Want to help your Hispanic employees assimilate quickly? These four factors will get you started**

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

**A**ssimilating Hispanics into an organization won't happen overnight, but it can happen with less hassle, better communication and good feelings.

Angelo Miño is human resources and safety director at Signature Landscape in Olathe, KS, and also a consultant in the field of Hispanic labor forces in the industry. A well-known Hispanic speaker at industry meetings, he stresses four factors to keep in mind when dealing with a Hispanic labor force: family, country, god, support.

"These four factors apply generally across Hispanic peoples," Miño says.



Angelo Miño

"Build them into your training and safety courses as a way of creating loyalty and ties between the employer and the workforce. They are so important for us Hispanics — recognition of them will tell me

that you want to work with me. In turn, I'll know that I have to do something extra for you. That's what loyalty does."

Miño listed the four factors for assimilating



Humberto Moran's skills in small engine repair landed him a job in a mower maintenance shop.

ing Hispanics, and how you can apply them:

### 1. Family is important to us

"The extended family is what moves the Hispanic people. Make use of this concept by inviting members of the employee's family to become a little bit more active in company life," Miño says. "For example, when I start a new safety program, I will request my employees to bring me pictures of their wives and their kids, and I will put up a sign saying 'Please work safely — you are important to these people!' Sometimes I ask the wives and the kids to write letters to their husbands or fathers asking them to please work safely. And let me tell you it works — with both Anglo and Hispanic people.

"To increase work quality and produc-

tivity, I give out calling cards so that people can call their families without any extra expense," he adds. "Or I allow one of my employees to call from the phone in my office. That might give me an opportunity to speak with an employee's mother briefly and say, 'Thanks for having such a great boy — he's one of the best people here. But you don't want to speak with me — you want to speak with him!'"

Miño's firm also holds open houses and field days open to the families. "Since in the Hispanic employee's mind, 'It's not just me, it's my family,' make his family part of the company celebrations," he suggests.

"Take one second to ask, 'How are your kids doing in school?' When a child is

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## THE HISPANIC PARTNERSHIP



Miguel Angel Arredondo, 23, is from Irapauto, Mexico, and is familiar with irrigation.

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born, put up pictures of the baby and mother on the safety bulletin board," he notes. "Let brothers, sisters and others come and apply for jobs in your company. As a family unit, they will take care of your business like it was their own."

### 2. We are very patriotic people

"I always advise my clients to create 'international corners' with flags, caps or mementos from a given country and display them on the wall. It's a kind of small museum with a sign that says, 'This company celebrates our multicultural heritage,'" Miño says. "Buy the flags of each of the countries that your people come from, and display them in the break room. When they see their flag every morning, it will motivate them. The message is: 'My boss cares about me. He took the time to go and find my country's flag and put it on the wall.'"

Miño notes the displays are also good tools for marketing. "They tell your clients that you respect your employees and your clients as well, because our United States customer base is increasingly multiracial and multicultural. Plus, if clients and prospective clients see that you take good care of your employees, they may get the

impression that you will take good care of their properties also," he says.

### 3. We like people to respect our beliefs

Approximately 87% of the United States Hispanic population is Catholic – usually, deeply so. How do you celebrate this factor?

"Change your holiday structure for Hispanic employees," Miño recommends. "If your company offers seven holidays a year for the Hispanics, keep five of the American holidays and switch two. (Memorial Day and Labor Day really don't mean anything to us.) Let the Hispanic people take two days to celebrate really important religious feasts. For example, Mexicans are big on December 12, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And June 24th, the feast of San Juan, is very important for Puerto Ricans.

"That policy will help your safety rates!" he adds. "Some of my client companies have told me that on the 13th and 14th of December, there are some accidents in the workplace and they want to know why. You're asking them to come to work the day after! The night before, there has been a big celebration – they wait until midnight to go to church and sing the birthday hymn to La Virgen de Guadalupe, and



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then they go and drink and dance! If they show up for work the next day, they'll certainly be tired. They won't produce, and they will expose you and others to the risk of accidents."

His own firm has its own schedule. "Our company is closed on Good Friday. That is a day we celebrate, spending maybe all day in church," he says. "If I'm working that day, and I know my family is in church doing the right thing while I'm not, I won't concentrate on my job anyway. And, of course, that's when accidents happen."

#### 4. From my amigo, I expect support

"Help them with their legal issues, to get drivers' licenses, to build credit," Miño recommends. "Support is important. I like to bring in local financial companies to teach the employees how to develop and use credit. That will build loyalty to your company. With a credit rating, I can buy a house, and I'll be a more responsible worker. I need to pay off that mortgage! So I'll work harder and learn the language."

He also recommends owners pay for someone in the company to become a notary. The employees won't have to take time off and spend money to get documents notarized. "I teach managers how to deal with paperwork to help their employees, like how to get translations done for them," he notes.

This year, Signature Landscape brought in a company to do tax returns. He explains: "This was a big hit – the Hispanic employees, who are even more nervous than you are about their taxes, felt secure. Their company was there with them. That's support!"

— The author is a contributing editor based in Mendham, NJ. For more information about Miño's consulting firm, call 913/438-3364 or contact [www.hispsummit.com](http://www.hispsummit.com).

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