

# What it Takes to Add Irrigation Technicians to Your Crew



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—Richard Wilbert, Surrounds Landscape Architects and Construction

Since the economic downturn, and the loss of so many jobs, there has been no shortage of individuals looking for work. But finding skilled employees in technical specialty areas is a different story. Diane Toth, Richard Wilbert, Jim Davis and Jason Fawcett – irrigation leaders in their respective landscaping companies – know this all too well.

“Irrigation service techs are some of the most difficult employees to find and keep even in this downturned economy,” says Fawcett, president of Elizabeth River Landscape Management, Norfolk, Va. “Irrigation is a very specific industry, and finding employees – from service technicians to managers – who are exactly the right fit for our organization has been tough. We have no choice but to keep it lean with good quality people.”

Fairfield, Conn.-based Aqua-Lawn knows its irrigation technicians are important because they have direct contact with the customer. “The impression they provide can either make or break a company,” says Toth, Aqua-Lawn’s secretary/treasurer. “Basically, the service technicians and installers are

the bread and butter of our company. It's extremely important that our customers be given a well-designed and installed system."

## **Wanted: A Detailed Technician**

When Toth looks for experienced irrigation technicians, she expects them to have good technical knowledge, as well as customer service skills with the ability to converse with customers, understand their needs and respond to requests appropriately. To be an irrigation technician in Connecticut, where Aqua-Lawn is headquartered, you also must be certified and licensed by the State of Connecticut, which requires a two-year apprenticeship.

"I look for individuals who are good with numbers, have irrigation certifications, pay attention to details, understand the importance of rules and guidelines, have a good working knowledge of what works well and how to keep things simple," says Davis, Landtech Irrigation Design Consultants, St. Louis.

But, according to most irrigation experts, it's a rainy day in Death Valley when you can find a technician possessing these qualities.

"Over the years, I have found irrigation services to be the most difficult to staff and get customer satisfaction ratings that are acceptable," Wilbert says. With 40 years of experience in the landscape industry, Wilbert is currently division manager at Surrounds Landscape Architecture and Construction, Sterling, Va.

## **It Takes Training**

Wilbert doesn't blame the candidates necessarily for their shortcomings. "The very nature of irrigation is a thankless job," he says. "The service is dirty, tough work, and the hours can be long. Customers, for the most part, never see the work because most of it lies underground, and they only comment on it when there is a problem."

Despite this, Wilbert points out, contractors need someone who has been trained in irrigation and understands how to troubleshoot. The individual must enjoy working independently and also follow direction. "Irrigation has become a very technical service with the ET controller, the computerized water management system and the concern for water as a resource," he says. "Most of the service techs are not up to speed with all of the technology that is available to us as contractors."

Wilbert believes the education of the technicians is lacking in many cases. The blame lies more with company managers and owners.

"We need to invest in our people to get the best result, and, as company owners, we sometimes miss the most obvious issues," says Wilbert. "We need to keep these techs up to speed on the changes in irrigation technology."

Aqua-Lawn knows how important this is. The company invests in training its people in-house and through the Irrigation Association and Irrigation

Contractors Association classes.

Fawcett believes hiring individuals with “common sense” has been a key to his company’s success, and that is something that can’t be taught.

## **Retain To Gain**

Aqua-Lawn retains its irrigation professionals by offering job stability, good benefits, a pleasant working environment and clear expectations. “Pay them well and provide them with the tools [software & hardware] that make their jobs easier, more productive and more fun,” he says.

“We, as managers and leaders of our company, need to recognize our service techs for their work,” Wilbert emphasizes. “Too many times, we miss opportunities to say thanks or job well done. The importance of this is always underestimated.”