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### The manager's perspective

If there's anyone who can answer why someone would spend their entire career with one employer, it's Phil Williams, director of grounds at the College of Wooster, Wooster, OH.

"I had to be somewhere where I could expand my knowledge and do something interesting," Williams says of his first years there.

He began his career there in 1962, and in 1969, he was promoted to his current position. Since then, it's been the personal rewards of the job that have made him stay put.

"It's rewarding to see our crew get up at 4 a.m. and clear snow from 48 parking lots, 10 miles of sidewalks and the steps

of 100 buildings by 8 a.m.," he says.

When all things are considered, a good employee retention program boils down to showing you care, and there are many different ways to do that.

Kristina Harper, human resources director of Greater Texas Landscapes, knows Texas heat all too well. Summer is when many of the company's laborers decide they can't hack the heat, making it also the time when creative employee retention strategies must be used.

"We hold a summer party with games to get their spirits



Phil Williams

up," Harper says. Among 85 employees, she considers anyone with three years of service a long-time employee and considers herself lucky to hang on to a laborer for seven months to a year. Employee recognition breakfasts every three months try to improve that number.

Rick Carver, president of Carver's Lawn and Landscape, does not allow his 23 year-round employees to work over 40 hours a week, a rule conceived to keep employees around longer. "I don't want work to get in the way of their family lives," Carver says. "If they're happy at home, they'll be happy at work."

Carver boasts a 90% retention rate in his company. The average employee has more than one year of service and about 50%

have two years or more. He expects his average laborer to stick around for at least two years.

Employee retention strategies can also be used before someone is hired. Don Ekema, general manager of Summer Rain lawn care company, Margate, FL, says it's important to ask the right questions during the interview.

"I ask a person where else he's looked for a job," Ekema says. "If the answer is the local gas station or anywhere he saw an ad, I know this guy is only looking to make \$6 to \$7 an hour and isn't likely to stick around. If he says he's looked at other lawn companies, I know he'll stay and learn and grow with the business."

Wooster's Williams employs the same strategy when hiring. "I've always tried to hire employ-

## LM'S BENCHMARKS: STANDARDS FOR THE LANDSCAPE AND LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

### Employee retention two ways: Percent or time

Let's face it — keeping entry-level employees is a challenge. Our Best Practices Panel had plenty to say about this topic and decided that a tiered approach was best. The benchmark is:

- 75% retention for entry-level, in-field crew
- 85% retention for foremen and middle managers
- 95%+ retention for senior managers

These benchmarks may be low to some operators, and several on our panel expressed a preference for something closer to 80% to 85% for in-field crew.

Entry-level here refers to full-time employees, not just seasonal workers. For those, consider a more realistic dip below 75% (in some cases as low as 50% for the season), but aim to keep them as long as possible through the season (sometimes a challenge in itself). Some companies offer graduated bonuses to get them through their busiest months.

#### The time factor

Our panel also discussed length of employment as key to measuring retention. In an ideal world, the best employees stay on and the worst voluntarily leave quickly, but that's just dreaming. So it's reasonable to ask how long should crew members stay? How many years should your middle managers remain? Here are the Panel's suggestions:

- at least 2 years for entry-level, in-field crew
- at least 5 years for foremen and middle managers
- at least 5 to 10 years for senior managers

Raising employee retention rates is not impossible. It starts with finding out why employees are leaving and addressing those problems immediately. Then, take a close look at your organization and ask why your employees *should* stay. You might be surprised!

Your ideas, responses and feedback are welcome. Please contact the editors at 800/225-4569, fax 440/891-2675 or email: [sgibson@advanstar.com](mailto:sgibson@advanstar.com).

ees who have a degree or background in grounds management," he says. "That way, I know they'll stay with me for a long time."

Bob Ottley, president of One Step Tree & Lawn manages almost 30 full-time employees. One of the first steps he took to retain employees was offer year-round employment, and that was partly a result of buying a Christmas Décor franchise. Another step was focusing on customer retention.

"We agreed that if they (employees) could keep their customers year-to-year, we could pay them year-round," Ottley says. "We improved our customer retention 16% the first year we went to year-round employment. I guess it is harder for customers to cancel their account when they have a personal relationship with their lawn care person."

Ottley expects 25 to 30% turnover, especially during heavy growth periods when he can't afford to be too choosy about hiring. "Some people decide the job isn't for them," he says.

Once employees enter their fourth year of service, he says they seem to need more responsibility to stay content. "They are in charge of their own area," he says. "They schedule their own work and sales, so they have a sense of ownership."



Bob Ottley

## Become a retention-based company

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

Cincinnati-based Sasha Corporation is a 15-year-old consulting firm specializing in employee retention. Their clients include fast food, manufacturing and cleaning companies — businesses with work forces and retention problems similar to the Green Industry's. When *Landscape Management* asked Sasha's vice president Brenda Corbett if she could offer a list of innovative strategies our readers could apply to their employee retention programs, she said no.

The reason, she said, was because her company follows a system, not a list. "It's like standing up at one of those meetings and saying, 'Hi, I'm Joe Landscaper and my company has an employee retention problem.' You don't need a quick fix — you need to be a retention-based company."

"You need a system because of the new, nontraditional employee," adds Karl Corbett, Brenda's husband and partner. "In service industries, frontline people are frequently workers between jobs, people who for whatever reason are not candidates for the next dot-com opening. We call them nontraditional employees. We're getting all kinds of people in this segment — immigrants, older adults, people who have never worked or those who are otherwise hard to employ."

"Compared to generations past, this worker does not have a noticeable work ethic," Corbett continues. "Your company needs a systematic approach because it is tremendously challenging to successfully manage, supervise and keep these workers."

To address this need, Sasha offers training modules in audio and video, aimed at frontline supervisors. This emphasis is intentional.

"Around 80% of employees who leave service industry jobs do so because they don't

get along with someone at work. Of course, that person is usually their immediate supervisor," Brenda explains. "If you want to become a retention-based company, start with frontline supervision."

Supervisors, Brenda says, usually earn their position because of production skills or good attendance, not because they have management skills training.

"Your typical landscaping company is a perfect example," Brenda says. "The people who start the company may know a great deal about landscaping but have never been managers in their lives. Then, they hire frontline workers, and the frontline people frequently are those nontraditional workers between jobs, who, if anything, require exceptional management."

— The author is a contributing editor for *Landscape Management*.

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# I WANT YOU! TO MAKE THAT EXTRA EFFORT

**Rewards like these make several landscape professionals glad they emphasize regular crew training**

BY PHIL FOGARTY

## EDWARDSVILLE, PA

When General George S. Plantain walked into the office of Grasshopper Lawns to deliver a speech on leadership, the crew didn't know what to do. Accompanied by a tape recorded and adapted version of the speech from the movie "Patton" (complete with music and full combat gear), the "General" made an unforgettable impression.

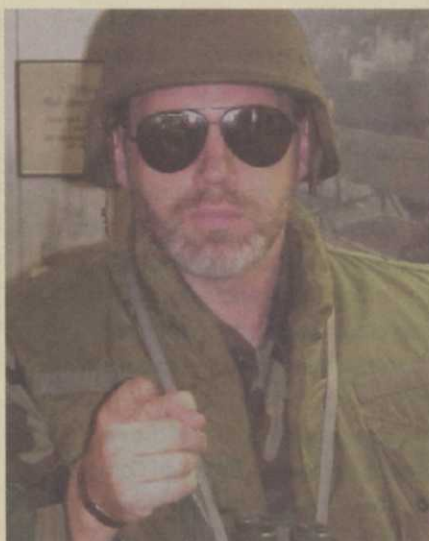
Plantain's message: This is a great industry with a ton of opportunity. He told the staff that they belong to a quality oriented company that gets the job done and leads their market. Plantain went on to say that the company would crush the competition with superior products and service, then crush all of their customers' grubs, "using their guts to grease the spreaders."

"One thing is for sure," says Grasshopper Lawns' general manager Michael Kravitsky. "They will never forget this lesson and it was a lot of fun, too."

## MILLERSBURG, OH

A commitment to training can get you a lot of attention. Kim and Char Kellogg of Grasshopper Property Maintenance, Millersburg, OH, found that out when their company was chosen by the Holmes County Chamber of Commerce as Small Business of the Year.

Grasshopper was selected for its involvement with Habitat for Humanity, not to



Michael Kravitsky, a.k.a. General George S. Plantain, commands attention from his troops.

mention its commitment to quality customer service through training and volunteer work.

Kim Kellogg explains, "We talk a lot about the curb appeal of what we do and we preach curb appeal to the community."

Kellogg even trains homeowners in Millersburg and throughout the county by contributing articles to local newspapers on how to keep things green and growing.

## ROCKY MOUNT, NC

Joel Adams's company, Adams's Gardening Service, does it all for customers, including troubleshooting the entire property and home exterior.

"Once, we spotted a problem with a customer's windows while pruning and contacted the manufacturer and installer to follow through until there was a resolution. All this was before the customer ever knew the situation existed," Adams says.

Training for that kind of service is a daunting task, but through a Skills Development Series session, he realized he was making progress in another way. A co-worker offered to lead the team that week and, at the end of his lesson, told the group what regular training had done for his self-esteem.

Adams recalls, "As he told everyone how much better he felt about himself and how he had never worked before for a company that cared enough about its employees to teach them this kind of stuff, I hid the lump in my throat behind my coffee cup and listened."

Adams asks every person on his staff every day: "What have you done to teach someone else your job today?"

That's not a bad question for any of us. How are you planning to train so that this year is better?

The Skills Development Series has landscape and lawn companies raising the bar. Training is the only tangible way to create the future, and it's allowing these Green Industry companies to make amazing things happen.

A consistent and interactive training program will make a lasting impression, earn you some recognition, increase profits and change a few lives — not bad for a half hour each week!

— The author led the Skills Development Series training system, which was sponsored by American Cyanamid and Landscape Management. The author can be reached at [pfogarty@stratos.net](mailto:pfogarty@stratos.net).

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## Property at a glance

**Location:** Duke University,  
Durham, NC

**Staff:** Duke University Grounds  
Services

**Category:** School or university  
grounds

**Year site built:** 1924

**Acres of turf:** 198

**Acres of woody ornamentals:** 289

**Acres of display beds:** 67,835 sq. ft.

**Total paved area:** 109

**Total man-hours/week:** 1,848

## Maintenance challenges

- ▶ Equipment noise restrictions
- ▶ Student/community activities
- ▶ Continuous university construction

## Project checklist

- ▶ Community outreach program
- ▶ University/community gateway landscapes
- ▶ Campus tree inventory/assessment

## On the job

- ▶ 45 full-time staff, 12 licensed pesticide applicators

# Duke University

## A 2000 Grand Award Winner of the Professional Grounds Management Society for School or University Grounds

If it wasn't for basketball, Duke University Grounds Services' job might be a little easier. As it stands, grounds crew members have a blue devil of a time restoring turf left dead from tents pitched by fans who have to camp out in order to get tickets. Then there's the wear and compaction caused by thousands of fans who hold victory celebrations (and build bonfires) on Main Quad. But hey, that's life at a Division I school, and the grounds crew wouldn't have it any other way.

Located in the northeast piedmont of North Carolina only 140 miles east of the mountains and 130 miles from the coast, Duke has a complex mixture of climates that present many challenges. Grounds Services combats snow and hurricanes, yet the prevailing microclimates allow for an abundance of woody ornamentals, annuals, perennials and turf options.

Whether it's hedge-trimming on the 2:1 slope above Campus Street or dodging cars while maintaining a portion of

the 67, 835 sq. ft. of display beds at the traffic circle, Grounds Services works like the devil to ensure fans of the school have more to cheer about than basketball.

Groundskeepers must keep the annuals fresh and colorful at this traffic circle, but they must also be cognizant of vehicular movement.



**PGMS**  
**Landscape**  
MANAGEMENT

Editors' note: *Landscape Management* is the exclusive sponsor of the Green Star Professional Grounds Management Awards for outstanding management of residential, commercial and institutional landscapes. The 2001 winners will be named at the annual meeting of the Professional Grounds Management Society in November. For more information on the 2001 Awards, contact PGMS at 120

Cockeysville Road, Suite 104, Hunt Valley, MD; 410/584-9754. Web-site: [www.pgms.org](http://www.pgms.org)

This entry planting to an adjoining hotel was installed by Grounds Services to facilitate the continuity of the gateways.



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