



Winning at Hiring, Training and Retaining
Landscape Employees

Contractor's Guide to Successful Candidate Interviews



Introduction

Your company's most valuable asset is its people. Selecting, training and retaining the right people can dramatically increase your success.

In the hiring game, the cost of a mistake is very high. Selecting the wrong person not only means that you're paying for substandard results, but also he can be a drag on the productivity and success of your whole organization. In many cases, the damage done by a bad hire is 2 to 3 times the cost of his monthly wage. In just one season, a bad hire can cost you tens of thousands of dollars in lost profits and potential.

While the financial costs alone are frightening, there are also the emotional costs of hiring the wrong person. A "bad apple" can destroy the morale of your entire team, cause disciplinary issues and lead you to many sleepless nights.



For the landscape and irrigation contractor, there are few resources available to help you improve your candidate selection process. That's why we are offering this special resource that provides practical and proven ideas you can use right away.



Why Improve Your Interviewing Process?

Your interview process should be an efficient and practical way to get insight into job applicants to make a wise hiring choice.

It should also help you screen candidates effectively; reducing the time you spend conducting interviews (because unqualified candidates get eliminated earlier in the process) and giving you deeper insights into the candidates with whom you meet.

Often the unskilled interviewer does too little to effectively evaluate candidates and therefore makes bad hiring decisions. By improving your process, you'll discover better candidates and get better results.

What to Do Before the Interview



Connect with the candidate by phone before scheduling an in-person interview. These calls are often revealing. If the candidate is hard to reach or slow to call back, this is definitely a sign of his/her potential behavior moving forward. Proceed with caution. Of course, some candidates can be nervous or fumble their words on the phone. If you're hiring a laborer or a technician, don't hold this initial awkwardness against them.



Confirm a time to meet and include a pre-meeting "assignment" Ask the candidate to review information you send by email and/or to review your website before he comes in for the meeting. In the interview, you can ask about what he learned from reviewing these materials. The candidate who doesn't take the time to at least minimally peruse the materials may prove to be unsuitable. Similarly, the candidate who shows up late to the interview appointment without a logical excuse is also showing a "proceed with caution" message.



For managerial or office roles, request a resume and a cover letter. The cover letter is the candidate's opportunity to express interest in the role. If it's done accurately and carefully, that's a great sign of the person's attention to detail. You don't want a communications manager who makes common grammatical mistakes. Review the resume for work history, key skills and broad experience that might apply to the role. Look for general fit, not a perfect match. Often managers will look too closely for a specific job title or level of industry experience. Be open to candidates who have relevant background or experience in other industries or job roles.

What to Do During the Interview

Make the candidate feel comfortable and welcome. Nothing is gained by a high-stress interview environment. It puts up an artificial barrier that prevents the candidate from relaxing and showing his true nature. It also can often be off-putting to candidates you most want to attract.

Give the interview your undivided attention. Don't take phone calls and leave email until later. Keep in mind the applicant is a person, not a number. Give the respect you would give a customer.

Frame the first interview as a 15 minute meeting. You'll know in the first 15 minutes whether you'll want to continue. You can gracefully exit from a bad situation if the interview goes poorly with no surprise on the part of the interviewee. If the interview is going great, most candidates will be willing to stay on to continue the discussion.



Avoid talking too much. A common mistake of rookie interviewers is to spend too much time talking about the job. They ask the candidate "yes or no" questions looking for agreement with their own summary of the job. It's not helpful when you're leading the candidate to just agree to the correct answers.

A good way to get the candidate to talk is to pile up several questions at once, getting them onto the table, and then just being quiet so the candidate can respond. For example, you can say "What do you do to make sure a job runs smoothly? How do you evaluate the quality of the work? How do you keep things on track to the schedule? What do you do when something goes wrong?" Then just BE QUIET. Your candidate will talk and talk, giving you a real chance to understand his/her thinking and approach.

Trust your gut. You're going to have a reaction to the person in the first few minutes. Is this someone you can work with? Is this someone you can trust? Will this be a good fit? Look for candidates who demonstrate positive passion or seem to have "something to prove". They'll often be great contributors to your organization. If your gut is telling you it's not a fit, it isn't.

If the candidate is shy or awkward, tread carefully. It may be your candidate's first interview in 10 years. Or he might not be as naturally outgoing as you. Don't necessarily see these as a negative if the role is not one that requires a lot of social interaction. Conversely, some candidates put forth bravado and incessant chatter to cover for lack of concrete knowledge or motivation.

Be Columbo. Remember the TV detective who had "just one more question" as he was stepping out the door? Have a couple of zinger questions as the interview is wrapping up and the candidate is more relaxed. These might be an opportunity to get insight to the person ("do you consider yourself successful?" or "what things really bother you?") or their perception of a particular role or duty ("what do you really think of safety rules?")

Consider walking the candidate out to his vehicle. One contractor claims he can tell a lot about how successful a service technician will be by how neatly he maintains his personal vehicle.



What to Do After the Interview

Quickly write down the candidate's pros and cons. It's important to get your insights on paper quickly, particularly if you're interviewing several candidates. Often during the interview you can write keywords that can help you construct a list when the interview has concluded. A technique to follow is to take a sheet of paper and divide it down the center with a line. In the left column, write keywords that are "pros": "experienced", "motivated", etc. On the right, write "cons": "work hours", "asked few questions", etc. If you have several interviewers in your process, ask each to provide pros/cons for all candidates they interview.



Start background checks with selected candidates. Have the candidate sign a standard form consenting to background checks. The form can include the information you need to get these checks started with your provider.

Verify the candidate's legal eligibility to work with the United States government E-Verify site. Enroll at <http://www.uscis.gov/e-verify>

In addition to background checks, do testing. Consider having the candidate complete an overt integrity test that identifies applicants prone to counterproductive behavior. These are known to reduce workers compensation claims, reduce selection of employees with behavioral issues and increase success. One of the popular tests is IntegrityFirst (formerly Tesco) which is used by many national firms. www.integrityfirsttests.com



Consider personality testing. Many companies are using the Myers Briggs Indicator or a DiSC profile to gain insights into the candidate's work style. These are especially helpful in understanding how to most effectively work with the candidate (his style of learning, his preferred method of receiving management direction, etc.).

Check references. Call your candidates' references when you expect they'll be away from the office or at lunch. Why? You want them to call you back. Say "Henrietta Rogers is a candidate for a crew leader position at our company. Your name was provided as a reference. Please call me back if you feel she would be an ideal fit for the role." If the candidate is really that good, you'll get 100% call backs with great comments. If you get zero calls back, that's a major red light!



Summary

The more interviews you do, the better you will be. One contractor who has completed hundreds of interviews has developed a profile of certain key attributes that define candidates who are standouts and washouts. Look for patterns that allow you to eliminate problem candidates early so you can focus on the right prospects.

People are an investment. Great business strategies can help you grow, but without the right people to implement them, they're just ideas. Find the right people!



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Train the Best.
Motivate the Best.**

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to help you grow your
employee success in the
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Sample Interview Questions

Candidate Self-Assessment

Tell me about yourself.

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

What motivates you? What demotivates you?

Why do you think you would be a good fit for the job?

Assess Candidates Interest in the Company and the Industry

What did you learn about our company from the materials I sent (or from our website)?

What do you think it takes to be successful at our company?

Identify the Candidate's Problem Solving or Thought Process

Create one or two situations and ask the candidate what he/she would do in them:

- Diagnosing or troubleshooting a problem
- Introducing himself to a potential customer
- Handling a customer complaint
- Resolving a conflict with a co-worker

If your supervisor asked you to do something that you disagreed with, what would you do?

Tell me about a stressful day at work, how did you keep it under control?

When are you most satisfied at your job?

What differentiates great customer service from average customer service?

For managers: What key factors do you consider to ensure a job is managed efficiently? What aspects of a job do you consider when evaluating its quality? How do you motivate a crew to do high-quality work without exceeding budgeted labor hours?



Identifying Successes and Motivations

What did you like about your past job? Why did you leave (or will you leave)?

What was the last project you led and what was the outcome?

Give me an example of when you went "above and beyond" the expected at work.

What traits of others irritate you and how do you deal with them?

Tell me about the last time you got angry with a co-worker, customer or supervisor. What happened?

If you were told a co-worker did not respect you, what would you do?

Why do you think you're the right person for this job?

Have you ever been on a team where someone was not "pulling his weight"? How did you handle it?

