

Staffing In The Off-Season

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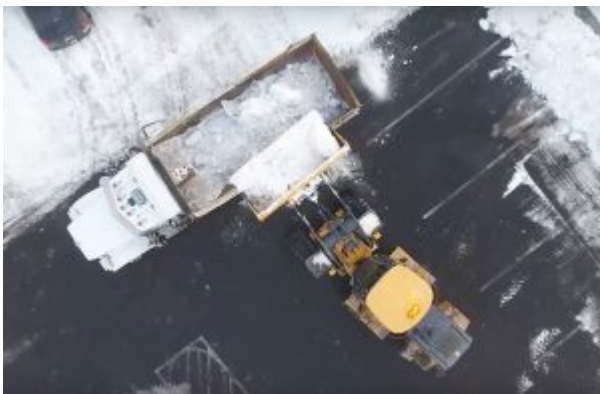
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[dropcap]F[/dropcap>or a lot of lawn and landscaping companies, the off-season poses a unique set of challenges when it comes to staffing. Being a [seasonal](#) business, most [landscape business owners are faced with deciding](#) whom to lay off and whom to keep—as well as how to keep those year-round employees busy. Complicating matters is the difficulty of hiring and retaining reliable employees. If they're laid off, will they return?



(Photo credit: Outback Landscape)

Extending The Season

A number of companies have faced this challenge head-on by extending their season with various winter services. For Chase Coates, owner of Outback Landscape in Rexburg, ID, adding a holiday lighting service has been the ideal way to keep his employees working—and has proven to be a successful profit driver, bringing in around \$250,000 annually.

“It gives us a full solid month of billable labor and it’s a repeat service every year,” Coates says. “Besides installing the lights, we’re also pulling them down, labeling, and storing them in January—so that gets us to February 1. Then, we do snow, too. We are able to keep all of our foremen and equipment operators on staff full-time year-round because of snow. For that

reason, my best advice to other landscape companies who are looking to keep employees busy and find an off-season revenue driver is to add a high-margin winter service.”

Like Coates and many other landscape business owners, Mark Borst, owner of Borst Landscape & Design in Allendale, NJ, says snow keeps his team busy as well and produces about 15% of the company’s overall income. Borst keeps about 25% of the total staff on for the winter season which consists of all of the company’s managers plus some of the key field employees.

When There’s No Snow

Of course, some snow seasons are a bust. Borst says when it’s not snowing, team members are kept busy by refurbishing equipment and preparing for the upcoming regular season. Anything that can be done to ensure the company hits the ground running come spring will help get the next season off to the best start.

Coates admits that snow work may not be for everyone. It definitely requires a major investment in equipment, and the logistics can be complex. But there are other ways to earn winter income.

“If you don’t want to create a huge snow removal company, then I would go after parking lots that require deicing like medical buildings or doctor’s offices—places that need to be open, no matter what,” Coates says. “That’s honestly where a lot of the money is made, and it can be a more manageable service.”

Bob Grover, owner of Pacific Landscape Management in Portland, OR, says their marine climate doesn’t mean much snow. For that reason, they push the landscaping season as far as they can—doing pruning and remedial work in the winter when weather allows for it. When it does snow, Grover says it’s “all hands on deck.”

“My best advice is to try to work with customers to do as many things in the winter as possible,” Grover suggests. “We are too busy in the summer, so things that can be done in the winter can... smooth things out. For instance, most of our irrigation renovations occur in the winter.” (See article, “Selling More Than Plowing” on page 20.)

Who Stays And Who Goes?

In terms of determining who stays and who goes, Borst says it almost always works itself out at his company. He says he typically has enough crew members who appreciate the rest period that winter offers as they gear up for another labor-intensive season.

Grover says he keeps all crew leaders year-round with about 20% of his staff being seasonal. That 20% seasonal pool is mostly filled by the H-2B program. (The H-2B program allows U.S. employers who meet specific regulatory requirements to bring aliens to the U.S. to fill temporary nonagricultural jobs.)

Though it's a given in this industry that layoffs are a natural part of doing business, it can still be challenging for some companies to address. Coming to the lawn and landscape industry from the Marines, Joe Lewis, account manager for Environmental Management, Inc. (EMI) in Plain City, OH, says that seasonal layoffs are relatively new to him—and his least favorite aspect of the industry, if he's being honest. But he also knows it's a necessity.

"We'd like to keep everyone if we could, but even our team members recognize that it comes with the territory," Lewis says. "We owe it to our people to be as smart as we can about operations, and that does mean we can't keep everyone year-round." But Lewis says how those layoffs are handled can be the difference between disgruntled employees and a happy team. "The most important thing is to be clear and up front," he says. "Nobody should ever be surprised by a seasonal layoff—it should be something that was already talked about from day one. When you're giving the team lots of advance notice and constantly communicating about what's going on, you don't open the door for upsetting anyone or possibly discouraging them from coming back."

Another benefit EMI offers employees (both seasonal and full-time) is free financial advice, says Lewis. If seasonal employees are struggling with figuring out off-season personal finances, EMI's financial advisor is available to them. Lewis says EMI also offers paid vacation days, which are earned, and some employees save those days until the off-season. "We're really looking to do whatever we can to be of the best service to our team, and that includes how we handle the off-season," Lewis says.

Unemployment Insurance

Government unemployment benefits can also be helpful. For those that don't stay on in the winter, unemployment benefits are worth looking into—recognizing that laws will differ from state-to-state.

"With seasonal unemployment... your employees may be able to earn a percentage of their pay, depending on what state you're in and what the regulations are," Coates adds. "That's what programs like that are there for."

First, a worker must be designated as an employee, not an independent contractor. Next, it's up to the individual requirements of the state. Michele Evermore, senior policy analyst with the National Employment Law Project (NELP) says, "Generally speaking, most states do not cover seasonal unemployment insurance but... every state is different." She emphasizes, "It varies quite a bit.... It's been left to the states to create their own policy, so states do have really broad latitude in terms of who they can cover with a few exceptions."

She adds, "When you apply for unemployment insurance, you generally have to send paperwork in showing that you are actively looking for work, but in some states, they say as long as you have a certified start date back with your main employer, then you can qualify for unemployment insurance."

The length of the last recession depleted many state unemployment funds. "So, going forward, a lot of states tried to reduce access to unemployment

insurance,” says Evermore. “That has not been great for seasonal employees.” But there is good news. Oklahoma just recently added seasonal employment and Massachusetts has expanded the definition of a seasonal worker, she says.

Time For Training

Like any other business challenge, it’s important off-season decisions are carefully thought-out or it can have a negative impact. “You really need to look at who you’re keeping and how they can help you in the off season,” advises Borst. “Make sure you’re not draining your budget for the year when you’re not producing your primary revenue.”

Lewis agrees and says “being smart about how you utilize the people that you do keep on” is key. “You might not be able to fill every minute of every day with work, but those are the times we try to take advantage of as many training opportunities as there are,” he adds. “The off-season can be the ideal time to strengthen your company by cross-training employees in different areas of the business that perhaps they were too busy to learn during the regular season. You can also take classes and help your employees to further their education. The bottom line is to use your off-season time as wisely as possible, no matter what you’re doing.”



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