

for '09. The largest number of responses (100 of 439, or 23%) is in the 1% to 4% forecasted growth category. However, when we asked how many were budgeting for decreased revenues, in the very next survey question, 44% of respondents said they expect revenues to decrease 5% or more this season, with 5% expecting at least 20% less revenue.

Not surprisingly, this uncertainty is reflected in the readers' employment plans, our survey shows. Forty percent of respondents said their employment picture remains the same as it was last year; 31% say they will have fewer employees, and 29% report they will need more employees.

If there's a silver lining in this economic cloud, it's that companies will be able to be selective in bringing new employees and managers into their companies. A lot of experienced people will be looking for positions this year. — RH

Landscape worker wages (average) for '09

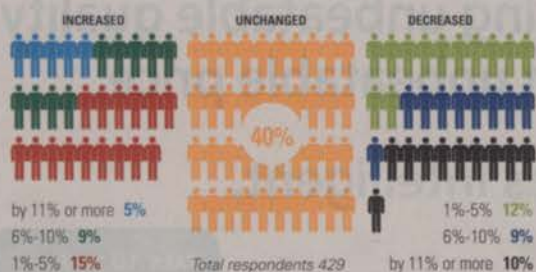


Hours of employee training annually



Total respondents: 429

Change in the number of employees for '09



What % are you budgeting to grow revenues in '09



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two or three years," says Senske.

"We're also working on being better managers and making sure we're running lean and mean," he adds. "We've made a commitment throughout our company to train all of our people, and everybody is involved in evaluating, and improving, our processes."

Beyond that, Senske says the economy offers a great opportunity to

add new talent to his company.

"We're getting more high-quality applicants now," he says. "We're only interested in the A players. We're excited about adding anybody like that to our team."

Services make the difference

Landscape or lawn service companies' prospects for the coming season (and

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David Kafka

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owners' expectations) seem to be predicted, in large part, on the types of services that generate most of their sales. Lawn and tree care services generally are doing better than lawn maintenance, which is holding up better than installation. Landscape construction — for almost all layers of the market, and especially for new construction — is way off.

David Kafka's company, Supergreen, maintains the properties of seasonal homes on the resort islands in and around Charleston, SC. Even though the owners have primary residences elsewhere, the properties must be tended 12 months of the year.

"A lot of our customers are saying they've lost 40% or more of their retirement savings, and they're telling me they must cut back on their expenses," says Kafka. "We tell them, 'You've told us that you like what we do, so let's stay in business together. Let's reduce the services, maybe eliminate the shrub treatments or cut back the visits from 52 to 41 this year. We can help you.'"

While that approach has yielded some positive results, and Kafka has reaped others by personally contacting customers, the depressed real estate climate and dormant local construction have dramatically slowed his business this past winter.

Kafka says he tries to keep his employees working year-round because they're trained and experienced, and he would hate to lose them. This winter, however, he was forced to cut back their hours. Most weeks, at least through February, they were done by Wednes-

day afternoons or, on some occasions, Thursdays. As a last resort, he laid off two people in his office and five production employees.

"We're going from three-man crews to two-man crews. We'll just have to work longer hours," says Kafka, a former fireman who started the company in 1997.

The contractor factor

Mountain View Landscape and Lawn Care, Chicopee, MA, is going into this season with about \$3.5 million in business on the books, says President Steve Corrigan. It's enough to get it started, but well below what it's been carrying into the past spring seasons. Even so, Corrigan remains "cautiously optimistic."

"Our maintenance renewals have been good, but that's only 20% to 30% of our business," he adds, admitting that he's probably more concerned about next season because of the lack of construction starts this past year, especially in the commercial sector: "Because we're always the last contractor on a site, we're a little concerned about what's going to happen in 2010."

Corrigan says the lack of new construction has added another wild card to this season's prospects: the entry of more contractors into the competitive mix.

"There's more competition than ever for the work. Last week, we bid on a \$350,000 park job. We came in second," says Corrigan. "The low bidder was a subdivision contractor. He said he didn't have any subdivisions to do, so he had to start looking at other stuff."

Mountain View employs 25 to 30 people on its construction crews, but Corrigan says he might need to reduce that number by two to six employees this season, depending upon sales. It's something he hopes he can avoid.

"These are skilled employees because we do a lot of diverse and difficult projects," Corrigan says. "The more difficult the job is, the more competitive we are. We have a great work force."

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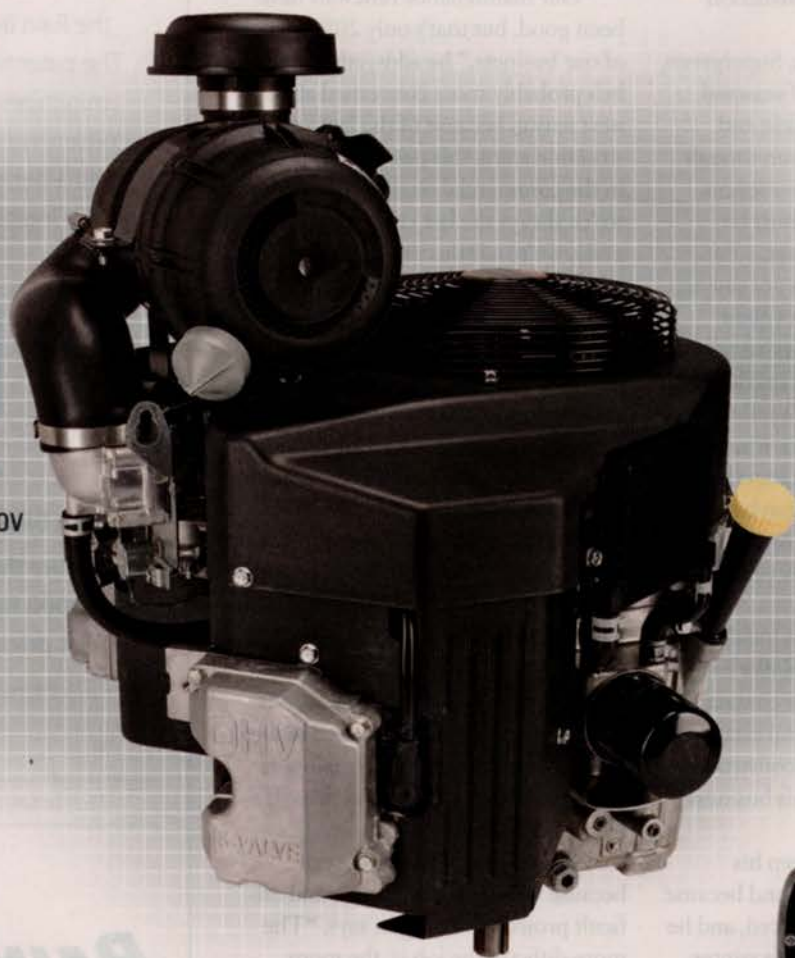
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PROTECT YOUR BEST PLAYERS

BY BILL HOOPES

Be very careful about the employees you cut from your roster or let get away.

Reflecting back to the 1987 recession, I recall the need to trim our staff. I also remember a senior manager saying, "Let's just do it through attrition. We just won't replace quitters." There's a problem with this tactic: In tough, demanding times, the best people get the best opportunities. Also, as typically happens, the people you need least are usually the ones who don't quit.

If you have one of those "really good people," another company, maybe a competitor, is trying to recruit him or her. One thing is certain; in tough times you need your veteran problem solvers more than ever. You need their experience, their knowledge and their ability to work efficiently.

Before you cut staff, consider these three factors:

1 Evaluate the relative benefits of keeping people versus the cost of hiring and training new workers once the recession comes to an end. When it will end is anybody's guess, but it will end, and you will need to add or replace staff. It can take years to truly, fully replace talent.

2 If you decide you must cut employees, force-rank your entire team — not just production workers. Look closely at supervisors who might not be pulling their weight, but who are more highly paid. I recently helped a client lay off a non-functioning manager and replace him with a higher-paid, more talented person. Once on the job, the new manager reorganized and reduced the staff, made the operation more efficient — and did it all for a net added cost of zero.

3 As you evaluate the team, think about your best utility players, those people who understand and can play several different positions well. You want people who can capably handle responsibilities formerly handled by others.

—The author is the owner of Grass Roots Training, and provides consulting services, specializing in training and employee building for Green Industry companies. Contact him at hoopes@columbus.rr.com.

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Seasonal labor

Steve Booth started Booth's Landscaping in 1984. It's the most-established landscape company in Alaska's Kenai Peninsula, a scenic region on the southern edge of the state that touts itself as Alaska's Playground.

"The last couple of years we've been very busy. Typically, Alaska is a little bit slower to catch up with the outside economy," says Booth. "I'm sure this year the economy will hit us."

Booth's Landscaping derives most of its revenue from commercial projects, and employs about a half-dozen employees each season. The work is highly seasonal, generally starting May 1 and lasting until October or November.

"We have several projects that we couldn't finish last fall because the cus-



tomers weren't ready for us, so we have work right out of the chute," says Booth.

Getting employees is sometimes a challenge, admits Booth, who has been in the industry 32 years.

"We don't have a big labor pool here, but the phone will start ringing in April. I try to hire somebody who has good references," he says. "Driver's licenses are often a problem, and it's hard to find guys with commercial licenses. Sometimes we have to weed through a lot of people to get a good employee." LM

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The author is president of JP Horizons Inc. Visit www.jp horizons.com.

Take 5 steps toward lasting change

One common Lean tool to making changes and taking action is a simple, but effective process called 5S. It is effective because it provides a plan to accomplishing something that is visual to everyone. In most cases, it also creates immediate efficiencies and improvements.

5S can take place in the maintenance bay, the design office, or through the computer files — and will help in shaping the culture of your company to move from just talking about changes to making them. The following is a brief description of 5S methodology:

- 1. Sort:** Select an area, then begin to systematically evaluate what should be in that area and what should not be. It might mean you need to go through the “painful” experience of throwing away that old transmission you bought at an auction 12 years ago that your maintenance crew has to step over every time they need to get the backpack blower hanging behind it on the wall. After all, when in doubt, throw it out!
- 2. Shine:** Get out the mops, buckets, cleaning utensils and go to work. Clean everything in the area in which you are focusing. Don’t just dust; how about some new paint on the walls and the floor? Spray off the tools and equipment that will be stored in this area. Be careful not to try and clean the entire world, just stay focused on the area you have selected.

3. Set in order: When you are ready to put back only the things that belong in that area, first add some shelves, hooks or designated space on the floor to park equipment. Give thought to what should be placed where, based on making it effi-

cient to locate and easy to access.

Let me offer a quick note here for all of us who have instinctively used the first three steps described above only to find that in time, the area in which we put all that effort eventually returned back to the way it used to be. This process has more to it than just cleaning; it must become a mindset that shapes the culture of your company. That is why the next two steps are essential.

4. Standardize: The easiest way to accomplish this is through labeling and creating some structure to the area of your focus. When a designated label clearly reads “rake,” it becomes more difficult to place the shovel there. Show faith in your team or yourself as a leader. Try it, and your team will amaze you.

5. Sustain: This step is what separates your efforts from “just cleaning something” to an evolving culture of efficiency and Working Smarter. Keep in mind that the project is not completed until you have put up some visual reminders and tracking that will maintain and continue to improve what you have accomplished in this area. Post a simple map that shows where everything is to be stored, and use an auditing system that consistently measures and evaluates how well everyone is adhering to the new standard that has been established.

Making changes, even simple ones, often can be uncomfortable, seemingly time-consuming and can challenge the current state of your company. Yet on the other side of the change, success is waiting patiently. What if a mind shift and a great 5S project could help your company add 10% more billable hours in 2009, or add 3% improvement to client retention? When the correlation between making changes and noticeable and measurable improvements is realized, a culture shift to continuous improvement takes place.

MONTHLY CHALLENGE

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- ▶ They can only help manage some plant diseases, not all.
- ▶ Identify the disease/weed first, so you choose the correct product.
- ▶ The correct timing of applications is critical to success.
- ▶ Measuring, diluting and applying products effectively and safely requires attention to detail.

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Dow AgroSciences

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Scotts Professional

To help professionals develop flexible weed management plans, Scotts Professional has created a free Pre-Emergent Weed Guide. This informative guide describes how to most effectively use its new granular herbicide, Jewel (pictured), in rotation with its other pre-emergent herbicide products, Rout and OH2. The guide also offers sample rotation schedules for five U.S. growing regions, and identifies common weeds with photos and detailed descriptions. www.scottspro.com or 800/492-8255



Syngenta Professional Products

Barricade pre-emergence herbicide is supported by a money-back guarantee that the product will control crabgrass well into 2009.

Customers who purchase \$5,000 or more of any combination of Barricade flowable, Barricade 65WG water-dispersible granule formulation or Barricade on-fertilizer from authorized Syngenta Channel Partners between Sept. 1, 2008 and May 15, 2009 qualify for the program. www.BarricadeGuarantee.com or 800/395-TURF

Valent U.S.A. Corp.

SureGuard Herbicide received registration from the Environmental Protection Agency and has been approved by all 50 states for use in landscape settings as a preemergent and quick postemergent control of broadleaf and grass weeds such as crabgrass, spurge, bittercress and groundsel. SureGuard's active ingredient, flumioxazin, brings a unique mode of action to the LCO market that works to control glyphosate-resistant weeds and provide an overall strong resistance management alternative. www.valentpro.com or 800/89-VALENT

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Bayer Environmental Science

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