

Training: Yes, It Makes a Big Difference

The logo for Turf, featuring the word "Turf" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A green grass blade graphic is integrated into the letter 'T'.The logo for Tree Services, featuring the words "Tree Services" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small green leaf graphic is above the 'i' in "Services". Below the main text is the tagline "Taking Tree Care to New Heights" in a smaller, italicized font.The logo for DesignBuild, featuring the word "Design" in a black, sans-serif font and "Build" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. A small orange square graphic is above the 'i' in "Design".The logo for PLOW, featuring the word "PLOW" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. A registered trademark symbol (®) is to the right of the word.

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Weitzel's small, knowledgeable team keeps his Pennsylvania company going in the right direction

J.L. Weitzel Landscaping

Owner: Jamie Weitzel

Founded: 1989

Headquarters: Harleysville, Pa.

Markets: Montgomery County Pennsylvania and an hour drive time in and around Harleysville, a city of about 9,500 in southeast Pennsylvania

Services: Landscaping, hardscaping, commercial maintenance and lighting

Employees: 9 full time, 1 part time

Website: <http://jlweitzellandscaping.com>

In a stagnant economy, growth can be a steep climb for a landscape operation, but that's exactly what J.L. Weitzel Landscaping & Lawn Care in Harleysville, in southeast Pennsylvania, is experiencing.

Growth – at least 4 percent each year since 1989, its first year in business – has been achieved through an insistence on education, training and certification, on consistency and on risk-taking and experimentation.

This year, Jamie Weitzel, owner-operator of the company, is experimenting with four 10-hour workdays as a means of saving fuel and rewarding his single crew with three-day weekends. You sometimes have to find ways to do things differently, says Weitzel. When you put pen to paper, it makes a big difference.

"The guys like it, and it's more productive for the company," says Jason Shanks, Weitzel's hardscape-construction division foreman who is in his 13th season with the firm. "We get a lot more done in one day because there's less travel time and less lunch time. It actually reduces overtime, and there's more time at home. As I get older, it allows me to heal up, go back fresh, and then I can push harder for the four days."

A full-service company, the operation mows and maintains lawns and also installs hardscapes and ponds and water features. It recently launched lawn programs with a "greener" option, says Weitzel, who began on his own, cutting grass while attending Temple University's Ambler campus for landscape design. Two years later, in 1991, he was full time. Today, he supports nine other full-time employees and a part-time office person. Two of his employees have been with him for more than five years; one is in his 11th year. Weitzel no longer does the "physical side of the business."

"I have good people," he says. "I believe in education, and that it helps you build your business. We're not just guys with trucks, and other perceptions like that that just can kill you as you're working to be legitimate."



J.L. Weitzel Landscaping experimented with four 10-hour workdays this season. Owner Jamie Weitzel says workers like it and that it's reducing travel time to jobs and reducing overtime, too.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF J.L. WEITZEL LANDSCAPING.

Two of his employees are certified landscape technicians; five are certified by the Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute (ICPI); and five by the National Concrete Masonry Association (NCMA). Each winter he sends workers to school and trade shows. He does it because it gives him the confidence to send them out on a job. His employees return from the training realizing that they're not "just landscapers," and that they don't just cut grass and throw mulch, but rather that there's a right way to do it.

"It really works," Shanks says of the training. "It makes customers more confident, but then our guys feel confident, competent and can give a decent answer and satisfy (customers). With education, we can get a little more for our jobs, and customers get four quality guys, not just one."

Weitzel sees the satisfaction this level of service provides clients, who realize they're getting value from the company even though it charges a higher rate than competing firms.

"If I could show them a couple days of work beforehand, then I'd be able to avoid a lot of questions," Weitzel says.

To that end, he's considering adding a video component to his website. "It's definitely a thought," he says. "There's always just too much to do, but there are lots of ideas for how to get people to see the difference."

A consistent approach

Weitzel prides himself on his men, and says all his guys on a job are the same – and the same as him. “When you hire us, you’re hiring me whether you know it or not, and whether I’m there or not,” he explains. “If there are five guys on a paving job, they’ve all had the same training. Each guy helps build our reputation, and we get a lot of work from referrals. We get lots of compliments because we hire guys who are meticulous.”

Then, there’s the day-to-day experience factor. Employees who have been with Weitzel the longest initially worked side-by-side with him.

“They know what I want and how I want things done,” he says. “If I am out on a job, and I see something that I don’t want done, then I tell them, but I’m not a screamer or a yeller. It’s not my way or the highway. We’re always working as a team to get the desired result and to do the work as efficiently as possible.”

He has the confidence to send his guys out to the fussiest of clients. Two weeks before this interview, two guys on the same job were also competing for a position as landscape foreman. The testing ground was a “fussy, fussy” customer – a longtime customer, but a fussy one. When the job – which included ripping out mulch beds and replacing them with 21 tons of river rock around a swimming pool – was finished, Weitzel received the direct phone call – his guys were awesome. “(The client) said they all worked their butts off,” he says.



Weitzel’s very careful about pricing mowing services, pointing out it’s a battle to get the business of homeowner associations, which often favor the least-costly service providers. “The drive time, and the gas expenses kill you,” he says. Even so, two of his employees mow 67 lawns a week.

By contrast, hardscape projects have blossomed this year. “And they’ve been good hardscape jobs, not one-and-a-half-day jobs, but three- and four-day jobs,” Weitzel says. “Usually, we might get one \$30,000 hardscape job a year. This year (as of mid-summer), we’re working on our third.”

In a couple instances, the big jobs were initiated by clients a couple years ago who have now decided to act on that delayed impulse. “But they’re also expanding on the original work,” Weitzel says.

New directions

When he started fertilizing programs, it was first offered as an add-on service, but in just its second full season, Weitzel is considering it as a separate business entity. The winter of 2010, he and another employee became certified applicators. He previously subcontracted lawn applications.

Since adding lawn treatments, he has been experimenting to get the best results for his clients’ lawns. He didn’t want to spray all chemical fertilizer. He wanted more of a blend, a bridge with organics, and that took

some trial and error. Weitzel worked with SynaTek, an East Coast turf solutions company and neighbor in Souderton, Pa., to end up with a spraying program that's now 75 percent organic and 25 percent chemical. As it stands now, his company provides a five-step program that calls for two chemical-only sprays and five organic sprays a year. The second and fourth of the seven sprays involve both solutions.



Employees at J.L. Weitzel Landscaping are encouraged to attend trade shows and earn certifications. Training is huge at this southeastern Pennsylvania, full-service firm.

"We had to get the chemistry right," Weitzel says. "We didn't want to spray for weeds, and then still have weeds. We strive for quality in everything we do, and that's why we took a year before we decided to go full force."

Since then, business has doubled. Weitzel is treating 1.9 million square feet of lawn, all within the company's typical radius, about an hour from its base.

Continued growth

Just about everything in the company has doubled of late, even its operational space. Weitzel's original plan was to find a piece of property where he could live, but also work. In 2000, he bought a 2.5-acre property that's about a mile away, but then two years ago, he found that the business had already outgrown it. He had too many trucks, too many bins, and he ran out of room at home.

"Now, we're out of room again," he says.

And that's after moving all but his 40-by-60-foot barn-office and some storage at home to the new site at the back of a nearby wooded property, which he rents. What he now calls the shop includes access to one building and space for what's now two mulch bins (and even they are now taller), plus bins for river rock, modified stone, topsoil and sand and another for debris. And equipment, of course.

Having all the bins at one location, instead of trucking to other sites for pickups, waiting there and loading up, he says, pays the new rent alone in time and gas saved.

"My head says we're about at the limit now," he says. "But if the fertilizer end keeps growing, I'll have to add another crew, and add a top guy there who knows it all, or I'll have to be out on those jobs, which means there's more office work, and that puts us at a breaking point. Some of what I just said is overhead, and that's going to make me more money."

His favorite kind of work is installing low-voltage lighting, especially in ponds, and says if he could build a business only on it, he would. "They look awesome when we're finished," he says. "It's also an easy install, and a money-maker."

Hardscaping, in general, has picked up for most in the industry, and Weitzel says the surge is based upon the look. "Concrete is cheap, and it's fine if you want to be cheap," he says.

He just redid a pool deck area this past year, a redo of a concrete job he did eight years ago. Now, the client wasn't happy with the look of concrete, and so he replaced the concrete with pavers. Another client the week of this interview wanted to do the same.

As for overall changes in the industry, Weitzel says customers have an ever-increasing confidence in landscape professionals. "It is an industry, and we are experts and educated," he says. "Twenty years ago, it was thought that all we wanted was a paycheck so we could get to the bar, that you could pay us \$10 an hour because it wasn't a profession, and we would never own a house or have a career. Now, clients ask, 'What do you think? You're the professional.' The attitudes and views have changed."

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