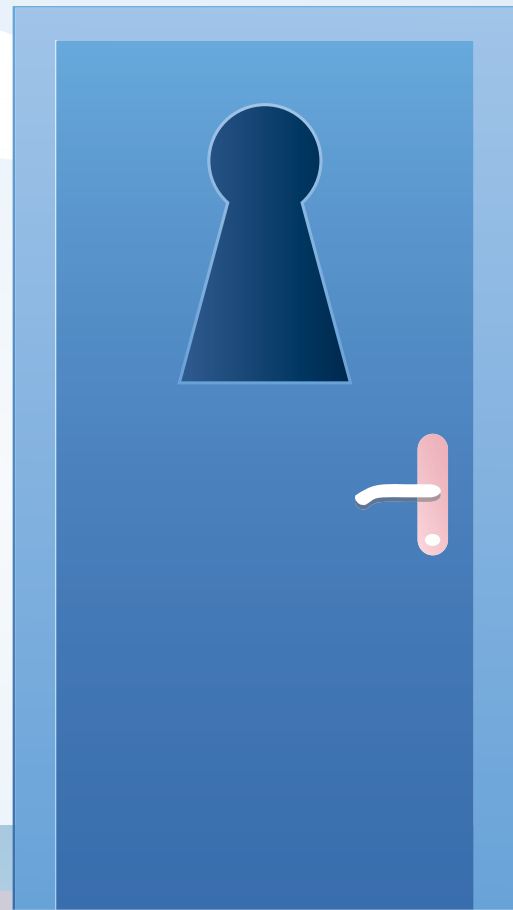


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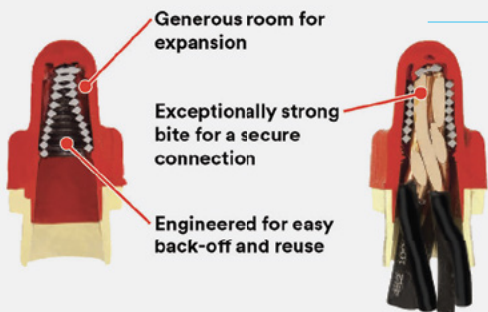
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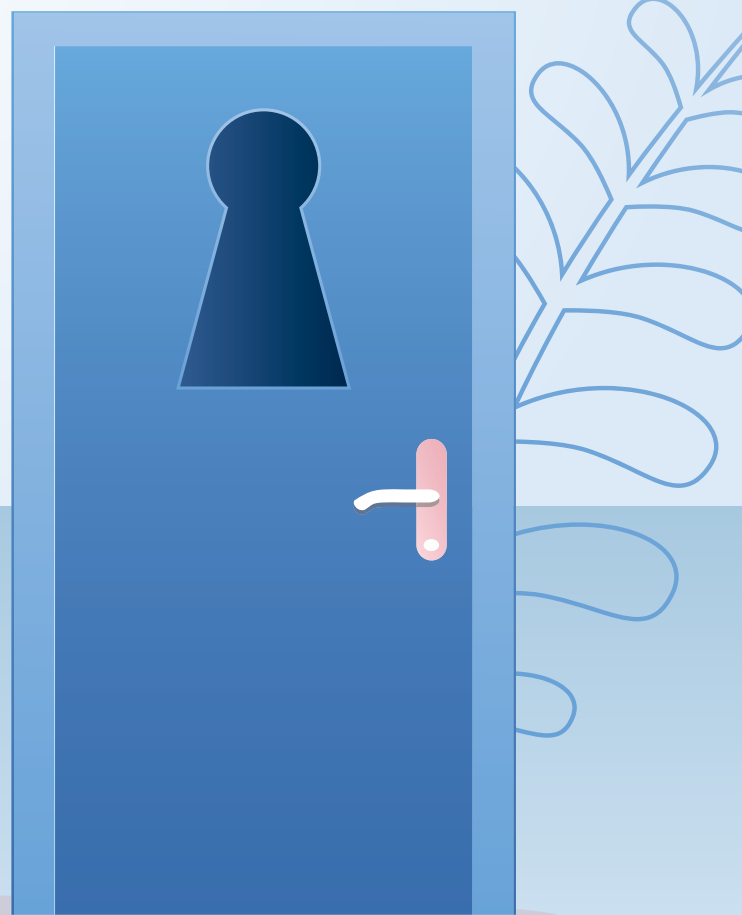
Welcome to *Irrigation & Lighting* magazine's Keys to Workforce Success, a collection of best practices from industry consultants and experts chosen to unlock your company's potential for growth. These articles are focused on ideas and concepts that will help you give your employees the support they need. Use these professional insights to see your business from another perspective and develop the processes you need to grow your crew into the team you're after.

HIRING PRACTICES, P. 14. You're always on the lookout for the next reliable hire. Whether you're a seasonal or year-round contractor, bringing on new, quality crew members is always in the back of your mind. Industry experts show how building a relationship within the community can make it easier to find your next great hire. Sharing sincere experiences both from the perspective of an employee and from leadership can show potential recruits why your company should be at the top of their list. Then, use career path programs and ongoing improvement to show them how to build a career on your team.

COMPANY CULTURE, P. 18. Your company has a culture, whether you've given it serious thought or not. Developing a healthy, supportive company culture is one of the best ways to retain good employees and encourage them to grow in

their roles. Tom Borg shares how culture starts with communication and a shared understanding of a common goal. Learn to show your team what they're worth to you.

CONTINUED EDUCATION, P. 20. You might worry that your crew members could move on to other companies if you encourage their continued education. But what happens if they don't learn anything and stay in the role they're already in? Ken Keller shows how to build a curriculum, set goals and show your team what potential is ahead of them through education. Sometimes you have to be more than a boss. You also have to be a teacher.



ON THE LOOKOUT FOR TALENT

BY CAROL BRZOWSKI



Share experiences and build relationships to attract and keep quality employees.

Getting new talent in the door and keeping them remains one of the top concerns of irrigation professionals.

In the 2024 Green Industry Outlook survey, 72% of respondents listed it as their main barrier to growing the business. Though finding the right fit can be a challenge, building a relationship and developing a career path can go a long way toward directing a team poised for growth.

To start, the goal should be to identify workers who are in line with the company, but who also seek opportunities when necessary to advance, says Kimberly McNeil, HR knowledge advisor, Society for Human Resource Management, Alexandria, Virginia.

That entails “being on the lookout, looking at your employees and putting together opportunities that allow them to get high profile tasks to meet leadership, have those conversations and openly and directly discuss their career aspirations,” she adds.

Mark Dzierzbicki, president of Controlled Irrigation & Blackflow in Highland, Indiana, has witnessed employee hiring and retention trends over the years. He keeps his six employees sharp with new skills so they’re ready when they start with service calls around April 1.

Building strong recruiting strategies is more important now than ever as the industry faces increased challenges, he says.

Recruiting is different in various parts of the country because of the industry’s seasonal nature. Someone may be able to work year-round in Florida, but in the Midwest or Northeast, that same employee would only be working about eight months.

“But he’s going to get paid more,” Dzierzbicki says of the seasonal employees in his region, the Midwest. “You’ve got to find a special kind of person. It’s a challenge to find a person who can do or is capable of doing all those things.” The seasonal nature of the job means the potential employee must either learn to budget money in the down time or take on a second job, such as traveling to warmer climates to work in the same industry for a few months. For his company, senior staff members who have been with the company for more than 20 years are paid year-round.

Nashville Irrigation and Lighting in Franklin, Tennessee, serves middle Tennessee with 32 employees, which increases to 37 in the summer, according to Shannon Wooden, company manager. To attract employees, the company pays for a portion of the employees’ health benefits and offers paid holidays and vacations, says Wooden.

It’s always best to build relationships with the community, McNeil says.

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“That’s the biggest thing. It’s hard to find a person with a great attitude. I’m very fortunate to have the people who work for me.”

– Bob Gurkin, Rainfall Irrigation and Landscape Lighting





Social media also can serve as a low-cost recruitment tool, but it's important to do more than just throw a few posts out and expect a result. Highlight real experiences and think of it as more traditional advertising, though the target audience is a potential employee.

For positions in the irrigation and lighting sector primarily comprised of small businesses conducting mostly seasonal work depending on the locale, McNeil suggests business owners reach out to colleges, universities and high schools.

“You can create internship and mentorship opportunities that would allow for a pathway or funnel program where they could learn the business from current talent. There’s a pool that you’re now creating to recruit from,” she says, adding it also serves to establish name recognition in the community.

Dzierzbicki has taught for the Irrigation Association and at junior colleges among other places and suggests teaching and community outreach as a way to recruit. It helps him identify potential employees and gives students a chance to consider working in the industry. He suggests participating in school career days or municipal job fairs.

“When you teach a class, you get people who are interested in the first place,” he says. It also affords the opportunity to identify top talent through direct interaction.

Bob Gurkin is president of Rainfall Irrigation and Landscape Lighting in Kingston, Massachusetts.

Gurkin leverages his experience as a high school athletic coach in his hiring strategies. He looks for people who are eager to begin their career, so his biggest avenue is scouting for hires at vocational-technical school.

“We’ll meet with the kids and have career days,” he adds.

Gurkin says he’ll open a spot for someone with a great attitude and work ethic, even if he’s not hiring. He’s got three rules to be a part of his team: Be on time, give 100% and communicate. Each of those translates into a life skill that will serve the employee even if they move on to another company in the future.

“That’s the biggest thing,” he says. “It’s hard to find a person with a great attitude. I’m very fortunate to have the people who work for me.”

SHARE AN EXPERIENCE

Social media also can serve as a low-cost recruitment tool, but it’s important to do more than just throw a few posts out and expect a result, McNeil says. Highlight real experiences and think of it as more traditional advertising, though the target audience is a potential employee.

“The key is to not produce content that looks overproduced or fake,” she says, adding content creation should serve to advertise the business and promote an authentic employee experience. Have employees present their day in the life of what has made working for the organization favorable for them, what they felt they have accomplished or how it has helped them grow professionally or even outside of work. That gives people a realistic and transparent perspective.

Dzierzbicki says some potential employees will check out a company’s website to determine its legitimacy. That means that not only does a company’s website need to exist in the first place, it needs to look professional, usable and attractive to the potential employees visiting it.

When advertising for a job, Dzierzbicki notes the salary ranges from starting pay to the top pay and indicates there are additional benefits. Being able to share that range can differentiate the job opportunity from others. If the role is seasonal, “you’ve got to have that conversation that in these parts, it’s an eight-month-a-year business,” he says.

Recognize that while a crew member’s role might seem straightforward, there are a lot of requirements that go into being successful, even in an entry-level position, he says. Take some time to understand which of those skills can be taught and which you want them to show up with to the interview.

“You’re looking for someone who knows a little bit about electrical, plumbing and hydraulic principles and a lot about customer management skills,” he says. “That’s a lot to ask for. You can have a guy who’s a great technician, but if he goes to the customer’s house 50 miles away, accidentally leaves the gate open and lets the person’s dog out because he’s not paying attention, you’ve got problems.”

The experience of an employee isn’t the only one that’s important. Potential hires want to know about the people who run the company and who they’ll be connecting with each day. Leadership insight is key. McNeil says questions

that should be addressed include: “Who are the people who run the business? What is their day-to-day? What drives them? What are the things they’re passionate with both in and outside of work?”

BUILD A MAP

Once an employee comes on board, a successful retention strategy starts with the human resources professionals in charge, McNeil notes. That can be challenging in a business sector that is more seasonal in nature.

She suggests mapping as a way to help ensure current and future employees have the skills needed to do the job not only for which they are hired, but potentially learn other skills so they can move within the organization as opportunities arise, including those during nonpeak season.

“Career mapping can be an arduous task, but it can be broken down easily into a couple of small steps,” says McNeil. “One is engaging the individuals to do a little bit of self-reflection and assessment of their skills and how their past experience shaped the job, any accomplishments and their interests.”

That serves as a foundation for creating a career map unique to the individual that’s based on where they see themselves going, she adds.

“You want to retain them internally,” McNeil says. “Any good career map should be based on ways they can stay within the organization. Inevitably, there may be skills they may need to obtain from outside of the organization. This allows some transparency and the best use of people’s time.”

Once that map is established, seek out reliable current employees who can mentor and teach new skills. Those leaders should also be able to guide and improve a mentee’s current skills or help them redirect their experience



into other skill sets. Look for situations where opportunities present themselves to either fill in or work on collaborative tasks where they would be able to gain insights, McNeil says.

Since the relationship with a new hire is predicated on trust, Dzierzbicki makes sure that they understand that education will continue as they develop experience. Education is one way that he retains his current employees, building on their skills and showing a tangible payoff by providing them with new capabilities in their field. That gives them new opportunities to advance and potentially earn more.

For employee retention, Dzierzbicki uses a two-page tech checkout sheet delineating proficiency skills which are checked off as they are mastered. A copy is retained by technicians, managers and the office.

His success in retaining customers from 30 years ago underscores the impact of these practices.

“There’s a reason for that — we do all of those things,” he adds.

Gurkin’s company offers a retirement plan and health benefits. Though the work is seasonal, shutting down from January through March, he keeps employees busy during the downtime and awards a bonus based on the time they’re out to cover that work.

Gurkin has one employee who’s been with the company for 18 years; many foremen have been there over a decade.

“The biggest thing is we do a lot of team-building activities with different parties throughout the season to show

my appreciation to them,” Gurkin says. “We have goals and performance bonuses based on those goals with their salaries incorporated. We invest a lot of money on education and certifications.”

Gurkin outlines what must be achieved to be promoted to a foreman, with pay based on that.

“You become more valuable to the team,” he says. “There are a lot of incentives for them to move up the ladder.”

He makes it a point to reward not just technical experience development, but also a growing understanding of customer care and people skills.

“I have three incredible foreman who customers rave about how kind, polite and patient they are,” Gurkin says.

The key to retaining employees, says Wooden: “Meet people where they’re at and treat them like you would treat your own family.”

Wooden says the company has retained 75% of its employees for five years or more. The company hosts cook-outs in spring, summer and fall and a Christmas party with games and prizes.

“If they have an emergency in their family, we always work with people so they can take off when they need to,” she adds. “We try to help them out with bonuses and things like that to make sure their families are taken care of.” 🌟

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WHAT THEY'RE WORTH



Nurture a culture that supports your employees by enriching their experience.

BY TOM BORG

I remember having a conversation with a green industry business owner a short time ago, where he was venting his frustration on how hard it was to find and retain good people to work for his organization. His company paid excellent wages to frontline employees, and his department heads received excellent salaries, benefits and bonuses. On paper it was a great place to work, but it wasn't the right kind of culture.

In many ways he was doing the same things that his competition was doing. By the way, his competitors were also complaining and frustrated about the difficulty of finding and retaining good people.

Many of them advertised for help in the same places like Craigslist, LinkedIn and other employment websites. Many of them had the same weak onboarding practices. Many of them avoided having regular meetings because they turned into "complaint sessions." And, many of them had the belief that the problem was with the people they hired and not with the owners and leaders of their company.

As a result, they didn't have the right kind of culture to find and retain the right people.

I shared with him that maybe it would be helpful to initiate some strategies to change the company culture.

Like the saying goes, “If you keep on doing what you’ve always done, you will get less of what you always got.”

In other words, if you keep using the same approach that is delivering minimal results, rather than creating the kind of company culture you want and need, you will find it harder and harder to get the results you want and need to run a successful company.

CREATING CULTURE

One of the first places I begin with my green industry clients to solve this dilemma is examining the type of communication that is taking place within the company. Research shows over and over again that clear and on-going communication remains the number one challenge businesses face today. Let’s face it, if you don’t have the right communication tools in place, keeping clear and open channels can be difficult. No business owner in their right mind sets out to have poor communication practices in place. It just happens.

People are different. They have different behavioral styles and expectations of how communication should take place. There are excellent tools available to address this area of concern. What I use with all my clients are scientifically validated behavioral and motivator measurement assessments.

As the late management consultant Peter Drucker taught us, the purpose of a business is to create and keep a customer. Before you can do that, you must be able to attract and keep the right leadership team and employees. Neither of these are possible unless you have good communication with your team and in turn, they have good communication with your clients and customers.

Next you must create the right kind of company culture. What would the right kind of culture look like in your company or organization? While only you and your team can decide for sure, there are a few ingredients that should be present:

- honesty
- transparency
- willingness to help each other
- a feeling of being connected
- a feeling of sincerely being cared for
- a company vision each person has helped to create, be part of and maintain on a day-to-day basis
- a feeling of knowing that each person is worthwhile and is contributing to a purpose bigger than themselves
- to be accountable to each other
- fairness
- appreciation for a job well done
- an ethical company mindset and practice to do the things that are right, because they are right

How do you give and reinforce the feeling to your people that **they are worthwhile** and that **they truly matter** in contributing to the vision of the company they are part of?

The late Fred Rogers, who in his role as Mister Rogers, influenced millions and millions of children to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their personal values, made a lasting mark on most children and adults who heard his message.

Rogers had a brilliant quote that went like this: “The world needs a sense of worth, and it will achieve it only by its people feeling that they are worthwhile.”

How do you give and reinforce the feeling to your people that they are worthwhile and that they truly matter in contributing to the vision of the company they are part of? When you can do this on a regular basis, you are building a company culture that will attract and retain the right kind of people.

Let’s take this concept of retaining the right people a step further. When you create a company environment where people want to be, you are on your way to making it a reality.

Once people are hired, what kind of an onboarding process do you have in place? This is a critical factor in keeping good people. Do you have a plan that is properly and regularly implemented to ensure that a new hire’s first 30 days are a positive experience? Many companies use a buddy system. That is where a new hire is assigned to another team member who can help them navigate the ins and outs of their new position.

Next on the list, do you have a career ladder that is clearly explained to your new team members at the time of their hiring and when you do their regular appraisals? Remember when we mentioned the importance of your team members knowing that they are part of a company with a vision for the future? They need to know where they fit into that future. What positions can they prepare for and receive on the job and through training and coaching as they remain and grow with your organization?

If this sounds more than you can handle, get a little help. Hire a business consultant or coach to help you implement these ideas. The results will more than pay for your investment.

When you create the right kind of enrichment culture, you will attract and retain the right kind of team members. 🌟

Tom Borg is a business consultant who works at the intersection of leadership, communication and culture. As a thought leader, he works with his green industry clients and their leadership teams to help them connect, communicate and work together better without all the drama. To ask him a question please call 734.404.5909, email him or visit his website at tomborgconsulting.com.



If you keep using the same approach that is delivering minimal results, rather than creating the kind of company culture you want and need, you will find it harder and harder to get the results you want and need to run a successful company.

LEARN TO TEACH

BY KEN KELLER

Support your team through ongoing education and development.



I grew up an Oakland Raiders fan. When I first got hooked, the head coach was John Madden. He was an unleashed bundle of atomic energy on the sidelines, and it seemed every game had a fantastic finish. It was entertaining, with crazy emotional ups and downs.

Recently, I was channel surfing and stumbled on an interview Madden had done a few years back. At the end, he summed up his entire career as a “teacher.”

He elaborated by explaining that during every stage of his career he was in a role that required him to share his knowledge. He earned a teaching credential, put it to use as an assistant and then head coach at the junior college level, an instructor at UC Berkeley, as an assistant coach and shortly thereafter head coach of the Raiders, as a TV color commentator and as a key contributor to the popular game Madden NFL.

As a company leader, I see your role and your responsibility to be the same as Madden’s. I am not sure what your title might be: owner, general manager, CEO — it does not matter. You need to add “teacher.”

You probably think you do not have the time. I believe you must make an investment of your time to have a better business with better results.



You may push back, “I don’t have the patience to teach people.” Consider hiring someone with patience. But understand that you will need to instruct the person who you have training your team members. I recommend cutting out the intermediary.

I have had clients through the years who shared, “For what I am paying these people, they should already know what to do!” Really? We pay our presidents \$400,000 a year; do you think any one of those men knew how to do the job when they took the oath of office? They did not; they knew only what they wanted to do. Each learned on the job.

You do not have to be Yoda, although I am certain that your people come to you with every possible issue. It is fine not knowing all the answers because successful teaching requires your ongoing learning. If your people see you learning and growing, they will soon understand that they need to learn too.

“What should I teach my people?” you ask. Having worked with hundreds of small and medium-sized companies, I am going to suggest several topics to get you off to a strong start.

SET THE CURRICULUM

First, to be a winner and lead a winning team, you need to define what winning is. You may set financial metrics, or it might be you want to achieve a volume number like client count. But what you need is to define winning for both you and the team. What is your version of winning the Super Bowl, the World Series or the NBA championship? Because this is something that people can relate to, and most importantly, it is visible and progress is measurable.

Second, you must instruct and maintain your desired work ethic. Because you own a business, I am willing to bet, sight unseen, that you were working when you were in high

You must take your **energy**, **time** and **attention** to focus on growing good people.

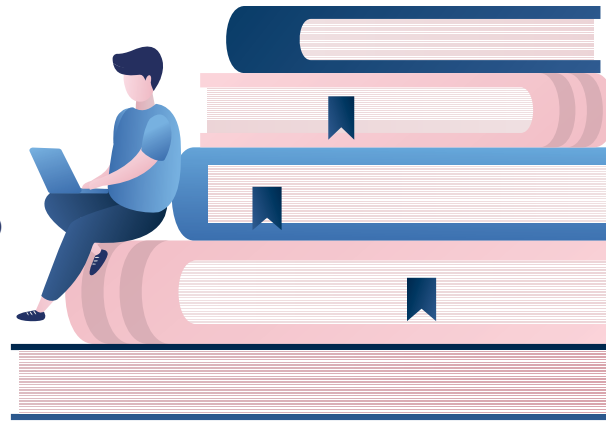
school, maybe before. You learned being on time means arriving early. You learned how to work, safely, to positively contribute and not to goof off or waste time. You learned how to work in a team, take direction, to make meaningful suggestions to improve things. You did not slow down or quit before quitting time.

Third, you must always lead by example. Most owners do not realize that they are constantly under a microscope and that everything said and done is seen, discussed, analyzed and evaluated by your employees.

Next, you must make time to “inspect what you expect.” If you don’t reinforce what you want, people will soon fall back to the habits you wanted them to move away from.

Finally, your company needs a short mission statement. This works to keep individuals and the team focused. Mission statements set the tone and the direction. If you cur-

If your people see you learning and growing, they will soon understand that **they need to learn too.**



rently have a mission statement, review it to make sure it is succinct and easy to remember. If you do not have a mission statement, now is the time to create one. My mission is “To facilitate success in business and life.”

There are three mission statements to consider emulating when creating yours. The first is from the Los Angeles City Police Department: “To Protect and Serve.” The second was used during the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space programs: “To the moon and back.” The third is President Lincoln’s mission “To preserve the Union.”

Finally, having engaged employees is essential. In the book “First, Break All the Rules,” by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, questions from the Gallup Organization were shared as a way to measure engagement through regular check-ins with your employees:

- Do you know what is expected of you at work?
- Do you have the materials and equipment that you need in order to do your work right?
- At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
- In the past seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?
- Does someone here, at work, seem to care about you as a person?
- Is there someone here at the company who encourages your development?
- At work, do your opinions seem to count?
- Does the mission of this company make you feel that your job is important?
- Are your coworkers committed to doing quality work?
- Do you have a best friend at work?
- In the past six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
- This past year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

You must take your energy, time and attention to focus on growing good people. Understand that this is a marathon and not a sprint; you need to be patient and consistent. Be the best teacher you can be, and then some. This is how companies move forward to achieve their goal to win. 🌟

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