

STAFFING FOR THE '90's¹

by John Hendricksen

The 1990's will present some very unique problems and challenges to Tree Care organizations. There are substantial demographic, social and economic forces that are coming to pass during this time. Some discussion of those forces, how those forces will impact the labor market or the pool for tree care specialists and how an organization will be able to predict, react to, and capitalize on those changes is the purpose of this discussion. The outlook is positive, forward looking and hopefully broad enough to set the stage well into the 21st Century.

If I were a person entering college and attempting to choose a major, I would seriously consider industrial psychology, minoring in Spanish, with heavy coursework in English and communications. I would specialize in occupational training and job placement. Realistically, it would probably take three or four advanced degrees to cover those bases and most of what I would need to know would come from the school of hard knocks. There is such a thing as being overqualified as I am sure some of us have experienced in seeking employment.

These very skills are the ones I believe that each of us will need during the 1990's and to some extent be forced to use.

Ours is a people business. We, for the most part provide a service and the manufacturing or retail sales aspects of our business are small or negligible. We often say to ourselves, "The trees are the easy part." If we could eliminate employees, customers, or residents this business would almost be fun. Few of us have this luxury even if it were a serious comment.

The theme of this conference is "Exploring the Future" and if I were to choose a key word to succeed in the problem of staffing in the 1990's I would select the word "future".

I am a commercial arborist having spent the last 25 years building a fine organization consisting of over 160 employees dedicated to people and their love for trees. Early in my career as an arborist, a couple of recurring statements made to

me by employees, friends, family and peers were "What is an arborist?" and "Trimming trees! There's no future in that." I never hear that now in our company. It's hard work and some people aren't up to the working conditions and effort but they all know there is a future.

We made our future by sharing responsibility, authority, and in many small ways making each employee an owner of his or her own destiny and at the same time a participant in the company's success and growth.

I attribute the company's growth to our philosophy of breaking down our organization into manageable work groups that are located at various locations, geographically separate from each other.

While the decision to break up into small manageable groups was made over fifteen years ago, the principles remain the same.

Quality circles, are only a different manifestation of the concept of dividing a goal into recognizable and tangible tasks that a team can buy into and feel they have control. An individual, a crew, a branch, a company, a nation can all function successfully if they have some ideas where they are going and what is expected. Today's and tomorrow's employees will not or should not accept a long term position without knowing the future be it short term, today; mid term, this year; long, perhaps a lifetime career.

How does my experience relate to the staffing requirements of the 90's? "Times, they are a-changin'." Those changes are dramatic and they seem to be occurring faster. No longer can we put an ad in the paper and hire experienced climbers. Often we can't get an adequate number of applicants to prequalify, let alone hire, train, and promote. Recently, our company has made a deep financial and time commitment to training and have gotten our nose a little bloodied. Many of our trainees have left before we could recoup the training and recruiting expense. Often retention of classroom and written material is dismally low.

Why? Because we weren't paying attention to

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Toronto, Ontario in August 1990.

and dealing with the changes that are coming to pass as we speak and as we move into the nineties. Our selection, orientation and training programs were based on past experience not current trends.

One reason is that many of our new applicants are Hispanic. This has primarily happened since the legalization of resident illegal aliens. Prior to that time, our Hispanic work force could be counted on one hand. While the Chicagoland area has a large and growing Hispanic community, many worked on large landscape crews where the closeness of friends and family was security against exposure and deportation. Now that there is more confidence and fear has been somewhat alleviated, the higher wages and longer season are attracting more Hispanics from landscape companies into tree care.

During the time we have opened and operated an office in the Washington D.C. area, we have seen a complete change from young white and black males and females on landscape crews to nearly completely Hispanic crews. This has occurred in only five years.

Why such dramatic changes? Hispanics and other immigrant groups are filling a void created by the diminishing numbers of native U.S. citizens entering the workforce.

The baby boom (born 1946-64) is aging and we can't count on entry level positions being filled by these workers. There is, however, an opportunity here. There will be more disposable income by double income households. These people will both be working, be better educated, are more environmentally aware than prior generations and will have less time to personally work around the house. Demand for service businesses will continue to grow through the nineties. This will occur during the continued decline of manufacturing jobs in the U.S.

As the baby boom ages and assumes a more dominant role in mid-level jobs, competition will grow for these positions. As supply and demand dictate, there will be fewer promotions, stabilized wages, and potentially more frustrated, middle-aged people as the automatic raises and promotions will not be forthcoming.

Demand is flattening for management, sales and educated professionals. Demand for technicians and skilled labor is increasing as immigrants fill the

void for unskilled or semi-skilled positions.

How can a tree care organization be prepared to avoid lost efforts as we did when we didn't anticipate the need for Hispanic teachers in our training classes? Learn to identify the winners early in their careers. Provide them with targeted training and regular reviews that match talent and skill with fair compensation and opportunity. The old quarter raise across the board is long gone as a viable incentive to keep good people.

You must be able to identify the winners, train them properly, and be sympathetic to their needs. Our company erred by focusing our training program at "the average." There is no such thing as an average employee anymore.

Supervisors will face a workforce that will have many faces. Color, culture, educational background, motivation, personal goals and ethics will no longer fit norms.

Flexibility in supervision and training in interpersonal skills will become more important in the 90's and beyond. Bilinguals will become more valuable. As an example, some social agencies and police forces are currently facing demands by bilinguals for pay differentials.

In preparing for this talk, I interviewed a number of different people across the U.S. varying from owners of tree services to university forestry professors to municipal arborists. From New England to California, from the South to the Midwest, coming up with averages or norms was impossible. Some areas (as the Pacific Northwest or rural Midwest) did not have any immigrant influence yet in arboriculture while the workforce at some companies was entirely Hispanic with some companies reporting a new oriental influence. Educational backgrounds varied from illiterate in any language to requiring a college degree just to start on a pruning crew. Starting wages varied from \$5.00 per hour to \$11.00.

One fairly common denominator among the commercial arborists was one of turnover. A recent study by the NAA found that on line clearance tree trimming crews, there was over 80% turnover within one year. While I suspect it is somewhat less in private tree care operations, I know it is substantial. I think that turnover among entry level personnel has to be recognized as a fact in our profession. Where I think we make our mistake is in letting turnover control us as opposed to us

controlling turnover. Our company certainly did not appreciate seeing new employees leave before the season was over.

I use an analogy of the army. We have the draftees or our entry level employees, there are the recruits that sign on for three or four years before leaving to a new profession and there are the lifers. Certainly everyone should get the basic training, but we do not or should not give the draftee who will be out in two years advanced officer training. We must target our training to different levels of expertise, interest, commitment, experience, and to mid-term or long-term potential. It is a waste of resources to train everyone to the same level, or to expect the same interest, commitment or ability to grow. Frustration and the Peter Principle can easily be evident where accurate performance reviews are ignored. A pipeline for draftees to become colonels may be appropriate but obviously very few if any are going to make it.

Another example would be the "typical" entry career path for a green CPA in a big 8 public accounting firm. The firm recruits to their internal standards to be sure a potential candidate is going to fit. That person is then run through an intensive company orientation and basic training course. The recruit is then put out into the client environment at a billing rate seven to eight times the accountant's salary. This goes on for three or four years during which time the firm decides if this person is partner material. Only a small percentage make it. The rest are formally outplaced only to be replaced by a fresh recruit.

Some would say this is manipulative and unfair but it really is only if false promises as to future opportunities are not properly explained at the time of the job offer. What is better? To let someone leave when they are young and have many other opportunities or to let them languish and become frustrated in a deadend job as others pass them by. Most independent CPAs I know paid their dues at a big eight firm before being outplaced and then went on to start their own firms.

We are going to have to have better tests and criteria for hiring than a 98.6 degree temperature if we are to sustain a professional staff during the 90's. Employment placement needs to be objective, fair, and by law, non-discriminatory.

Both the workforce statistics and my own infor-

mal, unscientific, statistically irrelevant survey support the premise not to be rigid in your personnel practices. There will be no simple cookbook for the 90's. No quick, cover-all training program will work. If sharing the future is the key to successful hiring, then flexibility will have to be the method of application. The nineties and the twenty-first century are to be the age of the individual.

There will be some underlying principles that will continue to hold true. Recruiting will become more difficult as the diversity of people, cultures, etc. increases. Government anti-discrimination and civil actions will require a higher level of sophistication. Fairness and equity will be paramount in the hiring, promotion and termination process. Pre-employment and employment physicals are currently required in some cases and will be required of all commercial drivers later this year.

Some qualifications brought to my attention that can be added to the usual "hard working, enjoys outdoor work, dependable, etc." are a greater ability to deal and communicate with people be they coworkers, clients, or residents of a community.

A more educated clientele is expecting a more professional service at a time when many potential or current employees do not have some of the necessary basic skills like spelling, writing, listening, or basic math. No training manual in the world is going to work if the employee can't read or understand it. No video is going to work if it is in the wrong language for the person watching it. Some would say it's the immigrants' job to learn English. Not so! Three corporate executives were recently convicted of murder when a Polish factory worker couldn't read "cyanide" or "poison" on a drum of chemical in a film processing plant in Elk Grove, a suburb next to my own in Illinois.

Proper training not only is good personnel management but will help build the future of your organization and its legal aspects are something you must consider as a leader. Employees will face technological change and the employer will have to be prepared to both mitigate employee resistance and to train current staff to become proficient with new technology.

Computer acceptance and utilization will occur further out in an organization. With hand held and portable computers available, field supervisors will

have to be sold on their value and benefits and accept them.

Once an employee has been hired, do we give a proper orientation or are they put out on a crew to fend for themselves? How many of you remember your first day on the job? Was it positive, negative, or were you just ignored? People are less inclined to easily accept such treatment in today's work environment. The nineties are seen as the beginning of the age of the individual and we have to be sympathetic to an individual's feelings. Substantial damage can be done by taking any employee for granted, let alone a new, very impressionable recruit.

Once a new employee has been placed on a crew, the most critical person in that person's development is the crew leader. He or she sets the tone for the future. How we as leaders train the trainers has been, is, and probably will continue to be our greatest single personnel failure or opportunity. Poor supervision or improper communications is cited as the number one cause for employee turnover. The aggressive, highly motivated tree trimmer who works hard to get to the top is probably not the most sensitive to his individual crew member's needs. Often the traits that make a successful climber have the opposite effect on a fellow crew member. That climber that is promoted to crew leader will need extra effort in interpersonal skills.

Delegation should be one of coaching and empowerment and not one of getting rid of the garbage work. Again we need to train the trainer on personnel skills. Perhaps the crew leader doesn't even believe it's his or her job to train unless we have convinced them of not only the need but the responsibility. OSHA is proposing a three-year driver recertification and training requirement. These governmental requirements are going to escalate during the next decade. An employer who will not comply or document compliance can face substantial penalties. One of our company's clients was recently fined \$170,000 for failing to comply with the hearing conservation amendment. How many of you comply? How many even know what is required?

All of these skills do not come easily to arborists and foresters. How can we get help? Our firm uses an outside personnel consultant to give leadership training focusing on the concepts of

coaching and empowerment. Community colleges offer classes in personnel management. We have attended excellent, one day seminars put on by the local chamber of commerce. Trade associations sponsor seminars on recruiting, training, employee retention, motivation, etc. The NAA monitors new governmental regulations that may affect selection and training requirements. We are not the only industry facing these problems.

Are there any other choices? An individual full time employee can represent a large investment. There are some creative ways of lowering this investment or commitment. I believe we will see the use of more contract or temporary assignments as have been utilized by the Forest Service for years. Temporary services can offer excellent part time or temporary personnel without the burden of an ongoing permanent employee. Advertising or recruiting for college students who are taking a year off between classes can yield a motivated intelligent temporary employee.

One alternative to staffing for the 90's is not to. It is anticipated that there will be many new start up businesses as baby boomers become frustrated with the increased competition for advanced positions in large organizations. For those of you in municipal and utility organizations, contracting your tree care often gives you better control and flexibility without the encumbrances of full time staff and equipment. In the private sector, subcontracting substantial portions of your business may help even out work loads or broaden your scope of services without the capital and personnel requirements of specialized services.

Part-time help, high school students, shared jobs, internships, foreign exchange, even work release are all additional options individual organizations can weigh as viable ways of fulfilling manpower requirements into the nineties.

The future you are facing with staffing options depends upon the flexibility and imagination you are able to use as you pay attention to the needs and progress of your individual employees.

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