



BEST PRACTICES

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Optimize crew size

Among the frequently asked questions I receive is “What is the ideal crew size?” While on the surface it sounds like this should have a simple answer, it’s really quite complex. There are just as many factors favoring small crews as those favoring larger crews. Let’s take a look at six of the most common.

1. Job size. It’s nearly impossible to efficiently do a small job with a large crew. This is especially true of a route made up of small jobs. If a crew has to make four or five stops per day to service the route, things such as travel time, set-up time and loading time can eat into efficiency. The larger the crew, the more time is lost to non-revenue producing activities — making small crews more efficient on small jobs.

An exception might be if the small jobs were all in one industrial park, and the same crew could work numerous jobs simultaneously. Cost tracking is difficult, but should not be reason enough not to do it.

2. Route density. While every good manager strives to improve route density, it rarely is perfect. Four- to six-man crews can be efficient on large sites (one to three sites per day), as long as there aren’t long drives between jobs. Crew sizes of two to three people work well for mixed job size routes with varying job density.

3. Average hourly wage. The larger crew usually has a lower average hourly wage than a smaller crew, because a lower-paid crew offsets the crew leader’s higher wage. A simple example is a \$12/hr foreman with two \$9/hr laborers. This crew has an average hourly wage cost of \$10. Compare that to a \$14/hr foreman with five \$9/hr laborers, which creates an average hourly wage of \$9.83. The wage savings alone with the larger crew contributes 1.7% to the bottom line.

Understanding and managing average hourly

wage can be a significant factor in improving profitability, especially if combined with right-sizing crew to other factors.

4. Crew leader qualifications. While larger crews can have advantages of size and lower cost, they mean nothing if the crew leader cannot manage properly and crew members get in one another’s way. Large crews need good crew leaders, with leadership being the driving factor. Many crew leaders are the best workers — or in some cases, the person with the driver’s license. If this is the case, that person might be ineffective at managing five people and keeping them all operating efficiently.

With small crews, the job of leadership is important, but is much simpler: The hard-working crew leader’s personal impact is more significant.

5. Equipment availability and efficiency. Smaller crews require a company to have more vehicles on the road. We all know that has a higher cost and greater liability exposure. Large crew trucks may have a higher initial cost, and big trailers might be harder to drive safely — but long-term, the cost is lower because you can derive higher revenue per hour per vehicle and dollar of capital investment.

6. Job requirements. A larger job that might be more efficiently serviced by a large crew requires someone on-site daily. Perhaps the client wants the whole job mowed in one day, requiring a large crew. In these and similar situations, you may find that individual job requirements dictate crew size.

Crew right-sizing and route optimization can be a big profit driver for a landscape maintenance company. The right crew size for a company is probably a combination of large and small routes and crew sizes. Based on the above, the best practice is to understand and manage the variables and to plan out the most efficient and effective combination of factors in constructing your routes and crew sizes.