

HIRING QUALIFIED WORKERS IN THE TREE CARE INDUSTRY¹

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Abstract. One of the major production problems facing the green industry today is finding trained or trainable production workers in the numbers needed. This paper discusses several reasons for this problem and presents specific steps individual companies or industry segments might take to help solve their recruitment problems.

Résumé. Aujourd'hui, un des principaux problèmes de production auquel est confronté l'industrie horticole est de trouver, en quantité suffisante, des travailleurs qualifiés ou aptes à recevoir une formation. Cet article présente plusieurs raisons expliquant ce problème et présente les étapes spécifiques que les entreprises peuvent prendre pour aider à solutionner leurs problèmes de recrutement.

In order to discuss "Hiring Qualified Workers In The Tree Care Industry" I would like to divide the subject into two segments, "Where Did All The Help Go?" and "Let Mother Know." This second segment discusses several reasons for this problem and presents specific steps individual companies or industry segments might take to help solve this recruitment problem.

First things first, where did all the help go? The WW II baby boom has boomed and we are presently in a valley with comparatively few new 18-19 year olds coming into the work place. That is where the help went! This means you can expect to see the population from which you draw workers shrink throughout the 1986-2000 period!

Minorities and immigrants will make up a larger share of the U.S. population in the year 2000 than they do today. There will be an 18% increase of new workers entering the job market between 1986 and 2000. About 58% of this labor force growth will be hispanics. They will increase their share of the labor market from 7 to 10%, blacks, will increase from 11 to 12% and others will increase from 3 to 4% of the total. Women will continue to join the labor force in growing numbers, accounting for nearly 2 out of 3 entrants. Women were only 39% of the labor force in 1972; by 2000 they are expected to account for over 47%.

In recent years, the educational attainment of the labor force has risen dramatically. Between 1972 and 1986, the proportion of the labor force, age 18 to 64, with at least 1 year of college increased from 28 to 41%, while the proportion with 4 years of college or more increased from 14 to 21%. The emphasis on education will continue.

Assuming workers that you are able to hire stay with you past the initial and advanced training periods, you may then have quality, money making, production personnel. As you know the number of this type of worker is becoming very low. So to answer the question, "Where Did All The Help Go?" I would say that it grew up and advanced into sales or management or, and more importantly, it went to other types of employment.

Remember Bob Felix's article in *Arbor Age* about the invisible arborist? This industry is invisible. Its work is often visible but its potential as a place for the entering worker to find employment at quality pay and benefits (or, at least, we are getting there) during good times and bad with many opportunities for advancement is not. I will always remember the discussion I had with a prospective student's mother whose concern was that of employment after her son graduated. I essentially said, if her son sent out 1,000 resumes after graduation he would most assuredly receive at least 900 job offers. I asked her if she had had tree work done by a professional arborist. She said yes. I asked her if she had connected their work with the possible future employment of her son. She reiterated that it just did not click that there were good jobs with such companies. Her son is now one of my students, but if you had talked to her, her son might now be one of your employees.

How do you hire qualified people for your company? Easy, you pirate them from other companies by paying more or giving more benefits. Of course next week some other company will pirate

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them from you. So, over the long or short haul, pirating does not work!

If pirating does not work, then what? First, you have to accept the fact that, for the majority of the people you hire, you can not hire "qualified" workers. You must **train** them and **keep** them. Once an individual comes through your front door and is hired, your challenge is to make a profit from that individual's production. He or she is like any other type of production machinery it needs constant and intelligent maintenance. That maintenance is not only in the form of a satisfying salary and benefit package but in the feeling of "This is my company too, I can make it better or I can make it worse." This individual employee feeling is brought about by individual training, e.g. NAA courses, attendance at workshops or seminars, his or her own paid membership in the local ISA chapter, and just a pat on the back saying, even though at times it is an outright lie, "You Done Good."

I do not want to dwell on how to keep employees but how to find them in the first place. The first step is to define what you want in an employee then look at what is coming through your front door. If no one is coming through your door looking for work, or only the drunks, bums and malcontents are, you may have to lower expectations or do something about it. Either hire the bums or change your recruitment practices. If you do not spend money on recruitment then you had better start or face going out of business or going insane whichever comes first.

Let's talk a bit about recruitment. How do you advertise for new production workers? To start off with, it takes energy and some money. The nice thing about it is that as you are advertising for workers you are also advertising your business.

First remember, free advertisement is much better than paid advertisement. The basic thought is to get people to think of our industry and you as a professional member of it! Remember, quick fixes or one time efforts will not work. If you are in your 20's, 30's or 40's, you have quite a few years until retirement. Nothing of much value happens over night. You must be in the battle for the long haul. You must look to the future, for the present (if you are like most) stinks. The real choice is (1) to do nothing but complain and sooner or later go out of

business as a bitter person or, (2) to recognize the problem, bite the bullet and work your butt off. We are in a battle. The enemy is McDonalds, Burger King, this industry, that industry, in short, anyone who is hiring high school graduates. Which, by the way, is just about everyone. The question is, who is going to get 'um?, you or the next guy.

It took me and Paul Smith's College six long years and a lot of hard work to get our Urban Tree Management Degree started and recognized. As of today, we have 40 students enrolled in this two-year program. Wouldn't you and your company like to have 40 eager young men and women working for your company in six years?

The second segment of this paper is "Let Mother Know." In the majority of the cases it is mother who has the time to daily advise her teenagers on "What are you going to do once you graduate from high school? You are not going to stay home all day!" Fathers seem to not to be able to find the time to do the repetitive job that is needed. If "Mother" is sold on our industry then you can believe she will try to sell or inform her son or daughter of her beliefs. The key then is two fold: 1) let the general public know of our industry and you and 2) let mother, in particular, know.

Let's start with the general public campaign. Join! Join! Join! You **must** be a member of The International Society of Arboriculture, the National Arborist Association, the American Association of Consulting Arborists or better yet all three. This builds credibility with the public. Use your membership(s) in your advertisements, your business cards, within newspaper articles, radio spots and when talking to anyone who will listen.

Use the media. Think of positive things to do that will gain newspaper, television and radio coverage, e.g., the Boy Scouts and your Company prune trees in a downtown park (with pictures of course), discuss why leaves turn colors, or current insect and disease problems. Visit the mayor or town council and ask for volunteer projects that you and some volunteer group can perform. Remember the project does not have to be massive to get into print or on the local radio/TV news. The key here is not only the event but having it covered and placed on or near page one.

Find out who are the editor and photographer of

your local paper(s), the news people of the radio and tv stations. Get to know them. Keep them informed of the events you want them to cover, and, if necessary, pick them up and drive them to the event. This works. Most news media, especially papers, are, if you convince them, always looking for local interest stories.

Individually or as a group, your local ISA chapter or arborist association can sponsor a fund raising event or benefit by doing something for the trees within a park or other well known green area. The methodology is unimportant, but the fact that you or your group is doing it, and of course receiving good free publicity, is.

On the local PBS station, hold a call-in show entitled, "All you wanted to know about your trees but were too scared to ask." Give an address where the viewers can write in for further information or, when they call in with a question, get their names and addresses and send out generic information about trees and their care. The information sent could include Shigo's "Tree Hazards" pamphlet, ISA's new "Careers In Arboriculture" pamphlet, individual tree company brochures, as well as, a listing of all the professional arborists in the broadcast area. This will help separate the fly-by-night operators from the pro's like yourselves. During the broadcast mention over and over who the sponsoring group is, why they are doing this program (because as professionals we are very concerned about proper tree care), that the industry is having a hard time properly tending trees due to the great lack of entering workers (which is just a mystery to us because of our good pay, good benefits, outside challenging work, etc.) and please/please/please send for more information about tree care by writing or calling the number and address that is on the bottom of your TV screen.

Tape the TV program, and, in the viewing area's malls set up a display booth from time to time on Saturdays or special holidays (arbor day) and play the tape while holding impromptu question and answer sessions. The mall should allow you to do this for free. Possibly the mall or some of the tie-in stores could pay for advertisement as a come-on to attract people into the mall. The same subliminal message that was presented on the TV show is woven through out the mornings' individual

discussions. That is, "Come work for us, we have lots of good jobs, we are the profession you want for a life's career."

Try to be invited to speak at various meetings such as the local garden or rose society about trees and their care. Set up informal seminars at a park to discuss tree problems sponsored by some group that will pay for the advertisement. Again, be sure the media know what you are doing. Place your clean signed trucks near where you are talking. Make sure the media take pictures and hold interviews by your truck! If your area has a parade, be in it with either a prepared float or some impressive piece of clean and well-painted equipment.

Pressure the national organizations, e.g. ISA, NAA or ASCA or if you are connected with a large company such as Davey Tree (did you see the National Geographic spread) to place advertisements or articles in non-arborist magazines such as Women's Day, Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Family Circle, or TV Guide. Work hard to have the local environmental or acceptable pressure groups, who have publications, write stories about our industry and proper tree care. If they will not write them, try your hand at writing an article. Usually they cry for articles and their editors will often clean up the grammar.

In short, what I am trying to say is, become active. Nobody is going to help us but us! If there is a happening, either be a productive part of it, or, if you can't, make your own happening. Be loud, be professional, be aggressive. We have a problem, let us solve it.

By this time, you are thinking, "Is this guy nuts? I don't have time to do these things." My answer is, "Do you work every Saturday during the winter, every evening, do you have problems obtaining help?" You might also be thinking, "Nope, it won't work." My answer is "It will work if you make it work, just make up your mind that it will and it will!" You either do something to attract attention to your company and this industry's problems or you will sink out of sight in that gooey glob of no help, (good-bad or trained-nontrained) you are presently in.

Another solution concerning qualified production personnel is to sponsor one or more students for a degree program in Urban Tree Management

or turf management. ISA or NAA has the names of qualifying colleges. When I say sponsor I am referring to befriending a high school student and moving them in the direction of a career in arboriculture. Your business is based on salesmanship, so sell. Talk to the biology, botany, geology, or other science teachers in the local high schools to locate prospective students. Set up an appointment for interested (because you made them interested) students to tour your facility. Take them on the job for a day or so to see if they are really interested in arboriculture or turf as a career. Hold a mini career day or become involved with the high schools' career day. Tell them about the opportunities in our field. Give them work on weekends even if it is nothing more than sweeping out the office. Once they are interested, have them come up to visit the College. If you can afford it, offer to supply them with the climbing equipment, or books, or part of their tuition whatever, big or little, to show you care. They can come back to you for part time work experience and upon graduation full time. If possible, help them financially with a loan which can be written off so much a year. Let them feel indebted to you. Remember, country wide, 41% of all workers have at least 1 year of college. Let them come to us for years of arboriculture or Urban Tree Management training.

You are saying, if I had a potential production worker I would not give him (her) up for college training. I would put him to work. Has that worked in the past? I'll bet not. Can you really afford to spend time training? Remember the job time lost, the unsatisfied customers, the equipment broken, the "I quit", the potential for accidents and increased workmen's compensation insurance costs, etc.

If you could send one or two individuals to school each year, after two years you should have one or two individuals returning to work for you. If they stay for two or three years, then leave, so be it, for more newly trained production workers will be coming back to you each year. In short, you get 'em to college, train 'em, and get 'em back. Everyone wins.

Will it work? Yes! As long as you do your part and the colleges do theirs. How many of this year's graduating class will you get. Most likely none. But if you had seeded a student or two, most likely one or two. The difference is up to you. Help us, the colleges, to help you.

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Abstract

MAHAN, K.L. 1988. **Better safe than sorry.** Am. Nurseryman 167(3): 47, 49-50, 53.

Manufacturers list safety equipment for a reason. In part, it is to legally protect themselves. But the overriding reason is to protect the users. By enforcing rules for wearing the proper equipment, you reduce the chance of someone becoming ill by 95%. You should ensure the safety of workers simply because they are fellow humans placed in a dangerous situation. Sick workers cost money. A sick employee does not do the job as well as if he were healthy. Also, when workers are out sick, you must use other employees or hire new ones. From a management standpoint, putting anyone into a situation involving a pesticide and then not protecting that individual with the proper safety gear is a poor decision at best and a stupid one at worst.