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and it's a matter of finding them and recognizing them.

Keeping people is a function of several things: You've got to pay competitively, give them opportunities, treat them fairly, demonstrate concern for their welfare and appreciate they are human beings with needs.

LM: *How do you show concern for their human welfare?*

Gore: Anyone who has had success developing good people has been in situations where they're helping them out in a time of need. When they're struggling with an illness, you have to be tolerant. You should strive for perfection in this, I suppose, but even if you're only pretty good at it, you'll get good results.

LM: *Because so many other companies are so bad it?*

Gore (laughs): That's probably the case. There are a lot of things in life that aren't extremely urgent today but must get done or they will make life difficult in the future. Getting a job sold, getting a job done or collecting the money from that job — all those are urgent. Hiring someone who might be a good laborer and ultimately a good supervisor is important, but it's not urgent. You have to remind yourself that it's important. At some point, it becomes urgent if you don't make it important.

LM: *Still, it has to be hard to keep up with that yearly growth rate.*

Gore: It takes a lot of work, but it also makes it possible to keep good people and develop them from within. That's because growth provides opportunities for people with leadership capabilities and motivation.

Robertson Lawn Care

Robertson Lawn Care, Springfield, IL, does mostly lawn care for an upscale clientele

One company's experience

Keesen Enterprises Inc. in Englewood, CO, is a landscape contracting business with 140 employees and \$4 million in revenue. Landscape maintenance is its main business, along with irrigation, landscape construction, spraying, fertilization and snow removal. President Duane Keesen, a third-generation Colorado landscaper, speaks about the H2B program from experience.



Duane Keesen

"We were having an exceptionally difficult time hiring over the last couple of years," Keesen says. "Several years ago, we initiated an H2B program here and got off to a slow start. Eventually we went to Scott Evans, and we brought in 60 people last summer and 18 people in the winter.

"It was a wise thing for us to enter the program. What it cost us we probably tripled in profit. One of the reasons is that we bring in the people as a group and there is only one training period, which our bilingual supervisors do in-house. We find that jobs are getting done much faster than before. In the past, if somebody could walk, we would hire him.

It doesn't work in other industries

"I've gotten calls from other industries — drywall, roofers, concrete, construction — wanting to know how to get into this program. They would love to, but can't. We in the landscape industry are spoiled. We can get into it, but so many don't because of lack of understanding, or fear, or inability to provide the cash up front.

"To those who say they can't afford H2B, I say this program is the way to go because it's the right thing to do. The Bible tells us that if you build your house upon a rock it's going to stand, but if you build it on sand it's going to wash away. If you build your business on illegal people, you're building it on sand. You cannot promote within and before you turn around, you'll have huge fines.

"The only other possibility is to pay wages that compete with the roofing, sheet rock and general contracting markets. I'd love to do it, but it isn't there. If the construction industry cannot get good workers, we certainly can't at a lesser rate."

Each of his new employees has a sponsor, a company employee who makes the newcomer feel welcome. "Last year, when everybody first came up, it snowed. They had someone who could tell them what kind of boots to get. This works very well. We've only had to send two people back to Mexico. One had health problems and the other went to work for someone else, which is illegal."

Keesen and a lawyer have begun a campaign to persuade Congress to change the law to allow H2B workers to apply for a green card after a few years working here. The employer would then get back the prized H2B slot (remember, there are only 66,000 of them a year) once the green card is in place.

"My guess is that half or more of them would stay with us once they had green cards. But if they didn't stay with us, at least they would become available to the landscaping industry in general." (Keesen Enterprises, Inc., Englewood, Colorado; 303-761-0444.)

but is a small company and a growth company at the same time. Jack Robertson is president.

LM: What's your operation's size?

Robertson: At peak we have eight employees. Since starting our business in 1977, we've grown our customer base every single year.

LM: You've been able to achieve that



Jack Robertson

growth record with the same size workforce.

How?

Robertson: By being efficient. Our people's knowledge and experience is a huge part.

LM: Much of that knowledge and experience

belongs to your two senior service managers, Brian Cox (in his 20th year with the company) and Mike Harris (in his 19th). How did you manage to hold onto two good people for 20 years?

Robertson (laughs): If I knew the answer I'd bottle it!

LM: Perhaps it's not such a mystery.

Your formula for success boils down to something like this: Hire people whose values resemble yours and give them what they need to feel comfortable and satisfied with their jobs.

Robertson: We share bonuses yearly and throughout the year with our people, but the benefits package is minimal. We've been lucky in that Mike and Brian both have wives with good medical coverage.

LM: What does your company do right?

Robertson: No matter what business you're in, if you work that closely with people for that period of time, you become like family. And we're certainly like family here. For example, we like to do outdoor

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activities such as hunting together. There are other things that are just as important to us all. For example, we have kids that are not yet grown. It is important for

everybody to give the kids attention, and that means time. We're extremely flexible about things like letting people off to go to the track meet or the music recital.

I also want them to feel free to tell me

that they're going to take the time. That has worked well for us.

LM: So it's a matter of shared values.

Robertson: People and family come
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Why the labor crunch?

- "Unskilled native-born people, if they're going to work for \$7 or \$8 an hour, are going to do it indoors in a



Scott Evans

McDonald's where it's air conditioned in the summer and heated in the winter." — Bob Wingfield, Amigos Labor Solutions, Dallas

- "1976 was the lowest birth year

in the United States in the last 50 years. So the demographic pool of 24-year-olds — a typical landscape worker's age — is very small to start with." — Scott Evans, C. Scott Inc., Bay City, TX

- "Do Latin American laborers harm America? No! These H2B people don't take jobs from people — they fill an incredible need. And the belief that Mexicans coming here to work in our industry are abusing the system couldn't be further from the truth. These people make a real contribution to our society. Americans often don't realize what would happen if (they) weren't here. Except for maybe South Dakota, the whole country would shut down! Under H2B, only 66,000 people are allowed in a year. That's less than one for every community in the U.S."

— Bob Wingfield

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first. It's easier to say that sometimes than to actually do it, especially when you're chief bottle washer for the business. But it's worth it.

I think Mike and Brian enjoy coming to work because they feel we have the same

values. They also enjoy their work because we do everything only one way, and that is the very best way that we can.

We do things a lot differently around here. I've been to a lot of lawn care offices, and while some are very nice, some aren't. But we designed a new one six years ago so

that it would be fun to walk in the door every day. And when you visit our office, you feel that.

In a sense, we've designed the whole company that way!

— *The author is a contributing editor for*

Landscape Management

Working with a labor consultant

One response to the scarcity of labor is to look elsewhere, yet who has the stamina or resources to take on government regulations involved in importing workers from Latin America?

Specialists have sprung up to assist you and here's a sample of what some of them told *Landscape Management*:

Bob Wingfield is president of Amigos Labor Solutions, Inc. in Dallas, which last year brought in 1,100 non-green-carded workers from Mexico for over 100 landscapers in 28 states.

"We've found out that the quality of the people you get under H2B exceeds anything you can get here in the United States anymore. The current source of green card workers from Mexico is dried up and those who do have green cards may be too old to go out and do green industry jobs, and they've become Americanized. The H2B program allows younger people to come in, with more of a work ethic.

* "We offer our clients a simple turnkey deal, starting at \$650 per worker and varying with the quantity. The client must also pay for a legally required newspaper notice. In exchange for that, we do everything, with no surprises and no hidden fees.

* "Another thing we offer is continuity. We find out the H2B workers who our clients liked from previous experiences, and we try to hire them

back again the next year. Out of the 1,100 workers we brought in last year, over 95% stayed." (Amigos Labor Solutions Inc., Dallas, TX; 214-634-0500; www.amigos-inc.com)

Angelo Miño is personnel director of Signature Landscape in Olathe, KS, and also has his own consulting company, Summit, in nearby Lenexa. Summit's mission is aimed at human resource directors.

"I teach them how to solve the problems of the different immigration regulations and laws," Miño says. "And I do a lot of consulting about how to work with Hispanics and use



Angelo Miño

the multicultural background of their labor force as a big plus.

* "Many industry people believe that there is only the H2B program, but in fact there

are about 18 permanent programs. Usually every year, there is a temporary program, often as a disaster relief effort, of which most people know nothing. We had a program for workers from Honduras after their hurricane. Right now, the INS is preparing a temporary program for workers from

Colombia and Peru.

* "We also offer an emergency line for clients who have sudden problems — like a surprise visit from the INS. And I have a subscription service where companies receive regular news — for example, those temporary programs." (Summit, Lenexa, KS; 913-438-3364; mariu48@excite.com)

Scott Evans was a landscape contractor in Bay City, TX. Today, he's president of C. Scott Inc., an H2B resource firm.

"I got tired of my guys coming from Mexico all cut up from barbed wire. Every document they showed us looked perfect. But I began to ask myself: Why are these guys cut up if everything is perfect? I looked for an alternative, and I stumbled on the H2B program. I've been doing it for three years for other people. In 1999, we brought in around 1,800 to 1,900 people for 42 clients, most of them in the Green Industry."

* Evans' staff of four bilingual people charges a set consulting fee per client, regardless of the number of workers the client wants to bring in. "The paperwork is substantial, but it's much the same for one person or for 5,000," he says. The initial retainer is \$3,500, followed by another \$2,100 at completion. After that, the charge is \$1,200/year for the required recertification. (C. Scott Inc., Bay City, TX; 409-245-7577; www.silc-h2b.com)



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Steve Schepers
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BY JASON STAHL

You're called Captain Insano?

Yeah, the guys I work with call me that, and I think they got it from some movie they saw. The reason they call me that is because they ran into me one night at 9 p.m. and I was still working. They told me to go home and I said, "Hey, this is part of the business." I've installed things at midnight under the glow of car headlights.

What was your most difficult job?

The clubhouse at Arcadia Bluffs, a golf course in northern Michigan. We were on a tight schedule, and I was originally told that they needed us to install 60 sprinkler heads. The owner made some changes, and shortly after I found out that they needed 230 sprinkler heads...in two days. That was where having a brother in the same business helped out. I used some of his employees and we got the job done.

Talk about your brother. What's it like competing against him?

Gary owns Schepers' Lawn Sprinkling in Grand Rapids. I worked at his company through high school, college and five years beyond that before starting my own business. There's enough work in his area and my area that we rarely rub shoulders. Ironically, it's helpful that we own our own businesses because we can help each other out — for instance, if we need to borrow a machine or find a worker. We're brothers and we're in business and it's a touchy area, but there is more to life than making a buck. We keep it on the up and up.

What's the conversation like at the Thanksgiving dinner table?

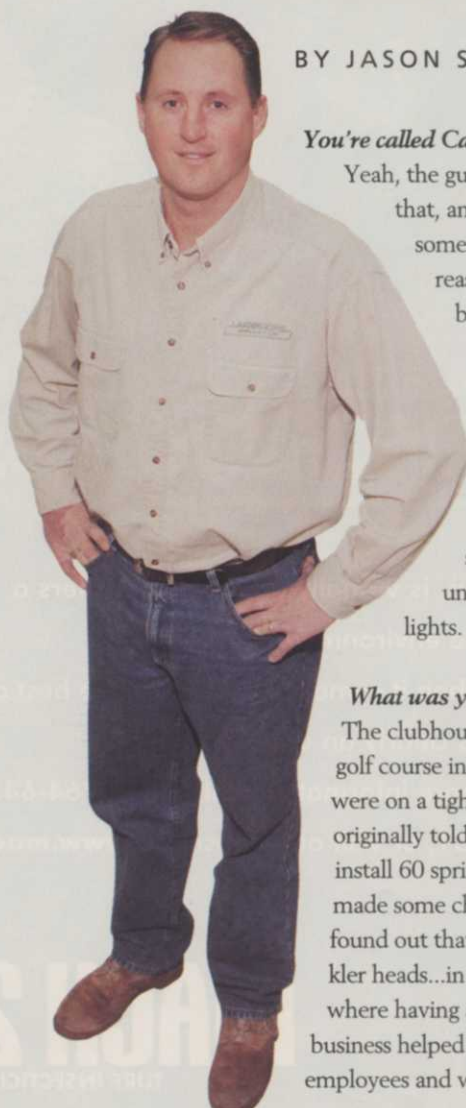
We talk very little about business at Thanksgiving. When we used to work together, we never talked about sprinkling. Now that we're 20 miles away from each other and don't see each other that often, we talk about the business for five minutes or so when we get together.

How has your labor situation been?

It's probably not been the worst case. I've only lost one employee in the last five years. It comes down to being a good boss, being fair and honest. I've done every job from the ground up — I dug holes as a kid, hooked heads and managed crews. I know what everybody's feelings are at every stage of the job. You have to stay close to your guys because nobody wants a boss who sits in the office all day. If your employees don't think you're slacking, then they won't slack. No employee is going to work harder than the boss, because the boss sets the benchmark.

Occasionally, an employee will want to leave to start his own business, and that's going to happen.

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Green Space

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But I emphasize that things stay professional and we stick to ground rules. When that happens, there can actually be a benefit. We can even refer customers to each other.

You seem pretty laid-back about your business.

Don't get me wrong, I'm as competitive as anyone. I just think that there's more to life than making a buck. We all have lives going on, we all have struggles. Just because a person is a competitor does not mean we can't get along. I try to keep a good perspective.

Company at a glance

Years in business: 5

Annual revenue: Not available

Projected growth for 2000: 30%

Number of employees: 2 full-time, 4 seasonal

Commercial accounts: 30%

Residential accounts: 70%

Other services offered: Christmas light installation

Business in installation/design: 80%

Business in maintenance: 20%

Market area: Western Michigan

What are some of the differences between installing irrigation in the North and the South?

One thing is that we use polyethylene pipes instead of PVC like the contractors in, say, Florida. That's because we have freezing conditions in Michigan, and PVC would crack. The reason that they use PVC in Florida is that there is an element in the soil that eats away polyethylene.

Another difference is that we are a seasonal industry

and don't have the luxury of having significant income four to five months a year.

How has your family taken to all your hard work?

Starting out is difficult, but I've done a lot better in the last few years. I've been fortunate enough to have good employees so that I can let the business run itself a little more instead of me coddling it. To be able to stand back and say enough and go home to my wife, Kelly, and sons, Nathan and Luke, is nice.

It looks like you've invested quite a bit in your Web site.

I started it two years ago, and I'm currently in the process of redoing some of it with new ideas I have. I don't get a huge amount of business from it but I don't really try to. People check it out for general information. As a business, you have to have the whole package, and that's why I have a Web site.

Does the "whole package" include a new office?

Yeah, I ran my business out of my home until this year, when we moved into a 2,400-sq.-ft. office condominium. It's enough space to work, I guess. An office is never big enough.

What has been the key to your success?

It's not really as hard as I thought to be successful in business. You have to say what you can do and do it. And you can't be afraid to tell somebody you can't do something. People want to be everything to everybody, but you have to stick to your guns. Know your mission statement and your niche. I don't go out and put sprinkling systems in golf courses because that's just not my thing. I'm not geared for that.

Sometimes I sell \$10,000 sprinkling systems to customers, but it's not so much selling to high-end customers as it is doing a quality job. It's easier on the short side of things to cut corners, but it's a quicker way to end your business and establishing a reputation you can't get rid of.

What will your industry be like in the year 3000?

We'll be installing sprinkler systems on Mars.

Will you ever sell and get out of the business?

Some day, because that's the type of person I am. I'm the type who wants to do something and get it working as well as it can and, as soon as that happens, change over to something new. Irrigation is in my blood, but I think I could let it go even though it would be hard to get used to. I'll never fully retire because I'd like to try others things like construction management.