

Tame the morning CIRCUS

Get your team off to a productive start with these simple-to-implement strategies

BY D. DOUGLAS GRAHAM



Time wasted represents lost opportunity in landscape and lawn service businesses. Every minute of wages paid to an employee not producing a service for a client is money forever lost. It's a double whammy

in that both the expense of the employee's wages and, more significantly, revenues that the employee could have been generating are lost.

Owners who build systems that reduce "unbillable" time run more efficient, profitable

operations. If you don't think your operation is as efficient as it should be, step back and take a critical look at it. Start by looking at the "morning circus," a notorious time waster for many operations.

A mess in the morning

This "circus" is generally defined as the madness that occurs when your office staff, managers and field employees all arrive at your business at the same time each morning.

Stop right there. Why does everybody have to arrive at the same time? A better idea — stagger the arrival times of your employees, including having your managers precede your production people by at least 15 minutes.

Another common and obvious time waster is inadequate or poorly planned vehicle parking areas, or the haphazard parking of trucks and trailers. Confusion reigns when trucks are being backed up, moved or rearranged before the day's work begins.

"The morning circus can kill you," says Joe Loyet of Loyet Landscape Maintenance, Inc.,



Joe Loyet

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St. Charles, MO. "In this business, you're working against the clock, so when people are milling around the coffee machine while their supervisors are trying to get organized, it takes a big chunk out of the bottom line."

Loyet, like many maintenance operators, learned to marshal his troops through a process of trial and error. His staff of 120 is split between two branches that work almost exclusively with commercial properties in the St. Louis metro area.

"Preparation is just as important as punctuality," Loyet says. "All the day's work orders are posted when the guys come in. We fuel the trucks the previous evening and re-

pair all equipment in advance. We keep backup equipment available, too.

"The crews take responsibility for much of this," Loyet adds. "Each takes care of his own lawnmower blades at the end of each day."

Tight organizational focus

In Loyet's tightly run operation, all maintenance employees arrive at the office at 7 a.m. and depart for their jobs no later than 7:15. There are no exceptions save for mechanical difficulties, disaster or sudden death.

Lawnscaping production supervisors and mowing production supervisors marshal the troops and get them on the road promptly.

"The branch managers get involved when this isn't done, and they take that responsibility very seriously," says Loyet.

The company also maintains detailed job tracking reports that indicate how long it should take to perform each job profitably, which shows employees that the company is seeking efficiency throughout the workday.

All of this is part and parcel with Loyet's tight organizational focus. Every contingency is covered, every job carefully mapped out, every conceivable problem anticipated in advance. Everyone on staff knows what he or she has to do to make the wheels roll.

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Snow game's 'midnight madness'

ERIE, PA — The opposite of the "morning circus" is the "midnight madness." If you're in the snow removal business, perhaps you can appreciate Peggy Allin's winter schedule.

Peggy is Vice President of Information & Human Resources for the Allin Companies, based here, and wife of snow push king John Allin. She's also the dispatcher for the Allin Companies' snow services that will account for slightly more than half of the landscape firm's \$2.9 million revenues this season.

During snow season (which sometimes begins in October and stretches into April here), Peggy's "day" begins at midnight. That's when the decision is made, during a snow event, to mobilize a small army of contract snow pushers.

Here's a timeline of the rest of her night:

12:15 a.m. — Call the area supervisors

and alert them to get their teams ready.

1:00 a.m. — Peggy arrives at the Allin Companies' headquarters and gathers the necessary production and route sheets, which are neatly stored in their appropriate slots within arm's reach of her desk in the dispatch office. She

arranges the paperwork neatly on a work area behind her desk.

1:15 a.m. — She calls the area supervisors to find out if any crew members are missing.

1:30 a.m. — Calls are made to find (or awaken) missing drivers.

2:00 a.m. — She starts putting together sidewalk clearing crews. She has a

total of 272 people on her list, and she keeps calling until she fills out the crews. (Not everybody is enthusiastic about pushing a snow shovel in a pre-dawn storm.)

2:30 a.m. — Sidewalk clearers arrive at company offices to pick up equipment

and route sheets. They have to fill out paperwork — their hours and the materials they use — after they clear their areas.

2:45 a.m. — It's time to call out the salt trucks. Allin's four trucks aren't equipped with plows; they just spread salt.

3:00 a.m. — Check with the area supervisors and find out how their crews are doing.

4:00 a.m. — Contact the sidewalk crew supervisor for a progress report.

5:00 a.m. — A final check on everyone to determine who's ahead of schedule and who still needs help.

6:00 a.m. — The backup dispatcher arrives at the Allin Companies.

7:00 a.m. — The remainder of the office staff arrives.

7:30 a.m. — Area supervisors begin asking for permission to send drivers home as their routes are completed.

By mid-morning, all of the paperwork from the previous night's efforts has been tallied and entered into the company's records. Peggy is home and sound asleep.

"We keep incredibly good records. We track everything," says John Allin.

— Ron Hall / Editor-in-Chief



Peggy Allin gets ready for the night shift.

Strategies to reduce confusion

Taming the morning circus is a matter of organization. While each operation has its own unique organizational wrinkles, strategies tend to be essentially the same from company to company. They include:

- ▶ Orienting the staff in advance about what's to be done each day, and making sure they understand and appreciate the cost of wasted time and effort.
- ▶ Coordinating the efforts of all departments so that they work together in the cause of improved efficiency
- ▶ Training people in equipment operation and productive labor methods
- ▶ Organizing the day's work and keeping all personnel up to speed on jobs by posting schedules, having meetings and communicating one-on-one
- ▶ Maintaining and repairing equipment, and fueling vehicles in advance so that both are ready for action when the day begins
- ▶ Establishing rules and consequences for tardiness and the inefficient use of time, and enforcing those penalties fairly and appropriately when necessary

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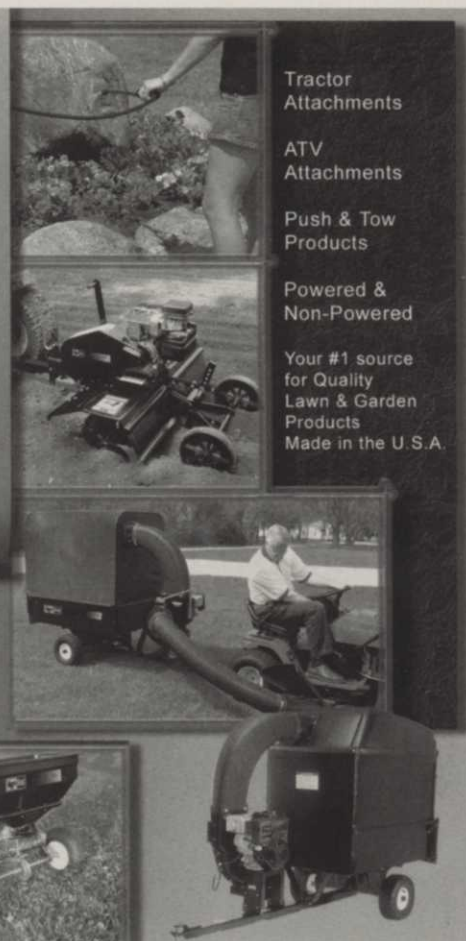
No one seriously objects to these measures, Loyet claims. "I've been doing this for 17 years," he says. "I learned about taming the morning circus the hard way, but now we have everything squared away. You have to be mindful of the cost of time in this business and any other business. Every wasted man-hour works against you, so when you have 60 guys screwing around for even an hour, it can kill you. We're talking about losing big bucks here. Fortunately, our people know that, and we make sure they also know that their job security depends greatly on the health of the company they work for."



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◀ Storing equipment in the proper place goes a long way in taming the morning circus.

Labor hours are the building blocks of profit in the lawn maintenance business, and labor is the

biggest production cost. Smart company owners spec their jobs with that in mind.

"We map out all the day's activities in advance," says Joe Munie, President of Munie Outdoor Services, Inc., Caseyville, IL, a company with 100 trucks and 170 employees. "We also do contingency planning. If rain cancels a sod or grassing job, we switch to mulching. We stagger start times as well, which really helps cut back on congestion. The idea is to get everyone out and about as quickly as possible. Right now, we try to get the trucks on the road within 10 minutes of their start time. We think that's pretty good, but we want to do better. Where efficiency's concerned, you can always do better."

Be the enforcer

Allan Davis, Executive Vice President of R.A.R. Landscaping Company, Baltimore, MD, believes that many companies are "lax" about enforcing strict morning policies because quality workers are hard to get. But in the long run, landscape companies can't afford to have employees who arrive late to work, show up out of uniform or miss days, says Davis, whose company employs about 130 workers during the season.

Davis says all employees have to know what's expected of them, and what they can expect when they fail to live up to their responsibilities. You've got to make sure all your ducks are in a row — the trucks gassed up and the equipment in good working order, for starters.

"We have a 22,000-square-foot facility with all departments under one roof," says Davis. "We bought the property with nothing on it so that we could build from scratch with efficiency in mind. That's how seriously we take the morning circus around here."

R.A.R. Landscaping, Loyet Landscape Maintenance and Munie Outdoor Services, along with a growing number of other companies, realize how lost minutes turn

into lost hours that, over the course of several months, turn into lost days of production. The solution starts first thing every morning at company headquarters. **L.M.**

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