

Hire Slow, Fire Fast



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Last year, Joshua McCarty interviewed 50 people and hired five of them. Four out of the five only made it past one day of work.

"If you don't work hard enough the first day, you'll never work hard enough," says the owner of [Mint Landscapes LLC](#) in Lacey, Washington. "We are quick to let people go if they aren't working out."

McCarty found his employees this year through his church. Because his company name is becoming more recognizable after four years in business, he's attracting more experienced landscape workers. "The quality of people we found this year have been better," he says.

Finding quality employees is a challenge for McCarty, as well as many other contractors. It was the No. 1 headache shared by respondents answering *Turf's* Compensation Survey. For that reason, these contractors have learned to embrace the mantra: Hire slow, fire fast.

Hire slow

When it comes to finding quality labor, landscape contractors aren't the only ones struggling. Fourteen percent of those answering the August [National Federation of Independent Business](#) survey say quality of labor is the single most important problem facing their businesses today—making it No. 3 on the list behind taxes and government regulations. Cost of labor comes in just four spots later at No. 7 on the list.

This year, 56 percent of small businesses report hiring or trying to hire employees, but 48 percent report few or no qualified applicants for the positions, the NFIB survey says.

To find quality people to work at [Lawn ReLeaf](#) in North Little Rock, Arkansas, owner Zach Dennis has a thorough interview process in place to weed out employees who won't be a good fit.

The first step is posting the ad on Craigslist and having potential employees fill out an application. "From the application, we can usually weed out 75 percent of the people who apply because we can tell they are job hoppers or notice other red flags," Dennis says.

Next, comes a phone interview. Dennis asks questions focusing on experience and situation management. "If they are cussing on the phone or are impolite, it tells us a lot about their personality," he explains. This process weeds out another percentage of the applicants.

The final stage of the hiring process is an in-person interview. The questions asked discover "whether people are afraid of making mistakes and owning up to them," Dennis says. "We ask about instances where they have been fired or how they handle conflict with a superior. It tells us if they will take responsibility for their actions or lie."

Ultimately, for Lawn ReLeaf, "this process saves a ton of time," he explains. "Interviewing people is a time killer. It's always worked out better when we hire people we've fully vetted through this process."

Fire fast

When it comes to firing, "we'll fire someone faster for a bad attitude than anything else," Dennis says.

Chase O'Shea, owner, [Chase Lawn & Landscaping](#), Tulsa, Oklahoma, uses a strike system, taking firing fast to a systemized and literal level. If employees don't follow rules, such as not wearing gloves or following safety procedures, they accumulate strikes, like in baseball. "One strike is a warning," he says. "If an employee receives a second strike, he is sent home. If he receives a third strike, he is fired immediately."

Promotion commotion

No. 3 on the list of landscapers' biggest headaches when dealing with labor is finding people who they can grow and promote to positions of more responsibility, the *Turf* survey reveals.

"Some people don't have the career mindset and they can't handle going from hourly to salary," Dennis explains.

This has happened to O'Shea. "I had someone working for me for 11 months who was doing a great job as a foreman," he says. "I told him I wanted him as a manager and offered him a salary and the chance to get his horticulture degree. He did a complete 180 and told me he was burnt out and didn't want to do this anymore."

Dennis and O'Shea notice there are two kinds of people: those who are hard working and want to do well and those who don't seem to care if they are doing well and just want a job.

Some employees may not be meant to grow beyond their current levels. Other

employees will blossom when given the chance. "Those who embrace growth realize the company is taking care of them," Dennis says, "and they become some of our best employees."