

MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Andrew Weilbacher found that growing his number of crews gave him more headaches — and less profit.



Andrew Weilbacher improved his company's performance after downsizing.

COMPANY:

Weilbacher Landscaping

HEADQUARTERS: Millstadt, IL

OWNER: Andrew Weilbacher

2010 REVENUE: \$500,000

PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:

About the same

CLIENTELE: 80% residential;

20% commercial

SERVICES: 70% retaining walls; 20% paver patios; 10% design/build

WHILE MANY PEOPLE tend to think of growing their companies in terms of adding employees, Andrew Weilbacher says that having too many crews was a mistake for his business. It became tough to manage multiple crews, and he was

getting callbacks on jobs he didn't personally supervise because mistakes were being made.

For a time, Weilbacher, who owns Weilbacher Landscaping in Millstadt, IL, says he had about 10 employees and three separate crews going out on jobs. Though he grew the business from doing side work on his own into a full-time career, he figured that adding more crews was the best way to move forward and grow his business. But what he found was that having his hand in the work and overseeing it as much as possible was actually more effective for him.

"As the economy got shaky and I cut back my employees to just three or four crew members over the last couple years, I've found that I'm actually making more money and dealing with a lot less problems," he says. "My quality control is much better because I'm able to be at the job myself most of the time."

Weilbacher says he started the business as a hands-on owner and has found that it works better that way for his business.

"With a few crews going out that I wasn't personally working on, I was getting callbacks that the work wasn't done well enough or there were mistakes," he recalls. "That's a big problem for my business. Most of my jobs are weeklong jobs, where we start on a Monday and finish up by Friday. If we get a call over the weekend that something needs to be fixed before we get paid, it means spending half a day back on that property on Monday instead of starting the next job."

Since downsizing to one key crew with himself as the leader, Weilbacher says he's no longer getting those callbacks. "It's my company, and I'm looking for perfection," he says. "I understand that a laborer getting paid \$12 an hour isn't going to care if it's perfect — but I do."

Today, customers are happier, and Weilbacher says he's enjoying a simplified payroll. He says that paying 10 employees each week was really eating away at his profits, and he started to feel like he wasn't making as much as he should be. The extra work he was accomplishing by having multiple crews just wasn't paying off with all the

callbacks he had to handle. While things have much improved, Weilbacher says one problem he continues to have is finding good employees. Though he's currently happy with his crew, laborers tend to come and go — and Weilbacher says that finding good help is difficult.

"Just recently, I went through four laborers to find the one that was great," he says. "One of the biggest lessons I've learned from that is the fact that you have to be your employees' boss, not their friend. You need to find the best person for the job and not worry about hurting anyone's feelings. What I do now is give employees a two-week trial period. I explain up front that if it doesn't work out, they'll still get their paycheck, but we'll have to part ways."

Weilbacher says that knowing whether to cut down on the number of crews is really a fine line for small businesses like his.

"Everyone always wants to know how many employees you have, and they think that it's somehow a measure of how good you are," he says. "But a bigger business isn't necessarily a better business. After all, it's not about what you bring in, it's what you take home. I've definitely found that I have less headaches and more money — and I'm much happier with the way things are today."

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.