

# The Unappreciated Difference Between Labor and Employees



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I've always been an employee and never an employer. I've worked for small family-owned businesses and within large national corporations. I feel confident that my perspective on being an employee, drawing on more than four decades (three in the green industry) navigating the employment market as a journalist, is shared by many other experienced employees regardless of industry.

I also feel my perspective may be valuable to employers, including those of you owning landscape and lawn service companies, small and large. Hopefully, what I write here will be helpful to you as you recruit, interview and hire employees prior to your busy spring season.

My story starts as a uncertain skinny freshman at tiny [Wabash College](#) in west central Indiana with an unexpected first meeting with Norman Moore, dean of the college. Early one early fall morning I was walking to the Campus Center for breakfast when Dean Moore, approaching from the opposite direction, stopped and introduced himself. Attired in his instantly recognizable tweed jacket and jaunty hat, he addressed me by my name and asked me a few questions about my family and hometown.

This shocked and surprised me, a lowly freshman. How did Dean Moore know me, one of more than 800 students at the college?

That he knew me by sight and seemed to take an interest in me went a long way in convincing me that I had made the right choice in terms of my college experience. (An upperclassman told me weeks later that Dean Moore made it a point each year to recognize and learn something about every incoming freshman.)

## Employees as family



That chance meeting on the college sidewalk came to mind during a presentation at the recent [Central Environmental Nursery Trade Show](#) (CENTS) in Columbus, Ohio. Bliss Nicholson and his son, Seth, tag-teamed a presentation focusing on (for want of a better term) the care and feeding of employees.

Bliss is CEO of The Bruce Company, Middleton, Wisconsin. Seth is president and COO. [The Bruce Company](#) is one of the largest and most respected independent green industry companies in the nation. It approaches its 64th anniversary with about 350 employees, 98 of whom have been with the company for 10 or more years, and 144 with more than five years seniority.

What do these numbers signify to me? It suggests to me that The Bruce Company is the kind of company that attracts and keeps good people—or as Bliss calls them “family.”

Said Bliss at CENTS: “When I got to the point where I didn’t know every employee’s name and family, I felt bad.”

Admittedly, because of its size and success, The Bruce Company has more resources than smaller companies to draw from in providing employees with career opportunities, not to mention benefits, such as a 401K, health insurance, etc. But equally significant, it has well-thought-out systems in place to recruit, train, coach and build employees’ skills.

### Employees merely a necessary expense?

I sometimes get the sense in interviewing or chatting with some of my contractor acquaintances that they view many of their employees, especially seasonal employees, as little more than economic units—as labor, as a large and necessary expense. The tragedy is (for you as an employer and them as employees) that many of the folks on your mowers or laying pavers on your clients’ properties may view themselves in the same light.

I’ve worked in companies that seemed to view me as a “necessary expense” and little more. And I’ve been fortunate to work for companies with practical systems and procedures that encouraged an open, collaborative team effort, companies that seemed to value my contributions to their success, companies that have a clear plan of where they want to go and my role (perhaps even a minor role) in helping them get there.

I’m absolutely certain you cannot build a successful small business—landscape

or otherwise—with employees that are viewed and view themselves as merely “working for the man.”

Employees that build and become part of successful companies want and demand more than this. They want structure. They want clarity in terms of their responsibilities and what is expected of them. They want training and tools to meet what you expect of them. They want regular communication and feedback. They want to be recognized and appreciated as team members. Who doesn't want to be on a winning team regardless of whether they're the star or the locker room attendant?

These are the kind of employees that build companies such as The Bruce Company and others that help all of us build a bigger and better industry.