

# EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>

by Larry Holkenborg

Last year, NAA President, Ken Kirk, created a new committee, the Employee Development Committee, and named me to be Chairman. The main purpose of the committee was to develop ways to recruit, hire, and train employees that could and would stay in the tree industry. This year, as President of NAA, I have appointed Bob Schulhoff chairman, and we have continued to look for ways to develop employees for arborists.

To give you some idea of my dilemma, last year (1978), I started the year with nine employees. Four of them had been with me several years and I considered them permanent and could rely on them to be at work. My policy at that time was to hire the first person that came along and as cheaply as possible. I thought that anyone could be trained to do the work. How wrong I was. With this policy, 30 of the 42 men hired last year quit. I learned.

The first thing I did to improve was to develop a series of letters to use in my recruiting. The first letter stated what I was looking for in an employee. It listed our goals and the benefits an employee could receive. I give this letter to each person that I think may be employable. The second letter is sent to the high school counselors in every school within 30 miles of our office asking for interested people. The third letter is sent to potential employees that are 18 years of age and over that I think might be interested in our type of work. I also write a letter to send to potential employees still in high school, under 18 years of age, whom I could hopefully use in the near future.

I talk to students on career days at high schools. I talk to college students at Ohio State University in Columbus, and Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster. I run ads in newspapers and advertise on the radio. All ads in school football programs, yearbooks, etc. are aimed at recruiting help. I spend more money advertising for personnel than for seeking business.

These are examples of newspaper ads:

1) Working Foreman Trainee, Larry Holkenborg Nursery, Inc., Landscape and Tree Service.

2) Working Foreman, Larry Holkenborg Nursery, Inc., Landscape and Tree Service.

3) Career Opportunity in Landscape and Tree Care, Larry Holkenborg Nursery, Inc.

4) Attention College Students. Available, a new career opportunity in Landscape Horticulture, Larry Holkenborg Nursery, Inc.

I do not put my address or phone number in the ad. I decided that if they couldn't find me they wouldn't be able to do the job anyway. The 'working foreman' and 'attention college students' ads have brought the best results. I have a lot of applicants to choose from.

I interview each prospective employee three times. During the first interview I explain our training procedure and give them the honest facts about our industry.

(1) I tell them of the skills they will have to learn and that they will have to climb trees.

(2) I tell them of the long working hours we have in the spring and summer, and that we have very little work in the winter. The winter work we have is sometimes difficult to do because of weather conditions.

(3) I tell them of the low starting wage but I also tell them what I can pay when they can do the work.

(4) I tell them the goals of our company. These are framed and hanging in the office.

(5) I tell them how they can receive the required training.

If they are still interested and want to try I set up an appointment to take them up a tree to see if they really want to climb. Before I take them up the tree I show them how to tie-in and explain what to do. I go up the tree with them and make sure they are always tied-in.

We now have, in Ohio, four ways an employee can receive on-the-job training and formal

<sup>1</sup>Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in San Diego, California in August 1979.

classroom education.

Ohio State University has a four-year program which earns the student a B.S. degree in Landscape Horticulture. Last year our newly formed committee met at OSU with several commercial arborists and several faculty members. An article in the January 1979 issue of the Journal of Arboriculture by T. Davis Sydnor published the results of this meeting. A student can now go to college two quarters and work two quarters in the field getting practical experience which, in turn, will make classroom study more meaningful.

One problem exists and that is it takes a student six years to get a B.S. degree under this program. This is a long time, but if a student-employee is willing, while working, he can also take a night course each quarter at a branch campus and shorten it to five years, which is more realistic. Two of my student-employees did that this spring.

The Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, Ohio now has a proposed landscape contracting and construction industry option where the student earns an associate degree in 2½ years. The student attends classes during the fall and winter quarters and works during the spring and summer quarters, graduating in the spring, an ideal time in our industry. It gives the student the opportunity to receive two internships, if he wishes, with two different employers.

Hocking Technical College in Nelsonville, Ohio will offer two six-week courses during January and February of 1980. One of the courses will be skill training in tree climbing and the other will be a more advanced training program in arboriculture. An employee can draw unemployment in Ohio and go to this school. You may want to look into this option.

We also offer our own training program which I call going to the school of hard knocks.

I encourage and sometimes insist that my employees attend meetings which will benefit them in doing a better job for our customers. A foreman training meeting was put on by the Ohio Chapter of ISA and the Extension Service at Wooster last December. I know my employees learned something at that meeting.

On rainy days we have short seminars. A foreman may show the rest of the crew how to

operate the crane, or they may show each other how to tie knots, or we look at National Arborist Association slide-cassette training programs. The NAA has many of these sets available on pruning, spraying, climbing, etc. The NAA also has two home study programs on tree care.

I also carry my camera with me most of the time. I take pictures for my own slide programs which I show my employees. One of these sets I call "The Screw Ups."

I have developed a foreman's manual. This is simple to do. I give my employees a ring binder and start feeding them material a little at a time. I use the Landscape Facts that I can get free each spring from Elton Smith (at OSU) and our extension service. It's good information. Your extension service possibly has the same type of material. When I read a story in a magazine which I think will benefit the employees I distribute a copy to each of them.

Area horticulture extension specialists are available. In my area, Fred Busher gives my crew ideas on landscape design. Educating and keeping employees motivated and productively employed is one of the biggest jobs tree company managers have.

In July, my company had 14 employees; one secretary, my 13-year-old son who hoes the nursery, one laborer who was not interested in our company and is no longer with us, four key employees with an average of seven years seniority, and seven laborers who are presently enrolled at OSU in horticulture, two are incoming freshmen, and two will graduate next March, right at a time when I can use them. We have had only seven employees quit this year compared to 30 last year.

It is true the college students will be gone in September, but I knew when they came that they would be leaving. They have done a lot of work while with the company. Every one of them can climb and most can climb very well. They were fast learners.

I am already planning for next year's work force. I expect four of the college students to return next April, just when I need them, with the experience they gained this year. Two of the other three I ex-

pect to return in June for three months, unless I can convince them to come in April. One will not return. I know that they all have gotten valuable experience to take back to school which will help them in their classroom work. It has been an enjoyable summer. In fact, the college students are home in Ohio now running the business while I attend this meeting. Normally, I close down during the ISA convention.

Recently, the NAA put on a 3-day pilot training program for tree climbers in Cleveland, Ohio. Dennis Ryan, professor in charge of the arboriculture program at the State University of New York in Farmingdale, was the instructor. The NAA is now talking of having a training school next summer for the teachers of our high schools and colleges to show them what we want our employees to know.

There is a lot we, as employers, must do:

1) We must pay wages and have benefits similar to those of other industries. We don't pay the kind of wages we should, but we must. We expect our

employees to have ten times the skills for half the pay.

2) We must offer our employees year-round employment. If we cannot, we should look at unemployment compensation and use it as a tool to keep employees.

3) Our equipment must be professional, our business must be professional, and our employees must be professional.

4) We must build a good image that will attract both customers and employees.

The tree industry must sell and educate the customer to good tree work and, in return, pay our employees so they can make a decent living. In the June 1979 issue of *Arbor Action* Bob Felix summed it up by saying, "If we continue to give our talents away and pay mediocre wages, we will continue to have personnel shortages."

*Larry Holkenborg Tree Service  
Sadusky, Ohio*

## ABSTRACTS

SHURTLEFF, M.C. 1979. **Trees for a city environment.** *Grounds Maintenance* 14(7): 44, 46, 48, 50.

To grow well in spite of the hazards of city life, a tree must be hardy and disease-resistant. It must withstand air pollution and soil compaction caused by pedestrian or vehicular traffic. It must also be easy to maintain, with a growing habit that conforms to available space. This is the last in a series of articles listing the best trees for a city environment. This article describes the characteristics and utility of the following trees: oak, pear, pecan, redbud, sassafras, serviceberry, silktree, Sophora, sourgum, sweetgum, sycamore, tulip tree, yellowwood, and Zelkova.

SMITH, R.C. 1979. **Effects of air pollution on landscape plants.** *Grounds Maintenance* 14(6): 59, 79.

Knowing the kinds of air pollution and their effects on landscape plants can help the grounds manager protect valuable plant material. Common air pollutant gases and their effects: 1) sulfur dioxide — ivory-colored foliage; bleaching; chlorosis (loss of normal green color); 2) hydrogen fluoride — same as above, quickly affects *Prunus*, *Quercus*, *Abies* and *Pinus*; 3) chlorine — interveinal chlorosis; upper leaf surface has silvery appearance; 4) nitrogen oxides — toxic range: 25 ppm or greater, (lower levels may be useful as fertilizer), at toxic levels, leaves have brown margins and black spots; 5) smog — bleached appearance; drying, brown color; 6) ethylene — in low concentrations, has strong hormonal effect on plant material, at toxic levels, epinasty, chlorosis and leaf drop will occur; and 7) hydrogen sulfide — leaf scorch on young foliage, older, mature foliage usually left uninjured.