

Technology To The Rescue



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Technology has revolutionized so many different industries with its power to automate, its ability to enhance communication, and its capacity to not only generate data but also interpret results and produce reports.

The capabilities of technology within the green industry have been no different. While some landscape and lawn care professionals have been reluctant to adopt the latest tools, those who have say technology has come to the rescue in many areas in their businesses, including scheduling, data analysis, billing and marketing. As a result, technology is also boosting efficiency and, ultimately, increasing profitability.

Useful technology to the lawn and landscape industry comes in many forms – from business software to networked systems, mobile devices and GPS tracking units.

Many landscape professionals today use multiple forms of technology. For instance, Rodolph Brothers in Casper, Wyoming, utilizes iPads that run software in every truck; Fleetmatics GPS tracking units inside the dashes of vehicles to track efficiency, maintenance and safety; AboutTime employee time cards to track employees and work times on their smartphones; drafting software for designers; Google Earth Professional to measure square footage of properties; and Quickbooks for bookkeeping. In addition, Rodolph Brothers had its own software program custom developed to manage snow events.

Aaron Rodolph, company president, puts it this way: “Technology isn’t magic – but it’s a great tool and should be used to its fullest extent.”

Using software or other forms of technology can simplify the complicated processes associated with lawn care and landscape work. “Lawn care is highly complex,” says Cherish Hull with Sensible Software, Inc. (CLIP). “The scheduling process is complicated. It requires tracking crews at various jobsites on different days. Even if a company feels like they have it down, a delay or a change can throw it all off. But software can handle it, and it

can simplify the entire process.”

Getting started

But at what point do you actually need software? “Companies can probably get by without software in the beginning if they have less than 100 customers,” Hull says. “But you also have to consider whether software would help you grow faster. It gets extremely complicated when you’re looking at a bunch of different schedules for different days on Excel spreadsheets. Landscape contractors in landscape maintenance roles who have complicated routes and a lot of jobs per week are going to benefit the most from this.”

Rodolph agrees that software can help a company grow because it simplifies processes. He says he began implementing business software and additional technology tools when the company grew past five employees. Now with 27 people, the company brings in \$2.5 million in sales, and Rodolph says they couldn’t operate nearly as efficiently without those tools. “To be honest, I’m not sure how we managed without it even when it was only five of us,” he admits.

Other landscape and lawn care company owners feel the same way.

When Bruce Stone’s company got its start in 1986, he used typewriters to type invoices. He knew it wasn’t efficient enough. “We started looking at software in the early ’90s and found it has a number of advantages,” says Stone, president of Yard Smart in Grafton, Ohio.

Among them, Stone cites generating route sheets as a top benefit. From a job costing standpoint, Stone says the software tracks on-site time and travel hours between jobs and then calculates that data. At the end of the day, a report that shows dollars per hour, as well as total hours for the day, is incredibly useful in knowing which jobs are making money – and where more efficiency might be needed.

In fact, report generation is a top-named feature of many software programs. Paul Wagner, president of Fit Turf in the Metro Denver area (with a second location in Detroit), says besides routing, the ability to generate sales reports, marketing growth analyses, and other key reports are the “can’t live without” features of his software program.

“Back in the day we had to input all this data by hand, and I had three employees solely posting production,” Wagner says. “Today, the use of mobile software lessens the time you have to keep people in the office. It makes it really easy for us to know where the guys are and how long they were at each stop. If the customer ever questions something, we have an electronic record to refer to.”



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PHOTO: SENSIBLE SOFTWARE

An efficiency boost

There seems to be little doubt that the automation of processes improves efficiency dramatically. Morgan Stallard, general manager with Four Feet to the Yard in Silver Spring, Maryland, says after 20-plus years of using software, he could never go back to the old ways. "It helps us to be much more efficient in planning a work day—at least 15 percent more efficient than just doing a well-planned day on paper—but probably much more than that," Stallard says.

The No. 1 issue with attempting to run a business without software is the "duplication of data entry," says Nanette Seven, vice president of Include Software. "Most contractors who don't already have a program are using Excel for estimating, QuickBooks for accounting, white boards for scheduling—or another Excel spreadsheet—and then creating work orders or job tickets that are being duplicated or re-entered from the estimate or proposal," she explains. "All of these things are duplicated administrative efforts that are more prone to error and omission."

Seven says that paying an administration person a yearly salary plus benefits—all overhead costs—when systems can be put in place to do the same job is how the software pays for itself. "I'm not here to take away jobs," she says. "But I help set up businesses so they can grow without having to add additional staff each time they increase their size. Software can handle those functions."

Michael T. Bedell, owner of Bedell Property Management in Milford, Michigan, can relate to the concerns with old-fashioned data input. He says when he started his business daily route sheets were filled out by hand for each crew and turned in at the end of the day. That data was then entered into the billing software manually. This created a number of issues.

"If pertinent information had to be relayed or the schedule needed to change, it created a myriad of problems," Bedell says. "Also, deciphering some employees' handwriting scribbles on paper turned out to be a challenge."

But Bedell says those issues disappeared with software. With everything automated, it has also reduced time spent on administrative tasks on a daily basis.



"We also noticed increased accuracy when it came to clocking in and out of jobsites, which obviously helps fine-tune your numbers," Bedell adds. "And we appreciate that all of our information is available to us on all platforms and devices in real time."

Going mobile

In fact, most software companies are offering mobile solutions. Michelle Tarantino of Marathon Data Systems says many versions of desktop software sync in real time with mobile apps to reduce administrative time as well as

paper usage.

"Many companies have gone paperless and streamlined their office work by utilizing a mobile solution with a desktop software," she says. "The mobile app allows techs to time in, view appointment and location information, perform their services and time out. Invoices can even be emailed right from the mobile device, and all of this information syncs directly back with the desktop software."

Bedell says the on-the-go ability of the latest software and technology is critical to his crews' workflow.

"Work is scheduled on a Web-based scheduling application, which allows our staff to view their jobs for the day, as well as the workload of other crews on their smartphones," he says. "We use Jobber, which has pertinent client info and will even route crewmembers from their current location to the next jobsite. Employees check off when a job is completed, and that info is immediately available to everyone else who is logged in. The completed job can be pushed into our billing software (QuickBooks) to automatically generate an invoice."



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PHOTO: GO ILAWN

The new way of measuring

In addition to data tracking, reporting and route scheduling, contractors say technology tools that allow them to do jobsite measuring from their computer have also been a huge advance.

"We used to have to physically drive to a property and bring the measuring wheel. Sometimes, we'd have to wait until the spring to provide an estimate because of the snow," says John Peterson, design and sales manager with Exscape Designs in Chesterland, Ohio. "It might take two to three hours to drive to a property and do all the measuring, but now it can be done in 20 minutes and there are no weather factors to avoid with software. We can do more with fewer people."

Rob Turley, general manager with Custom Turf in Finleyville, Pennsylvania, says the ability to measure lawns while still sitting in the office is so much more efficient, and it helps him keep jobs. "Just five years ago, if a request came in for an estimate we'd have to go out with the measuring wheel and get back to them at a later date," he says. "Now when they call, I literally measure the lawn while they're still on the phone and email them the proposal while we're talking. More often than not, I close the sale before they have the chance to hang up and call someone else."

Measuring from a computer can save time, which is money, adds Go iLawn CEO

Mike Rorie. "It's a terrific differentiating tool against the competition as well," he says. "It speeds up estimating, is a great sales and presentation tool and is a great operational tool for your production staff so everyone is looking at the same thing."

The new way of marketing

Of course technology has also revolutionized marketing. More companies are utilizing email blasts to send newsletters and e-brochures with the most up-to-date content. "It used to be that you'd have brochures printed and were stuck with them until they ran out," says Exscape's Peterson. "Nowadays with web technology you insert new pictures and, boom, you have a brand new brochure."

Many software products also assist with more effective marketing. "If you have marketing functions built in your software, you should be able to import marketing lists into your database," says Brian Bacialupo, marketing and business consultant for Real Green Systems. "This, along with past estimates, and cancelled customers, creates a great marketing universe for you to market to neighbors of current customers."

Yard Smart's Stone says marketing capabilities are a major benefit of software. "We're able to generate all kinds of marketing lifts on any type of work we've done in the past but are not currently doing," he says. "For example, I can list all of the clients we did spring cleanup for last year but didn't do this year. Then we can do a merge letter for both spring and fall cleanup that reminds customers we're available and lists all of our services."

Learning curve

For those companies that have yet to introduce software or other forms of technology to their landscape businesses, the learning curve may be intimidating. That's where the software selection process becomes even more critical.

"Support is very important," Stone says. "When shopping for software, you really need to look at how long the company has been around and make sure you feel comfortable that they're going to stay around. That may be a downfall of going the customized route. What will happen if that company is no longer around? If a program was custom built for you, you may have trouble finding someone who can provide support if problems arise."

Along with the appropriate support, most software users say that with basic computer and Internet skills, software programs can be learned relatively fast. Turley says he recently trained a new secretary and says it took about a week for her to get it down. The good news is that once you get the hang of it, it usually sticks. "It's like riding a bike," he says. "Once you get it, you get it."

Of course good support has a lot to do with that, and Turley says he feels well-supported by a number of resources, including ongoing tutorials, as well

as annual user conferences packed with educational sessions.

Ken Scherer, owner of Hillsborough Irrigation & Landscape Services in Hillsborough, New Jersey, says on top of online training and support, much of the learning comes from simply using the software each day. That trial-and-error process worked much better during the off-season than during regular business hours, Scherer explains. "This ensured we were prepared to use the program during the spring season," he points out. "We found that everyone who used the software had no problem learning it."

In the end, however, it does come down to people. Software is only as effective as its users. Stallard sums it up as "garbage in, garbage out."

"Software can be incredibly helpful," he shares. "But if you're not putting in good information, you're not going to get accurate data. It's as simple as that."

The solution is ongoing training, Rodolph adds. "Training never stops, and it never will," he says. "You can never stop educating your people. These landscape and business software tools only work in the hands of capable people."

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