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WHERE GREAT IDEAS START.

RANSOMES

SMALL CREW THEORY

Larger crews don't always translate into improved productivity. Determining how many is enough is essential into maximizing efficiency and profit.

by Philip D. Christian III

The size of the most productive landscape maintenance crew has been discussed, argued, and subjected to trial-and-error testing. Since landscape maintenance emerged as a separate or specialty business, the issue has become even more important.

By adding mobile crews, we discovered the importance of correct crew sizing. In today's competitive labor environment the need for higher productivity and increased quality suggest a "new look" at sizing landscape maintenance crews.

Most landscapers have worked with one-person crews. Remember how much you could accomplish in one long day? Remember the first really good helper, the one who read your mind and did what you wanted him to do? You increased your production when you added the helper, but you did not double it.

One-man crews?

Landscape maintenance is a combination or series of solo, one-person tasks. Unlike landscape installation or construction, maintenance crews do not handle heavy or awkward materials requiring more than one person to improve efficiency.

This lack of synergistic benefit on a per-task basis encourages us to think of our crews as combinations of one-person crews.

Loading heavy sheets of 4x8-foot plywood is a good example. One person can load 30 sheets per hour by himself, but a crew of two can load 75



Efficiency is not always increased as field crews grow in size. It is sometimes better to divide large crews into smaller two- and three-man crews and teach them to function as separate work units.

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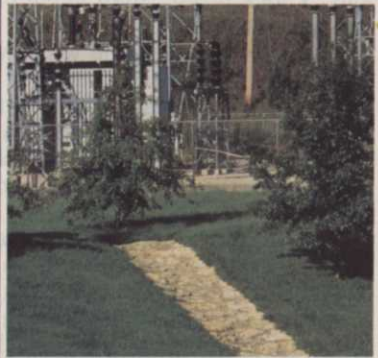
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sheets an hour. The difference is called synergy, which means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. By working together, the plywood-loading crew can increase the output per person from 30 sheets an hour to 37½ sheets per hour.

Creating synergy

In landscape maintenance work we do not perform activities that offer opportunity for positive synergistic effect. In fact, we have the opposite. When we increase crew size we lose efficiency.

For example, send one person to a

after. It makes them feel needed.

Is bigger better?

Crew members also like large crews. It is like being on a team. You don't feel the pressure to produce. They have more freedom to do the things they enjoy as long as they keep busy.

Property owners/managers love big crews. They are taught in property management school the more people running around on their property the better! They sometimes demand contractors get more people on the job and "get it done!"

Crews working a specific route are

and then "knock it out." Once back on schedule the owner/manager will accept, and become accustomed to, fewer people on the job weekly.

The myth that large crews provide better use of supervision is a throwback to factory or assembly-line thinking that really does not apply to mobile crews. The notion that one strong supervisor can supervise five people as easily as two and still keep up his production responsibility does not apply to mobile crews either.

Some supervisors try to "keep the men together." Supposedly they are easier to supervise; but in reality, this herd mentality further reduces productivity. Large crew supervisors must make a choice to reduce or eliminate productivity in order to keep five men up to speed, or allow their productivity to drop to maintain individual productivity.

Larger crews may finish faster, but less efficiently.

job that takes four hours lapsed time. Now send two people with the same equipment the same distance to produce the same work, and it takes 2.4 hours in lapsed time but 4.8 hours in man-hour time. The two-person crew did it much more quickly—2.4 hours compared to four hours—but more time was spent in man-hours and therefore it became less efficient.

In some cases mowing the property in a little over two hours rather than a half day could be a worthwhile trade-off for the inefficiency. The important issue is to recognize that the more people we send to the job, the faster it is completed, but it is also less efficient in total man-hours spent.

What's the cost?

Your cost is proportionate to man-hours spent, not lapsed crew time. The small two- or three-person crew will not effectively produce all size properties.

One drawback of small crews on large properties is that they cannot complete the work fast enough. They spend too much time on-site. One answer to that problem is increasing the crew size. All that is needed is a crew-cab truck. You will be able to send as many as six people to one property and "knock it out" then move on to the next job.

Large crews are fun to work with. They appeal to the social side of our nature, making it easy to build enthusiasm. Large crews make the members feel safe and secure. They feel as though there are enough of "us" to get it done.

Production managers like large crews because absenteeism does not cripple the production effort. Supervisors, especially non-producing supervisors, like a lot of people to look

often sized to fit the largest property. Crews seem to grow by themselves. Supervisors and production managers often add one member as "insurance" against anything going wrong.

Everyone likes large crews except the person directly responsible for profit. In some cases he or she does not know that large crews (more than three people) are the problem rather than the solution. They blame people, the pricing system, or the weather for the production crisis that is reducing profits.

Large crew myths

Increase in man-hour efficiency is only one of the many myths about large crews (see related article). Another popular myth is that large crews insure quality work. This was born in the belief that it takes more time to do quality work, and non-quality work is faster and saves time. Neither are true.

Quality is the result of a process that includes trained people operating the correct equipment according to a set procedure. In large crews where accountability is minimal, quality is often sacrificed.

Owners/managers like large crews on site. When you are behind schedule, the first solution is to add people. Desperate owners may even dictate specific crew sizes and threaten to withhold payment if these demands are not met. In most cases this "knock-it-out" behavior is an attempt to correct past performance problems and force the contractor back on schedule.

Separate, not equal

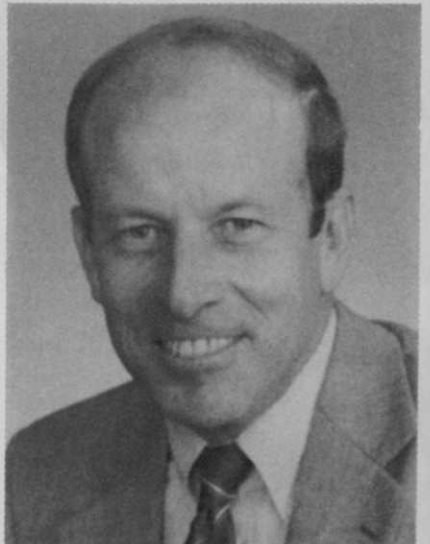
In this situation don't increase the crew: bring in a separate crew, divide the property into appropriate zones,

The best combination

Most large crew supervisors do a little bit of both and lose both productivity and quality. The combination that seems to work best is a full-time working foreman with one or perhaps two crew members trained to require very little supervision.

Divide large crews into smaller two- and three-man crews and teach them to function as separate work units. When large properties require more man-hours than a three-man crew can generate, divide the property into two zones and send two crews to produce the work.

Each two- or three-person crew should have production and quality goals for the day. Even though they may be in competition on the same property, they are evaluated them on that day's performance. **LM**



Philip D. Christian III is a business consultant with All-Green Management Associates. His office is in Alpharetta, Ga.

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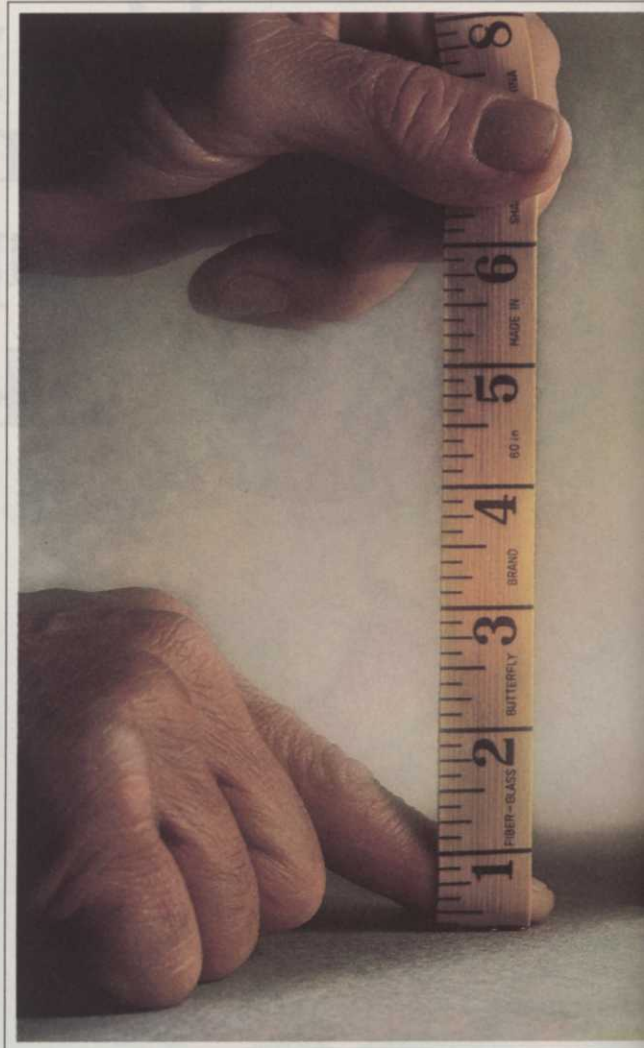
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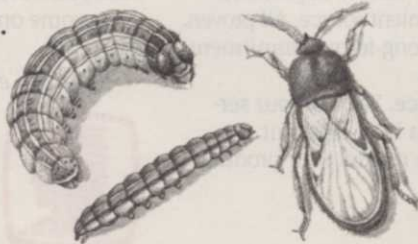
Weigh the alternatives. New TEMPO uses approximately 80% less active ingredient than the leading insecticide. Which means there's approximately 80% less chemical for you to carry around. And 80% less chemical to impact the environment.



How To Size Up

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In simple terms, TEMPO effectively controls the surface-feeding insects attacking your customers' lawns. Plus, TEMPO controls the toughest ornamental pests. So using TEMPO eliminates the need to stock several different insecticides.



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CAN'T WORK?

Disability insurance coverage is critical for small business owners and their key management personnel. If you have not placed any coverage in force yet, consider it as soon as you can afford it.

by Ed Wandtke

As the green industry matures, one of the realities that all owners need to face is the physical impact of this stressful and seasonal business on their bodies.

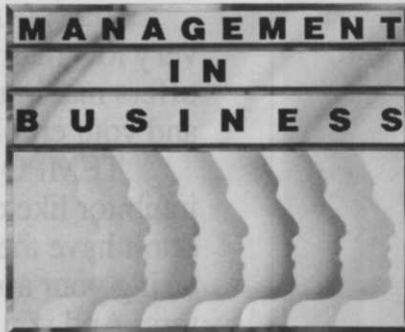
Various insurance coverages can protect you, your family and your business in the event a health problem prevents you or a key employee from working. One affordable coverage, disability income protection, can be very confusing to select and buy.

One of the principle reasons for buying disability insurance protection, according to current medical data, is that more than 70 percent of males and 40 percent of females between the ages of 35 and 65 will be disabled for a period of 90 days or more during these working years. If you are the owner or a key employee in your company, this could be devastating to your individual income. Buying some protection will afford you peace of mind.

Some of the buying decisions you must make are type of policy, waiting period, amount of coverage and benefit payment. A wide range of options should fit each policyholder's requirements. The following ideas should be helpful in discussing the type of disability policy that will fit your needs.

1. A key requirement is to be certain that the policy is non-cancellable and guaranteed renewable. You definitely do not want to find out that your policy will not be renewed just when you need it the most.

2. Do not buy an optionally-renewable policy since it can be cancelled on its anniversary date. This is not a very widely-sold policy, but if your premiums appear too low compared to other policies that you are evaluating, it may be because this clause is included.



vidual in a group plan as their age increases into the next five-year age bracket.

5. Do not assume that Social Security will protect your income if you become disabled. A recent report reveals that between 70 and 90 percent of the individual cases presented to Social Security for disability determination are rejected. In addition, it usually takes somewhere between 1½ and 2 years for

Social Security to process a claim that has been approved for disability benefits. Other federal and state plans provide some amount of disability coverage—such as workers' compensation—but have dollar and time period limitations on total benefits.

6. One of the many terms that you should have in your disability policy is "own occupation." This means that if you are unable to perform the job that you performed prior to the disability, you will continue to collect disability coverage even if you enter some other career.

7. Another coverage that you should have in your basic contract is "residual benefit." This is a benefit that will pay you disability in the event that you cannot continue to make an income level commensurate with the amount of disability insurance coverage at the time of the disability.

For example, if you earned \$100,000 before the disability but can earn only \$60,000 now, you would receive the difference—40 percent—of your disability insurance coverage amount. This benefit is especially helpful if there is the possibility that you would not seek employment in a field outside of the green industry.

After deciding whether you need this benefit for yourself, company or a key employee, the next issue to ad-

AGE	SEX	ELIMINATION PERIOD	FULL YEAR COVERAGE	FULL YEAR NO RESIDENTIAL
45	male	30 day	\$2800	\$2350
45	male	90 day	\$2300	\$2050
45	male	180 day	\$1930	\$1600
45	male	360 day	\$1760	\$1440

TYPICAL PLAN
\$4000 per month
Male non-smoker

3. Be certain that you have adequate cash reserves to financially survive the elimination (waiting) period before benefits are paid to you. If you have a 90-, 180- or 360-day waiting period, the amount of the insurance cost will be reduced about 35 percent per increase in the elimination period.

4. Do not rely on group disability insurance coverage today as your primary coverage. Group policies can be cancelled, the benefits reduced, or premiums increased based on the experience of the group. In addition, premiums will increase for each indi-



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dress is its cost. The following are three ways to lower the cost to you if it is needed:

- Have an elimination period which is the longest you can live with—in terms of both cash reserves and insurance premiums. At one insurance company, a \$4,000-a-month plan on a male non-smoker is shown on page 48.

This table shows the annual premium savings that is available depending on the length of the elimination period. In addition, the elimination of the residual benefit does offer some additional savings for most individuals.

Another way to keep premiums low is to have the disability benefit stop at a fixed age such as 65. This may save you some money initially, but I recommend a lifetime disability policy as the better coverage to purchase.

If you and your company have three or more key executives that you may wish to offer this benefit to, some insurance companies offer a discount of between 10 and 15 percent for writing three policies at once.

Also, make sure you define the type of work that you would be covered for. The broader the definition, the higher the premium.

Often the policy will have its own definition of terms. Have the agent clearly explain and obtain written definition of key terms that you need to be concerned about. One definition of disability that is currently in most disability policies is: "the individual's ability to perform the substantial and material duties of his or her current occupation."

Other definitions of disability often take into consideration an individual's past education, work experience, training or other positions previously held. These definitions ignore the current earning and work level of the individual.

Some final tips:

- Be careful of the policy that seems to cover all of the terms that I have mentioned.

- Remember to act before an individual becomes disabled rather than after.

- Be certain that the policy you choose is annually renewed and guaranteed.

- Keep your coverage as broad as possible in defining your work type.

Stay healthy. But if you do need coverage, disability insurance can truly be a financial life-saver. **LM**

Ed Wandtke is a senior consultant with All-Green Management Associates in Columbus, Ohio. He focuses on operations and financial questions.