



Keys to Workforce Success

Unlock the possibilities for your company's growth with these business best practices.



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Keys to Workforce Success

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Unlock the possibilities for your company's growth.

Welcome to *Irrigation & Lighting* magazine's Keys to Workforce Success, a collection of business-building best practices from industry consultants and experts. These articles are meant to give you the tools you need to open the door to brand-new growth for your company this year and think about the challenges your employees are dealing with from a new angle.

Year after year, the Green Industry Outlook survey shows that one of the biggest obstacles for contractors is labor. Regardless of the size of the business, about two-thirds of respondents say that they can't find enough quality employees to meet their needs. For some, even increases in pay in the past year don't seem to move the needle. The columns collected here are focused on several of the steps involved in bringing on the right employees and keeping them happy, as well as developing your exit plan for the future.

Key Hiring practices, p. 4. Whether you're a seasonal or year-round contractor, you're constantly on the lookout for new, quality crew members. Sometimes it feels like you just need a body to show up and do the work. But what if you were able to make better choices about your hires? Ryan Lisk shows how to hire for fit.

Key Employee retention, p. 6. Getting the right employees in place is important, but how do you keep them? Pay raises and bonuses can be tough for your bottom line and only go so far. Learning about the pain points for your employees can make a huge difference. Tom Borg explains how to stop what you're doing and start listening.

Key Career path, p. 8. One of the best predictors for whether or not contractors are able to find the right employees and hang on to them over the long term is a career path. An organizational chart and a line showing the way forward can show employees that this isn't just a job, it's a potential career. Julie Schweber lays out the path ahead.

Key Retirement planning, p. 10. When you have to deal with the day-to-day struggles of just getting the job done, it's tough to think about building an effective management team and an exit strategy. But avoiding thinking about the future won't make time move any more slowly. Larry Klimek talks about how to start mentoring and planning now.



Find your **FIT**

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BY RYAN LISK

Improve your interviewing practices to choose the best employees for your company.

You run a small irrigation business. Things are going well and your business is taking off. However, now you have to do something you dread: hire another technician.

You have three candidates coming in to interview this afternoon. This is not your area of expertise and, let's face it, hiring these days is tough. It's a challenge just trying to find someone who will show up for the interview, let alone the first week of work. You are thinking to yourself, "You know what, I'm making an offer to anyone who shows up and we'll figure it out from there. Hiring is like gambling anyway and it's more about luck. I hope I hit the lottery with one of them."

My job is to help you reduce the amount of luck you are relying on and add more skill to your hiring game, and you need something for this afternoon's candidates.

Here is a 10-question do-it-yourself, practical approach to "hiring for fit."

The first part includes five interview questions to ask about the role you're hiring for, the second part includes five interview questions to ask the candidate, and then we will put the two parts together using the three-candidate example.

START WITH THE JOB

To start, interview the job. This may sound strange, but let the job talk. What is the job looking for? Determine what you want. Don't be lazy here. The lazy way out is saying you want someone who can do it all. If that's where you're at, you're setting yourself up for a poor hire that won't be able to live up to that standard. Put some thought into what you want from the job's perspective. After all, what could a bad hiring decision cost your company?

PUT SOME THOUGHT INTO WHAT YOU WANT FROM THE JOB'S PERSPECTIVE. AFTER ALL, WHAT COULD A BAD HIRING DECISION COST YOUR COMPANY?



Here are five questions to help define what you want in a particular job.

- What are the top three things the person in this job should spend the most time doing?
- Is the job more customer-facing (deals with a lot of people) or solo (work by yourself)?
- Is this job a task-first type of job or is it a people-first type of job?
- Besides a paycheck, what rewards does this job provide?
- Why would someone want this job and work at your company?

One pro tip is to remember that your answers are 100% biased. Seek out the independent answers of other people who know the job well for their perspective.

Next, interview the candidate. Determine what the candidate wants and is looking for in a job. One of my leadership truths is “everybody wants something.” Ideally, you are looking to fulfill two wants. First, you want to hire people who can be themselves on the job most of the time. Second, you want to hire people who feel energized by the daily rewards of the job. You determine what someone wants by asking better interview questions.

The interview questions should have some connection to what you want, and the candidate's answers will help determine what the candidate wants.

Here are five questions to help determine what a candidate wants in a particular job.

- What type of work do you most enjoy?
- Which do you enjoy more: working with people or working on things?
- Do you enjoy working by yourself or working with others?
- Why do you want to work for us?
- Why do you want to be a landscaper?

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Let's look at an example putting the parts together interviewing three candidates.

Start with the beginning questions. You want to hire a technician. This role will spend 70% of its time working independently in the field and 30% of the time in the office with the team. The technician needs to be on time and on budget with the projects. Someone who likes to solve problems and work outside on their own while being part of a small team would enjoy this job.

Then, you have three candidates to interview. You ask each the same two questions.

- **Question #1: Tell me what type of work you enjoy most.**
 - Candidate A: “I would much rather work on my own. I like it when it's just me on the project.”
 - Candidate B: “I hate working on my own, I love to work with people!”
 - Candidate C: “It doesn't matter. I don't really care either way. I can work alone or with other people.”
- **Question #2: Tell me why you want to work here as a landscaper.**
 - Candidate A: “I enjoy being outside, I have always had an interest in plants. My grandfather was a farmer.”
 - Candidate B: “I think it would be so cool to make someone's house look better. I love curb appeal!”
 - Candidate C: “I heard you offer a signing bonus, and you have health insurance.”

Finally, put the pieces together. One of these candidates is a high-risk fit. It's Candidate C. If you hire Candidate C, it doesn't mean they won't do the job. It does mean the job will be more like work to them because the fit isn't as good and it's just not them. Candidate C doesn't appear passionate about the job, the company or the industry.

Candidate A appears to fit what you're looking for, so we will call them a low-risk fit. Candidate A is not perfect, but we're not looking for perfect. Candidate B interviewed really well, was friendly and easy to talk to. Candidate B could be considered a medium-risk fit. If we hire Candidate B, we know we're hiring an outgoing people-person for a solo-task job.

The choice is now yours. When hiring for fit, determine what you want, compare it to what the candidate wants, determine the fit risk and make your choice. By intentionally taking these steps, you will reduce the amount of luck involved and will make better hiring decisions. 🌱

Ryan Lisk is the second-generation owner of Lisk Associates. Lisk Associates has been in business for 31 years with expertise in the areas of hiring for fit, professional development and RealTime Coaching. He is available at ryan@liskassociates.com.



ONE OF MY LEADERSHIP TRUTHS IS **“EVERYBODY WANTS SOMETHING.”** IDEALLY, YOU ARE LOOKING TO FULFILL TWO WANTS. FIRST, YOU WANT TO HIRE PEOPLE WHO CAN BE THEMSELVES ON THE JOB MOST OF THE TIME. SECOND, YOU WANT TO HIRE PEOPLE WHO FEEL ENERGIZED BY THE DAILY REWARDS OF THE JOB.

Start «listening»

BY TOM BORG

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Retain valuable employees by learning to communicate and developing goals.

Many business owners and managers in the irrigation and landscape lighting industries are worried that they cannot find good employees. The fact is, you will minimize that problem and do yourself a huge favor by engaging your team members and preventing the good ones from leaving in the first place. Remember the old, yet true, saying, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

What is your strategy to maximize your employees’ engagement and retention levels? If you don’t have an intentional strategy, then you have an unintentional strategy that disengages your employees.

Remember, the profitability and overall success of your company depends on how committed and engaged your team is. It doesn’t happen by accident, but by design. Why not start the next season with a plan to build and maintain a strategy to maximize the engagement levels of your team?

Here is a simple formula I created to help my clients make this happen in their organization.

I call it the **START** Formula for Employee Engagement and Retention.

S – Stop what you are doing and schedule time to sit down with your employees one at a time and have a heart-to-heart discussion with them.

T – Talk about what is important to them. Ask them about their family and their professional goals for the year.

A – Ask them what skills and tools they need to advance their career in your company.

R – Repeat back to them what you hear them saying. Look for ways you can support them in their quest for these skills and tools.

T – Take the time to periodically have a conversation about the progress they are making with their goals and how you and your organization are able to reinforce their efforts.

STRATEGY IN MOTION

Let’s look at this formula in detail and see how you can put it to work for you.

Stop what you are doing. It is probably not the best strategy to believe that you will find some time in the future to “think more about” how you want to sit down and schedule heart-to-heart meetings with your employees. As consultant and author Mel Robbins says in her book titled “Stop Saying You’re Fine,” if you can’t commit to doing something within the next five seconds, the chance of you doing it at all diminish rapidly. So, to make something happen and set yourself up for success, get into action by taking the first step within the next five seconds.

Talk to them about what is important to them. Too often we talk with others about what is most important to us. We forget that they have a family. They have personal issues. They have hopes and dreams that most people never really ask them about or take the time to listen to them about.

Ask them what skills and tools they need to take their job performance to the next level. I remember when I was 15 years old and I wanted to learn how to play the guitar. I went to my parents and they agreed to let me start taking lessons. However, with three older sisters, a younger brother and my dad’s blue-collar factory job as our sole source of family income, there was not much extra money to go around for luxuries like a new electric guitar. They suggested I use my dad’s old classic guitar until I could save up enough money from my part-time job at a car wash to buy it.

The neck was too big for my fingers and the steel-wound strings were brutal on my fingertips. I used it for about six months until I was able to save up the money to buy my first pre-owned Fender Duo Sonic II electric guitar and an amplifier. As soon as I started playing that electric guitar on that amplifier, my desire to play the guitar skyrocketed.

Here is my point. It is a lot more fun and enjoyable when you have the right tools to do your job. Think of that from your employees’ perspective. Ask them about what tools they could use to do their job better and take their performance to the next level.

Repeat back to them what you hear them saying and look for ways you can support them in their quest for these skills and tools. Once they tell you which skills and tools they need, ask them, if they were to acquire these, how it would help them do their job more effectively and efficiently. Be open to seeing how these classes, training, coaching, and equipment or software upgrades will help them be more productive and not just an unnecessary expense. Once you come to an agreement, make sure they get the training, coaching and tools they need and want.

Take time to periodically have a conversation about the progress they are making. From time to time, on a regular basis, make time to have short conversations on the progress they are making. Offer suggestions and additional help as needed. The key point is to keep this dialogue going on a regular basis. This will help to eliminate any snafus that are sure to happen on their journey to professional development.

Remember, your biggest enemy is not your budget or your competitors. It is that nasty “I” word: inertia. This is the inertia you use that prevents you from moving forward on the good ideas you come across in your professional and personal life. 🌟

Tom Borg is founder and president of Tom Borg Consulting LLC. You can contact him at tom@tomborg.com or visit his website at tomborgconsulting.com.



REMEMBER, THE PROFITABILITY AND OVERALL SUCCESS OF YOUR COMPANY DEPENDS ON HOW COMMITTED AND ENGAGED YOUR TEAM IS. IT DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT, BUT BY DESIGN.

THE FACT IS, YOU WILL MINIMIZE THAT PROBLEM AND DO YOURSELF A HUGE FAVOR BY ENGAGING YOUR TEAM MEMBERS AND PREVENTING THE GOOD ONES FROM LEAVING IN THE FIRST PLACE.

See the path ahead

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Attract better hires
and develop current
employees with a strong
career path program.

BY JULIE SCHWEBER

There are some really good reasons for having designated career paths. It sends the right message to your team and becomes part of your employee experience. We're all fighting for the same pool of talented workers, so why not stand out? Why not let your development or career path become part of your employer brand?

A study by global staffing firm Randstad, Atlanta, Georgia, found that 73% of employers said that fostering employee development is important. However, only 49% of employees said that companies adhere to this practice. In the same study, between 25%-29% of workers said that a lack of growth opportunities was the main reason for wanting to quit. And 80% of workers do not think that their current employer offers growth opportunities.

A lot of companies may not recognize the value of career pathing or the practice exists solely as a process in the employee handbook. In an ideal situation, companies make this practice a priority and their employees are well aware of it. Even without a dedicated human resources person, smaller companies should take advantage of career pathing so that structure is communicated and applied consistently. A clear and transparent process is going to help retain employees.

STRUCTURE FOR THE FUTURE

Look at your goals and priorities for the next 3-5 years and think about what your business is doing in the marketplace. Is it growing? Is it going to hit a plateau? Are you looking to acquire new customers or are you retaining customers right now? Analyze those business priorities and think about the titles and employees you need to accomplish those goals.

Look at your overall organizational chart if you have one. If not, maybe it's time to create one. It's a nice visual that is easily shared with all employees, even if it's just a few sentences or a paragraph of key job duties and titles. Once you've defined your organizational structure and outlined the job duties and descriptions, you can begin to work with an employee to figure out which road they would like to go down.

Sometimes those roles are pretty limited. And that's OK. It's still sending the right message. For a small company, there may only be 10 different opportunities compared to a larger organization where there could be hundreds. But it's something to look at and have a conversation related to what they would like to learn about or an area they would like to develop. That shows how they tie into the overall goals of the organization. It's important for folks to be able to see the strategies and priorities for the next several years and how they might fit into that.

We don't have to just think vertically, either. Career pathing can be horizontal. It could be diagonal. It could be just learning all the aspects of the business through job rotations. That might help zoom in on someone's interests or even better, their true strengths.

You can play around with titles. Titles are emotional for people. Maybe you have a technician, and then a lead technician, or crew leader or whatever makes sense. Sometimes you can just provide the next step up or a half-step to have someone supervise or train new hires.

It's not necessarily about raises. We all want to be learning. We all want to enhance our skill set. That doesn't necessarily always warrant a pay increase. You're creating a learning environment where employees are always honing their skills to better meet the needs of the business and its customers. And sometimes we can play around with the title without always including a salary increase or promotion.

We want to figure out where employees can grow and where training needs can be met to enhance skill sets. Maybe you're not providing a pay increase for a new step, but it's building the employee's skill set to develop them for a better opportunity opening up as the business grows, to make them the right person for that job.

WALKING THE PATH

My favorite thing to do with any initiative like this is to involve employees, whether it's a handful or small team. Tell them that you'd like to develop career paths and ask for their thoughts. They're doing the day-to-day work, and they probably have quite a bit of good information and experience that they can share with an owner that they might not normally think of.

Especially for new employees, you can start career development right in the recruiting process, if the company

offers any kind of tuition reimbursement or professional or association memberships. You'd want to talk about that on the website or certainly in the job posting or interview. You want to have your talking points for when a candidate asks about that, but also take a look at your website. What are you saying on it?

It's important to talk about the number of people who are promoted at your company. Your employee retention level doesn't have to be on the website, but maybe it's something to share at an all-staff meeting. It's important to blow that bugle when it's good information like that.

Everybody's looking to answer the question, "What's in it for me?" They want to get up in the morning and feel like they've joined a great company where they're going places and the company has invested in them, where they care about professional development and train managers.

Prepare your frontline supervisors and managers to talk about career development as well, and make it part of the organizational culture. Make sure your employees have support and understand what's necessary to be considered for a supervisor or team lead role. Research has shown that more companies are moving to quarterly check-ins rather than waiting the whole year. I think it sends a powerful message that discussing your career path is ongoing, and it's a normal part of your job. It makes it easier, rather than having to wait for a full year. It also helps you keep a pulse on your employees' needs.

For established employees, we sometimes like to call it a roadmap of career development, working one-on-one with their supervisor. There's some direction from the employee to take ownership of their career path and their development. What are they interested in? What are their career goals? What are they going to do to get to the next step? Maybe they need to take a communications course or get certified as a technician. We're talking with them first because we want to understand their roles, what opportunities we might have, their current skill set and how a potential future skill set might be aligned with our organizational

needs. It's a two-way street to talk with employees about performance standards to find their strengths and then have regular check-ins with a supervisor to coach them along the way. Maybe that employee should try a new skill or shadow a more experienced person on the job.

Most importantly, there's no one right way to do it, and it may be a little different for each employee. Not every employee is going to have the same interest or skill set. It helps with both retention and recruiting. When I see a company that has a defined career path that says 60% of their promotions come from within their own workforce, that's a very powerful message to send all the way around. 🌟

Julie Schweber, SHRM-SCP, is the senior HR knowledge advisor for the Society for Human Resource Management.



WHEN I SEE A COMPANY THAT HAS A DEFINED CAREER PATH THAT SAYS 60% OF THEIR PROMOTIONS COME FROM WITHIN THEIR OWN WORKFORCE, THAT'S A VERY POWERFUL MESSAGE TO SEND ALL THE WAY AROUND.



Keep the end in mind

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BY LARRY KLIMEK

Build a strong exit strategy with intentional leadership and asset turnover plans.

Stephen Covey, author of “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” suggests that one of those habits is to “Begin with the end in mind.” When you started up your business in the first place, did you actually think about how you’d be exiting your business?

My organization has discussed this question with numerous small business owners for more than 30 years and very few were able to give a legitimate, straight answer to that question. Most of the time we receive calls to help the owner figure out a way to exit, and they would be extra happy if it could be as soon as possible for big dollars.

Whether you are in your 20s, 40s or 60s, it is time think positively about the perpetuation, sale or whichever direction you elect to take the business.

Exit strategy and legacy creation does not start at any particular time in an owner’s life or the age of the business. Most of our clients will say they wish they would have started earlier.

This strategy should be part of the business’ natural existence, driven by its purpose as to why the business exists in the first place. The ultimate legacy and value of a business starts at the beginning with determining the purpose of the business and setting it up to be sustained into the future. Some businesses are well past the early stages of existence. Now is the time to narrow in on what the business means to the owner. Is it a job, a business, an asset or just a pain in the backside? Depending on how it is viewed directly contributes to how it will fit into the financial future of the owner and how it will be valued by a prospective buyer.



STRENGTHENING YOUR PLAN

One of our clients engaged us to help him sell his business. He was in his mid-30s and was not enjoying the business he created. By nature he was a technician and got into the work because he knew how to do it and didn't want to put money in someone else's pocket. It's very typical for a small business to evolve from this basic startup point.

We started to discover the challenges by focusing on keeping the end in mind. We found that due to his less-than-ideal operating skills there were various weak spots in the business that were not being attended to. These caused headaches and eroded profit and consequently asset value. To help him get the best outcome for the sale of the asset, a series of operational improvements were put into action. This was primarily to bring the value up so the transaction would be worth something more than a fire sale. The results over time developed an operation that took the business to new revenue performance and profitability, and he still owns it years later. The business is now a significant asset in his portfolio and when he does sell it, internally or externally (both of which have plans structured), it will continue to generate income for him despite his lack of direct involvement in the business.

When an irrigation or landscape lighting business leader stops and consciously begins the thought process of the transition of a business from his or her care to another person or entity, there are lots of dynamics attached. Ultimately, there is also a tangible physical and emotional experience as well. Much like the separation of a child from the family unit to marriage or geographical distance, we can rationalize it intellectually but the pit in our stomach still exists. These dynamics become very real very quickly. The basic routines of interacting with staff, going into the office, walking around the warehouse and just chatting with colleagues at lunch about what is going on in the business all begin to take on a new shape when you are thinking about its future and your legacy. Yes, your "legacy" about how you will be remembered at the business start taking up real estate in your thoughts. As a result, the business owner sometimes defers on further planning of the transition.



EXIT STRATEGY AND LEGACY CREATION DOES NOT START AT ANY PARTICULAR TIME IN AN OWNER'S LIFE OR THE AGE OF THE BUSINESS.

This actually weakens the long-term value of the asset.

When setting up for perpetuation, exiting, retirement or any other words associated to this transition of the asset, the owner needs to plan an intentional leadership and asset turnover. Waiting until the owner is ready to retire, step down or, more tragically, be removed by loss of life, is poor planning or avoidance. The owner is typically the icon of the business. Through intentional perpetuation strategy execution, true long-term sustainable value and legacy for

KEEPING THE END IN MIND DOES NOT MEAN YOU ARE LEAVING TOMORROW. IT MEANS YOU ARE A **GOOD BUSINESS LEADER** AND MAKING THE APPROPRIATE DECISION TO MAKE SURE YOUR **LEGACY AND BUSINESS LIVE ON INTO THE FUTURE.**

the owner and the business are created. This will also help ensure financial stability to support potential seller financing if needed. As these strategies are incorporated into the natural operation of the business, these leadership focus points and improvements are received positively by all in the organization. These planned actions are the stepping-stones of crossing the river to a controlled and bountiful asset transition.

BE HONEST

While keeping the end in mind, you need to be ruthlessly honest with yourself and answer these questions: If you are not here, who is capable of running the day-to-day business transactions? Do they even know how and what to do? What about sales, profit and process? Are the revenue-attracting parts of your business on solid ground or do they need attention? Are all sales dependent on you? Is the operational part of your business advancing in a way to bolster the value of the asset? Are you struggling with what you should do next and how soon? Is there potential leadership to be groomed for buying the business? What about consolidating with another organization? How large of a business do you wish to operate? Is your business sustainable and scalable? What is your best guess at the value of your business if you were to sell it today? Be very honest with yourself. Grade yourself on your preparedness for your future.

A solid perpetuation strategy takes time, especially if the owner is going to get paid out of the proceeds or profits of the business while someone else is calling the day-to-day shots. If there is weak confidence in that person's ability to execute with urgency and be a proactive problem-solver

to pull it off, then your plan has a large gap in it. Your exit can be quicker when sold to a third party, but then it is a matter of demonstrating profit stability and market-place value, which goes back to what is the real value of the asset and not the owner's overimaginative value of the business.

Now is the time to get your perpetuation plan in place for your irrigation or landscape lighting business. Keeping the end in mind does not mean you are leaving tomorrow. It means you are a good business leader and making the appropriate decision to make sure your legacy and business live on into the future. 🌟

Larry Klimek is the promise guide, founder and lead strategist of JKL Associates. He is available at larry@jklassociates.com.



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Irrigation & Lighting

irrigationandlighting.org

Phone: 703.536.7080 | Fax: 703.536.7019

8280 Willow Oaks Corporate Drive, Suite 630, Fairfax, VA 22031