



## Market Knowledge

### **Recruiting and Retaining a Dependable Work Force: The Key to Expanding a Contracting Business**

In a recent national industry survey, nearly 50 percent of landscape contractors cited "lack of labor" as the limiting factor to their company's growth.

With demand for workers at an all-time high, recruiting and retaining skilled employees has become a major challenge. Especially in the landscape contracting industry, where hiring and keeping good supervisors and crew have become priorities.

To add to this dilemma, landscape contractors see major opportunities for growth in the coming year. Fifty percent of those polled plan to expand their current business by offering new services, including irrigation installation; aeration; landscape design; landscape lighting; seeding/sodding; tree services; organic/non-chemical fertilization; snow removal; driveway resealing; recycling; ponds and water gardens; and deer control.

Many contracting firms have come to the realization that recruiting top personnel is an on-going process. Today's owners and managers are always on the lookout for people who could bring valuable new skills to their organization. By actively recruiting, or at least actively networking, they will be better able to expand their businesses when opportunities arise, especially when economic times are good.

#### **Tips to Finding Good Employees**

Work your network. You and your company are known in your community. Use yourself and your employees as "ambassadors" of your organization. Mention to friends, family and neighbors that the landscape industry is growing and there are plenty of opportunities for people who enjoy working outdoors, like to be physically challenged, and who get satisfaction from seeing a job completed. The best part of this method is that each new contact comes with a "built-in" reference. To make this work, your current team members will need to have true pride in their profession.

Pay a "finder's fee" to current employees that recruit a new team member. As an example, for entry-level positions, you can pay employees a "bounty" of \$25.00 if the person is hired and \$100.00 if the person stays for six months.

Look for employees that have a genuine interest in the landscape business. Community colleges, vocational schools and high schools often offer courses in the landscape and horticultural fields. Students in these programs have a natural interest in joining a company where they can grow and develop their skills. Some schools also have internship programs that allow you to work with a candidate part-time before hiring them full-time.

Prospect constantly. Even when you have no open positions, be on the lookout for new team members. Your business cards (or company literature) could reflect this by saying something like: "Professional Landscape Services - It's a Growing Business." Place "help wanted" ads year-round in association publications. Use a "blind box" ad if you want to



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screen the prospects. Sometimes a talented employee comes your way when you are not actively looking.

Be a magnet for new talent. Portray a professional and successful image in your community. Company shirts, hats, trucks and yard signs all create an corporate identity. Emphasize to employees and clients what sets your firm apart from others. Prospective employees want to join an organization that is a leader; uses up-to-date practices; has access to the best tools and equipment; and offers on-going training opportunities.

Suggest that your local landscape trade association offer a Career Day where students can meet with representatives in the industry to learn more about career opportunities. Find out when local college or high school campuses, or local shopping centers, have "Career Days." Sponsor a table-top display that shows photos of your best projects and hand out printed materials about careers in landscaping. (You can get these materials from your trade associations.)

Attend local Home & Garden Shows. Set up a table-top booth to display large photos of your best work. These shows often attract both prospective clients and people who are interested in working in the industry. Have materials from trade associations that discuss careers in the field.

### **Recruiting Employees - Interview Techniques**

Start with a telephone interview to screen prospects. Plan to spend 10 to 15 minutes on the phone finding out why the person is interested in the job and their background. This will help you determine which candidates are best qualified and which ones are wasting your time. If you have an office staff, your assistant can often handle this assignment.

Allow 20 to 30 minutes for the first interview. Plan your interview questions in advance. Remember, first impressions can be key indicators of how your clients will also view this person.

Consider a "team interview" format. Sit down with a co-worker to meet with the interviewee and ask questions about their interests, training and experience, career goals, how they would handle difficult situations, etc. After the interview, your co-worker can also provide you with feedback.

Check references with past employers. Look for someone with a good track record of reliability, a person you can count on when the assignments or deadlines get tough.

Show promising candidates a solid career path. In these days of high tech jobs in climate-controlled offices, outdoor employment can look less attractive. The challenge is to demonstrate to candidates they can move upward in the organization. And that the green industries represent a genuine career opportunity with many rewards: working outside with the environment; being part of a team; creating landscapes for recreational use and scenic



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beauty; enhancing your community. The personal rewards can be as fulfilling as the monetary.

Benefits can also be as important as wages. Many service industry jobs today provide little in the way of benefits, especially those in the retail sector. Investigate new benefits for your long-term employees. Younger employees, and employees with families, are known to value flexibility as much as wages. Tap into this growing trend with flexible working hours, paid time off and special bonuses for weekend and evening work.

### **Retaining Employees - Keeping The Best People On Board**

When you have assembled crews that operate efficiently and have supervisors you can depend on, you are on your way to expanding your business. Keeping these valuable employees should be a priority. By understanding what motivates employees, you will be better equipped to keep these key people on staff. Consider financial bonuses; perks, like valuable gift certificates; career training programs; alternative benefits; or other incentives that your staff would appreciate.

Here are guidelines used by many successful companies:

Provide solid job descriptions. Make sure employees understand what is expected of them and their areas of their responsibility. Employees will have a sense of purpose and control, and you won't hear "it's not my job to do that."

Develop an incentive program. You will retain the most motivated and skilled employees by offering cash bonuses (or perk points) for productivity and sales acumen. Service or installation technicians that sell customers on the "extras" and "upgrades" deserve recognition for their effort. So does the crew that gets a project done right in less time. Some companies have even developed a "scorecard" system where the employee is evaluated daily by their supervisor on specific performance factors. Once tallied, the employee's daily scores determine their incentive compensation (or perk points) for the week.

Offer special opportunities for career growth. Investing in your employees is investing in your business and your customers. Your local trade association regularly sponsors training seminars for employees to help them gain more expertise, even licensure in certain fields. If you are considering expanding into new services, such as landscape design, irrigation installation, landscape lighting or water gardening, create a "staff specialist" in these areas. He (or she) can attend special classes or manufacturer's programs to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to help you grow in these lucrative new markets. Additionally, they can also help train your other employees in these specialties.

Pay attention to diversity issues. Each employee on your team is unique and expects to be treated according to his/her values. Make an effort to bridge the cultural gap. For example, companies that have a large Hispanic workforce often appoint a bilingual team leader who acts as liaison. This key person can make sure that Hispanic employees feel they are a



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valuable part of the team. At the same time, he can identify employees who would be candidates for career advancement once they have mastered English skills.

Encourage supervisors and crew to feel pride in their work. It only reflects well on a company when a boss is proud of his crew, and the crew is proud of the work they accomplish.

Celebrate victories. Show special appreciation for jobs well done. This does not mean you have to pay a bonus all the time - a verbal or written thank you, or lunch on the boss, shows your appreciation.

Some companies lose sight of the value of people and the cost of attrition. When you study the investment required to hire and train new staff, and the consequences to business performance, most owners/managers realize the value of investing in their people. Building a mutually-beneficial relationship with your staff will always pay big dividends in loyalty and performance.

### *About the Author:*

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