

How To Find Seasonal Help And Retain Your Best Workers



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What's more difficult: managing snow or managing the employees needed to manage the snow? "Hands down it's the employee part," says Michael Krintz, owner of Proscapes LLC, a landscaping/snow services company in Madison, Wisconsin. "I don't stress out about the snow – I'm used to that." It's continually finding, training and trying to retain workers that makes the winter season a high-stress affair for Krintz, and most others running snow services companies.

Proscapes has about 12 employees in the summer for its landscaping business but needs to ramp up to approximately 30 workers in the winter for snow. Of the initial 12, five are full-time, year-round employees and serve as managers/foremen. He works to keep as many of the remaining seven as he can, but has to lay them off when there is no snow to move. "When there are long durations between snowfalls, some guys just can't live on unemployment wages, and I understand that," Krintz explains. "It's hard to keep them happy without going broke myself." Jobs such as work around the shop, for example, is one way he's found to keep those workers on the payroll and productive.

Similarly, at Akehurst Landscape Service, which is based in Maryland and serves clients from southern Pennsylvania to Washington D.C., the first objective when filling "white season" positions is to retain as many of its "green season" employees as possible. The emphasis is on retaining those in more senior roles. "We try to keep as many of our people who are in team leader [foremen] and higher positions onboard year-round. If we don't get snow, we may have to lay off, but we try not to," says company owner John Akehurst.

Recruiting regimens

Retaining existing employees is a good first step, but snow management is a

labor-intensive undertaking, so more hands are usually needed.

One solution to finding snow management labor is to sign on employees working in other industries – like construction – who are laid off during the winter. Proscapes hires about five or six employees like this who work part-time as plow drivers. While these drivers may make \$20 to \$30 an hour, it can be difficult to attract those employees. “They’re trained and skilled, so there’s 10 different companies fighting for the same people,” says Krintz. Here, he says, the way to out-compete the other companies is to pay more. And, he adds, that means that Proscapes avoids bidding on low-paying work and getting into bidding wars. “I’ve learned that it’s better to charge more and pay more,” says Krintz.

While filling these higher-skilled driver positions is tough, it’s the jobs further down the ladder that pose the most problem, he says. Proscapes, for example, needs to fill at least 15 shoveler positions each year, and that’s a constant challenge, says Krintz. The first hurdle is to find a way to attract applicants. “Twenty years ago, when I started this company, the main approach was to put an ad in the paper,” he states. “Then Craigslist was huge, but it’s so flooded now [with ads from other snow contractors], that even when you pay for ads, it’s harder for that to work. We’ve actually had the best luck now with Facebook – we use Facebook ads, boosted posts and job listings.” The Proscapes LLC headquarters building is in a high-traffic area, so Krintz also posts a “help wanted” sign out front.



Even with all of these efforts, the results usually are pretty disappointing. The number of applicants is so low that nearly anyone who applies is hired on the spot, says Krintz. Keeping them is another story.

“Last year, I hired 16 shovelers in the beginning of the winter. Twelve of them came in once and never came back. None of them made it to spring,” he says. So filling these positions isn’t a one-time challenge, but it’s an ongoing headache throughout the winter.

And it’s not necessarily a matter of money. The workers last year were paid \$15 an hour. “For simple manual labor, that seems pretty good!” says Krintz. “But I can’t even get them to come back.” This year, he hired another 16 shovelers and only half showed up for the orientation training session. “Then, when we had our first snowfall, I called six of them and couldn’t get ahold of any of them,” he adds.

The reality is that the workers applying for and being hired for these kinds of jobs simply aren’t, generally speaking, reliable. And Krintz says that there seems to be a decline in the willingness of some people to work. “Twenty years ago, I was working for less than half of that, so it just sort of boggles my mind,” he says. “In my experience, it’s getting harder and harder to find anyone who wants to work.”

Akehurst Landscape Service begins its recruiting by seeking leads from its existing employees.

"We have a bonus structure that, if they bring someone in – a friend, relative, etc. – we pay them a certain amount after that new hire has worked for a certain amount of time," explains Akehurst. That bonus ranges, depending on position, from \$100 to \$3,000.

"Then we also recruit a lot of day labor," he adds. "We give out bonuses to employees for that, too. Say we have a snowstorm one day; if an employee brings in, for example, three guys, he gets a set amount per day laborer that he brings in per day." Akehurst Landscape Service relies on this supplemental labor for its snow work, requiring up to as many as 150 such workers, depending on the size of a given snow event. Akehurst says that the employee bonuses seem to work well in helping to draw in new employees – whether they are more permanent or day labor – and the company also uses social media, knocks on doors and hangs flyers in places like convenience stores in order to find employees for winter work.

Akehurst also subcontracts with other companies, such as a pool installation or concrete business, before each season to have them provide their employees when needed. These companies are often looking for extra work for their employees during the winter months, so it is a win-win for both businesses, he points out. This year, for example, Akehurst is working with 46 subcontractors, which range from one- or two-man operations to larger companies with 20 or 30 workers. These types of arrangements are made during the summer months; when it comes to snow management, labor needs to be a focus well before the season starts, he emphasizes. "It's becoming nearly year-round," Akehurst says of the work.

Training can be tough

"There's always, always room for improvement when it comes to training. I don't think anybody has it down to a science," says Akehurst. While his company trains employees extensively, he says the nature of snow management work – many new employees, different types of properties, and the fact that training sometimes is done weeks and weeks before the first snowfall – makes that challenging. At Akehurst Landscape Service, each manager oversees a portfolio of jobs. "We do a lot of training work upfront; we have maps of every property, and everything that needs to be done on that property is color-coded – where the sidewalks are located, where the pavement is that needs to be plowed, where to pile the snow. And we go over that with everyone," he explains. The company also uses training videos that it has purchased from SIMA. Over the course of a couple weeks prior to the winter season, employees are brought in to a classroom setting to learn everything from the right way to plow a parking lot to how trucks are operated. And there's also training on basic things like how to fill out a company time sheet.

But, eventually, the snow starts "and at that point we just have to throw them to the wolves," he says jokingly. Then, and especially when it comes to managing day labor, it is up to the leaders of each site to train and supervise new employees to be sure the work is done correctly. "We've showed the team leaders how to run the snowblower, for instance, now they need to pass on that training," says Akehurst. "We try to get the seasoned employees

to disseminate the information.” On-the-job training is just the nature of the beast when it comes to snow management, he says. If there’s a higher level employee who is new, the company’s operations manager and accounts manager may call them a little more often during a storm to check in and make sure everything is going OK, Akehurst adds.

At Proscapes LLC, on-the-job training is crucial. “We generally try to have one manager or crew leader to every three to five shovelers,” says Krintz. He says it takes this level of oversight to make sure that newly hired, not-always-dependable employees are doing their jobs correctly and representing Proscapes LLC well. But this poses another challenge: The high-caliber crew leaders who have been with the company for years want to move up within the company; they don’t necessarily want to stand out on a sidewalk in the winter to supervise shovelers, says Krintz. “Especially when they have earned the right to be in a comfy, warm cab plowing snow.” So he has to work to balance this fact, as well.

And sometimes the training that is devoted to new hires fails to pay off due to the unpredictable nature of winter weather. “We may hire 15 people before the season starts, but if it takes a month before we get the first snow, they all get other jobs or just disappear,” says Krintz.



One solution he’s trying to eliminate some of these challenges is to increase mechanization. “We bought some new sidewalk equipment this year in the hopes that we would need fewer people,” says Krintz. Proscapes purchased some additional four-wheelers with plows and leased some Bobcat S70 mini skid-steers. “I’m hoping that if each of these machines does the work of two or three people, that would cover the payments and lower the payroll. And the equipment is here – it’s not going to call in sick!” he explains.

Getting mobilized

Getting crews mobilized for a snow event poses its own types of challenges. It’s a logistical nightmare in many ways, trying to first contact dozens or even hundreds of employees (some of them new, some temporary) and then get each to report to a specific site at a specific time. And appropriately outfitted. Despite repeated instructions to new employees, some will show up without coats or in sneakers and will have to be turned away, says Akehurst.

One key lesson, says Akehurst, is to create a “bench” of employees that’s bigger than what you’ll need. Because there will always be attrition and no-shows. His human resources director, for example, builds a bench of 200 to 300 people. “She gets all of their contact information ... they have to come in to fill out paperwork and get set up in our system,” he explains. Akehurst credits her with finding a new technology service last year called Zipwhip that allows the company to send out a mass text to each of these employees that worked amazingly well. “I was blown away,” he reports. “We had a minor snow event last year and we were short nine shovelers. She sent that text message out at 3:30 a.m. and within five minutes she was getting text responses. We had the people within half an hour in our office – it was

amazing.”

When a big snow event is forecast, the day before the account managers at Akehurst Landscape Service meet in the company’s “war room” to create a plan. Each of those managers then lets the human resources director know if they feel the need additional people, so efforts can begin to get in touch with employees on the bench. To help move employees from site to site as needed, the company recently purchased two 15-person vans. Transportation – just another of the logistical challenges of managing a labor force in the snow management business.