

Crew size is the kind of issue that's maybe "too close for comfort" — or at least too close to get the attention it deserves.

It's so obviously important that perhaps we look right past it.

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT knows at least two successful contractors who understand the importance and competitive value of getting their crew sizes right. They've agreed to share with you what they've learned over the years about the ideal crew size. ▶ ▶ ▶

Jerry Gaeta, The Good Earth, Inc.

Jerry Gaeta is president of The Good Earth, Inc., Mount Pleasant, SC, a \$3 million company with 62 full-time employees that provides lawn, design/build and landscaping irrigation services, plus a turf program covering sports fields. Gaeta also serves as a management consultant to the Green Industry under the aegis of Charles Vander Kooi, a Littleton, CO-based management consultant to the Green Industry and related industries.

As part of his consulting duties, Gaeta gives seminars and does public speaking — often on crew size, a subject he is passionate about.

Landscape Management:
Why are you so interested in crew size?

Gaeta: Because labor is nearly the whole thing we sell, and with the lack of experience in the work force today, typical crew leaders cannot handle more than two or three people efficiently.

Labor is the primary thing that costs us money in this industry. Many

Is your.
crew size
on target?

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

Most landscape companies believe a three-man crew is ideal for commercial or larger sites.

people in our industry focus too much on materials, whereas our company focuses on labor. Labor is the key factor that makes you competitive or non-competitive. With so much unskilled labor today, you're much better off having the most efficient crew size and rewarding those people a little bit more so they don't have to "babysit the deadweight" so much.

If we need larger crews on a particular job site, we'll put two crews together with a responsibility level. The objective is for the foreman to remain within eyeshot of the laborers, aware of where they are at any time so that he can get more efficiency out of them.

Keeping that in mind, we've been running with 20 fewer employees since the summer. Our productivity has gone up, which means our labor costs have come down.

It's customary for landscapers in this region to do everything by 12-month contract. As labor costs climbed over the last six or eight months, we had to increase our productivity if we wanted to make money on our fixed contracts. That meant we had to reduce our crew size by one or two persons.

LM: How do you measure productivity?

Gaeta: By comparing the estimated man-hours on a job vs. actual hours. We also do time and motion studies during the year to validate our assumptions.

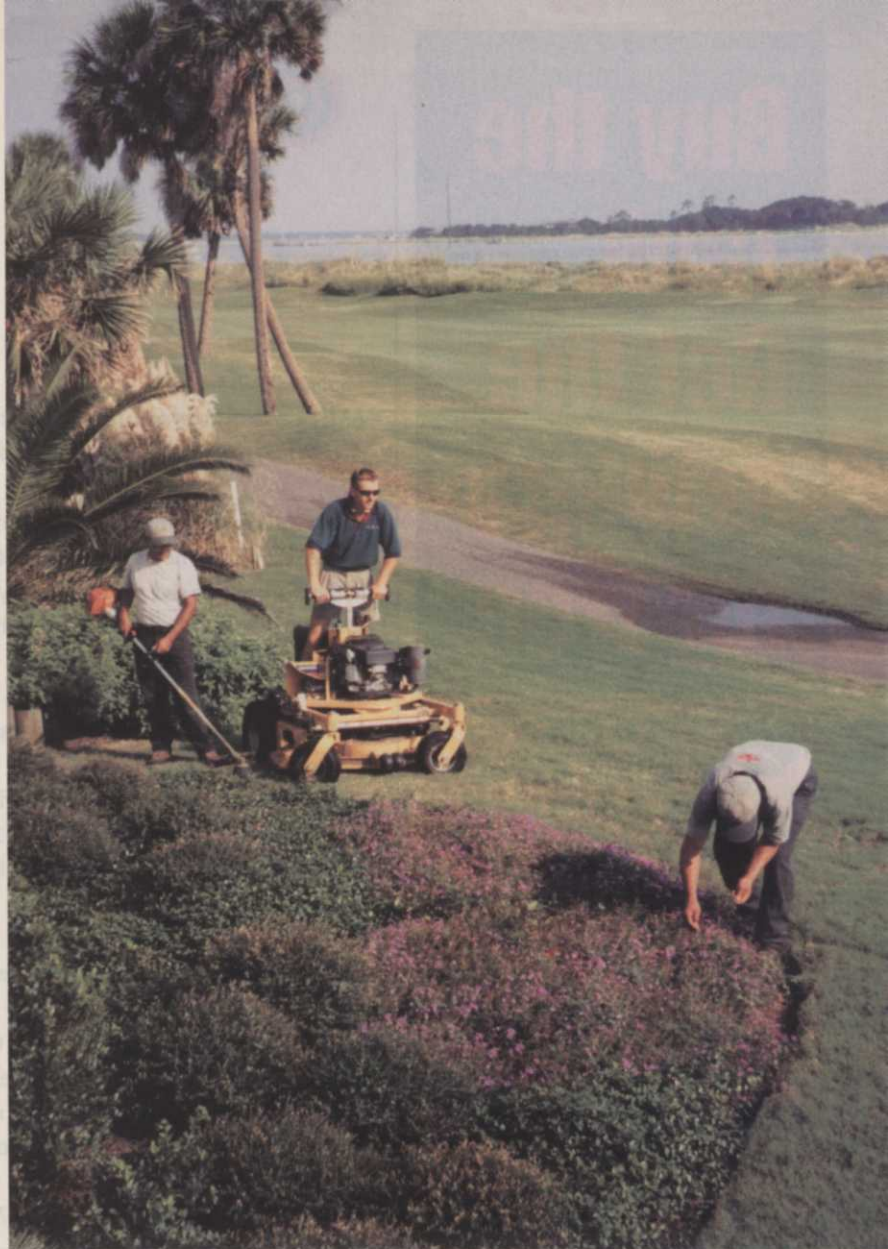
LM: What do you call the right crew size for a particular kind of work?

Gaeta: We try to have the right number of people that our foremen can handle, which is normally three. When a foreman has four or five people, two aren't producing much, and the foreman spends most of his time babysitting.

I have people here who can efficiently handle five or six people. We look at the volume of work the job site requires and try to do that work with the most efficient crew size possible. At a larger job, we stick with a three-man crew.

LM: What's the right crew size for your residential lawn maintenance work?

Gaeta: We do a lot of lawn maintenance work. About 70% of my business is maintenance under fixed con-



tracts, and our crew size for maintenance is two to three people. Some special projects have four-man crews, and these are managed by our most experienced foremen.

LM: How about a basic commercial property traveling crew that does things like bed work and irrigation?

Gaeta: We have an irrigation service technician who's a one-man show. We don't have a detail crew because all the detail work is typically done by the crew on the job site. We do have an "enhancement" crew that plants our annuals and does our mulching. In the past, we found that having a detail crew sometimes made the regular crew lazy.

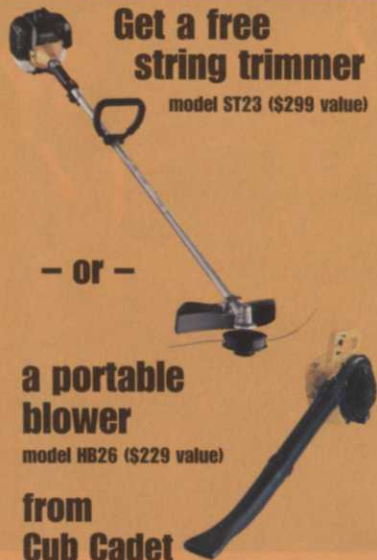
We break out the "big mow" crew at certain times of the year or for certain projects to do some of the cutting with a big mower and keep the other guys moving quicker.

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CREW SIZE

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LM: Does the issue of crew size have anything to do with the problem of labor availability these days?

Gaeta: Absolutely. Once you understand that you're selling labor hours that are hard to find in the marketplace and productivity is your competitive edge, you'll automatically begin to focus on a smaller crew size.

LM: Do you find that your crew configuration makes any difference?

Gaeta: We typically have a foreman, who we call a supervisor; a lead person, who's a foreman in training and who can serve as a backup foreman; and a laborer.

LM: What kind of equipment do your crews use, and how do your crews get to jobs?

Gaeta: We run in a regular van/pickup truck which sometimes has an open trailer behind it. We're looking at getting a large cutting machine this year to reduce labor some more.

LM: Do you ever change your basic crew?

Gaeta: We try not to, but it happens during the winter sometimes when our schedule is lighter and we have to shift people around for things like hard pruning. We try to keep the basic crew together — we may pull a float man off another crew — but we've found that shifting crews around causes bedlam. This is especially the case in the maintenance business, where the object is for the people on the crews to know the job site and go in knowing exactly what to do.

LM: Do you find that the cohesiveness of a crew can get messed up if you keep shifting crews around?

Gaeta: Exactly right. We have a very good foreman who's been with us for a long time — and he used to be the training ground. This frustrated him because he would train some-

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Time and motion studies — should you be doing them?

When asked whether or not time and motion studies are important in his company, Tony Bass of Bass Custom Landscapes replied with an enthusiastic "yes." In fact, he says efficiency is impossible without them.

Bass: I concentrate on time and motion studies a lot. Many people in our industry talk about the "morning circus" — the situation that occurs when people do everything except getting into the truck and heading out to the first job. You can't possibly run an efficient operation if you have the "morning circus" going on. I did a time and motion study in our company a few years ago, and it turned out we, in fact, did have the "morning circus" going on. My study revealed that the problem was the 180 feet from our time clock to the truck parked farthest away on our yard. After some observation, I realized that no one was walking a straight line to the truck. Now, as a solution to this problem, we have one employee who comes in early and lines the trucks up just outside the office doors. As a result, the trip from the time clock to the truck cab is now 15 steps, and our managers find it easy to keep an eye on everyone. This study led to crews to arrive an average of six minutes earlier per day at their first job. Clearly, time and motion studies are also useful in establishing your correct crew size.

LM: Where did you learn to do time and motion studies?

Bass: [laughs] I started doing them in the early days to keep from starving to death! I have an agricultural engineering degree from the University of Georgia, and that's where I learned to perform time and motion studies. (Our readers can also learn to do those by taking courses at local community colleges, or looking for professional organization seminars.)



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body and then that person would leave. But if you're switching people around, you have to tell them exactly what to do every time you're on a job site. That slows things down, and could cause problems for the client.

LM: *Do you find that your crew members like to work with the same people for a long time?*

Gaeta: Yes. We like to keep the basic makeup of the team the same.

LM: *Do you ever form SWAT teams to do things like hydroseeding?*

Gaeta: We subcontract out our hydroseeding, but we do have some special service crews in the maintenance business. We have one crew that does our annual planting and mulching, and they can be that SWAT team as necessary.

LM: *Do you feel you have finally found your right crew size?*

Gaeta: I'm not sure you ever find that. I feel that our crew size is working properly now for the job sizes we have, but given some of the work we're starting to chase, we may have to increase our crew size here and there. For example, you may have to increase your crew size if you have a larger job that has to be completed within a short period of time. An extra person can occasionally help with detail/bed work on big jobs with short time frames. But I don't think we'll

Spending for employee training — 1% to 2% of total sales

Avoiding the spending trap

No matter what crew size you use, your employees will be more efficient, effective and careful with continuous training. *Landscape Management's* Best Practices Panel recommended a variety of training dollar ranges from .5% to as much as 10% of total sales, but it doesn't have to be expensive. In fact, training may have a higher cost in time than actual dollars.

Resources to the rescue

Where can you get good training resources? Do-it-yourself is a good start, but there are so many thorough, inexpensive and worthwhile resources available, including:

- Associations — National and regional associations have video programs, training guides and "tailgate" programs on equipment use and technical topics.
- Local associations — They offer reasonably priced one-day programs on specific topics.
- Suppliers — Many dealers, distributors or manufacturers provide on-site training, training days, videos, product manuals and other resources for free.
- Conferences — Get in the loop at state or regional turf, horticultural or association ed-

ucational conferences.

- Outdoor demos — Grab a good opportunity to review and try out safety and operating features.
- Group training programs — Experts may hold their own seminars or ongoing programs offering specialty or multi-language training.
- Company training — Bring in your own professors or experts to make sure everyone has a solid technical foundation.

ever go over four people per crew, even though we do have some foremen who can handle larger crews.

Pressures also work in the other direction. On some jobs, we'll try to get our three-man crews down to two people via natural attrition. Our costs for things like labor, gasoline and health insurance have started to go up, and given that I can't raise my prices much, I'll try certain (mostly residential) jobs with crews of two. It's difficult to raise prices in this industry, especially on service, so crew size is the first

thing I look at when fighting cost increases.

LM: *Has your crew size contributed to your success? How do you measure that?*

Gaeta: Yes, it has. I measure success in two ways: first, I've been in business 26 years, and second, we're still holding onto our good long-time accounts.

Two more signs of our success are that we've been getting minimal increases in our contract prices, and we've signed a lot of renewals for maintenance contracts. The fact that I've been keeping the

price in line and the quality high tells me that I'm succeeding.

Tony Bass, Bass Custom Landscapes

Another landscaper with a passion for getting crew size right is Tony Bass, owner/president of Bass Custom Landscapes, Bonaire, GA. His company has been in business since 1987, commands revenues of \$2.5 million a year and has a peak-season workforce of 55 people providing landscape, design/build and lawn maintenance services to commercial and residential customers.

Tony Bass's Isuzu cab-forward trucks only seat three, so that's how many crew members arrive together at a job site.



LM: *Is crew size something you've paid attention to over the years?*

Bass: It certainly is. There's lots of low-skilled labor out there, but it's hard to attract that labor, so it makes sense to have the right crew size. It's your way of using productivity to fight against labor and cost increases. With wages starting to go up in our industry and customers remaining intolerant of price increases, we have to make sure we're operating at maximum efficiency.

LM: *What are your ideal crew sizes?*

Bass: We have two-person crews for residential lawn maintenance and three-person crews for commercial lawn maintenance. We generally use three-person crews on our landscape construction jobs as well. For really big jobs, we'll put two crews together...

LM: *Rather than increase the size of one crew?*

Bass: Exactly. Seldom do we work with four- or five-man crews.

LM: *How do you arrive at your crew sizes?*

Bass: [laughs] A lot of it has to do with the size of the cab of the truck! We mostly use Isuzu cab-forward trucks, the so-called "Super Lawn Truck System," and they seat three. We insist that our people seat themselves properly in the cab and put their seat belts on. That means you can only get three people into the cab.

Some companies have config-

ured their trucks differently.

There are dual cab trucks that can seat six or seven — something we will consider in the future for large commercial project because of the shortage of available drivers!

And we've begun to run some numbers because of the prospect of landing some super large projects — properties of more than 25 acres to take care of in one day. We find that the most a three-man crew can cover in one day is 18 to 20 acres, so if we have properties of more than 20 acres in size, and if it's important to get the job done quickly, we'll consider a larger truck/larger crew.

LM: *You said "run some numbers." What you mean by that?*

Bass: We look at the average wage of our crew. In most cases, our three-man crew has a crew supervisor, who's also the driver of the truck earning, say, \$9 an hour. Then, we have what we call our "number two" man, someone who could probably run the crew but is being held back by something (usually the lack of a driver's license, English language skills or leadership skills). This person is usually going to earn about \$7 an hour. The third person is usually a rookie earning about \$6 an hour.

The average wage of that crew is \$7.33 an hour. Let's say we're going out to a big property, perhaps 40 acres in size. Our numbers tell us that at our production rates, we can take care of

that 40 acres reasonably quickly and profitably if we had six people on that job.

LM: *You said, "Our numbers tell us..." Do you keep management information?*

Bass: Yes. When we attempt to take care of a new property, we'll physically measure all of the critical components of that landscaped area — the square footage of the lawn, the square footage of the beds, the number of shrubs (categorized as small, medium or large), the linear feet of edging, the number of zones of irrigation to be inspected on a regular basis, the square footage of weed eating and the estimated amount of time needed to blow off debris.

LM: *And do you store all of this information somewhere?*

Bass: You got it. We use these items on our estimate worksheet in Microsoft Excel. We create the estimate in an Excel spreadsheet, and, after we interpret the information, we plug the combined numbers into CLIP software to monitor the budget for the job per visit or per year. CLIP is a software program we use to help route and schedule and calculate job costing on our lawn maintenance jobs.

LM: *You do that so that when you're facing a really big job, you're in a position to base your decisions about crew size on historical information from your own company.*

You're not just flying by the seat of your pants.

Bass: That's right. We're not just driving through the property saying, "I think it's going to take 'x' number of days." You have to have concrete information with the physical data that's out there.

We spend a great deal of time on estimating to make sure we don't make mistakes on our bids.

LM: *And that careful estimation probably tells you a lot about the crew sizes you're going to need. Has the effort you've put into determining your proper crew sizes paid off?*

Bass: We are a successful company, and we're constantly looking to acquire new business. Right now, we're doing just that. I compare our profitability to ALCA standards, so I know that we are above average.

The effort we've put toward figuring out our ideal crew size has definitely paid off. I would say that the tendency toward incorrect crew sizing constantly threatens us, though. If somebody in our business today thinks they can add an unnecessary person to a crew and still survive, they're seriously mistaken. The margins we operate on in the Green Industry don't permit us the luxury of putting even a little more labor on a job than is necessary to get the job done efficiently or to an acceptable level of quality. **LM**