

LABOR SHORTAGES IN THE NURSERIES

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A labor shortage could be described as a deficiency in the amount of work force that is available to perform a particular task. This definition would be alright with anyone except a nurseryman. The definition most common used by a nurseryman is "A Labor Shortage Is Hell!"

The labor shortage has been an increasing problem for many years. It has become a household word. In recent months many of our women liberators have had to return to their nest to take up the slack created by the shortage of maids and baby-sitters.

Although there are numerous reasons and causes for our labor shortage in our nursery program, I will mention only a few; and how we have adjusted to them. Most of my remarks will be my own personnel views and experiences that have occurred in my locality during my brief experiences in the nursery program.

Most of my remarks will be aimed or directed at our causal or part-time labor and their responsibilities.

First, I plan to discuss some of the causes of the shortages. Then I will discuss how some of these causes can be dealt with and how we must live with others.

One of the earlier causes of the labor shortages that has affected our nurseries has been the movement from the rural areas to the urban areas. The Industrial Revolution created conditions that led to the modern labor movement. Large numbers of workers and laborers left the farms and rural areas for the big factories in the cities and urban areas. With this movement the land available for rural living has been diminishing. Thus still further reducing the available labor.

Another factor that has direct involvement to our labor shortage which is also related to my first cause is the expansion and spread of industry. With the constant increasing and expanding sizes of cities, many new industries are now having to build new plants and factories in the rural areas to get enough space. There are numerous small plants that are being built in small communities. These plants may employ only fifty to seventy-five employees, but this cause a tremendous reduction in the available labor force in a small community. They not only reduce the supply that you may have to select from, but also the ones that you are already working.

This new era has created a shortage of quality labor in our nurseries. Unless we are able to make our jobs and positions competitive with surrounding industry, quality labor will always take a higher paying position. Before the arrival of a labor shortage you could be very selective in your hiring. Now you take what you can get.

Another cause of the labor shortage is the need for casual or part-time labor. Many nursery operations are of a seasonal nature. So there are certain times of the year, that you will need to substantially increase your labor force. One such example is during the lifting and packing season. You can never be sure from one season to the next if you will be able to pick up a work crew. A great deal of time is consumed in training new recruits. Most people who are willing to work are looking for full time employment.

Still another cause of this labor shortage in our nurseries is the unusual weather conditions that must be worked in. The majority of their responsibilities must be conducted in the out-of-doors. Although the weather conditions are not severe everyday, there are many days that you have to work under adverse conditions. To complete work schedules and commitments, many operations must be performed in extreme weather conditions due to the short time period that is available to perform these tasks.

Another cause of the labor shortage is the advent of various support programs. They have made a definite impact on the labor supply. Although our support programs were set up by our government for good reasons, there are people who take advantage of these. In many instances people have lost the desire or need to work or better themselves. If they lose this, then people are just not going to work.

Also, it should be noted that my present labor force is very poorly educated as a whole. I have several that can neither read nor write. Their average age is thirty-nine. These people have had to work all their life. They are accustomed to work.

However, the younger generation that is now becoming available is better educated and do not particularly like nursery work. I am not a philosopher, but I can detect certain trends. This trend is that people with good sense do not like nursery work, or maybe they are lazy.

So far I have discussed several causes or reasons for our present labor shortage, and now I would like to mention somethings that can be done about it, I hope.

The number one factor I feel in combating the labor shortage is mechanization. Even with a labor shortage, our nurseries can produce more seedlings than ever before. Special built lifting machines can lift more seedlings in one day than an average hand crew (8 supermen) can in a full week. Seedlings are now packed by weight or bed inventory instead of counting to reduce labor. Seeding and mulching machines have been built to cut down on the labor needed to plant. New herbicides are being developed and tested each year to reduce weeding cost. There are numerous operations performed during a season to maximize the return from a pound of seed. This in turn reduces the number of seedlings that need to be produced. There are all types of tractors and equipment that reduces the labor force that is needed to produce a crop of seedlings.

If quality labor is available, you can maximize the productivity of your labor force with little supervision. Quality labor will do the job right the first time. Their work is thorough, accurate, and meets standard requirements. Quality labor reduces the number of employees needed.

If quality labor is not available, then you must work your labor to an effect where they must show progress. They should be worked in a way where they must compete with one another. Schedule work where they will not be doing the same task everyday if possible. Create an incentive or desire to maximize their abilities. Let them know why they are performing a job that they are not familiar with.

In hiring new people, I have found in most instances that if you have a good worker from a particular section of the community stick to that section in hiring new people. This also enables you to work people that may not have any means of transportation of their own.

Of course in order to attract people to your nursery, your jobs and positions must be competitive with surrounding industry. Establishment of insurance programs, sick leave, and vacations are important in attracting labor. Also, it is getting harder to work people over forty hours.

One other factor in the establishment of a good labor force, hire people that know how to work as a group and can get along with other people. This helps for a smooth operation. Also leave no doubts of what you expect from your labor force.

In regards to the problem with casual or part-time labor one method of combating this is to select the best of your crew, and try to schedule your work load so that they will have some work for them through out the entire year. During the rush season you will have to pick up a few extra workers as needed, but you will always have a trained crew.

There is not too much that you can do to improve the working conditions except changing the working hours during extreme hot or cold weather. Coming in early during the summer months works real good since most of the workers have farm crops that need caring for. We also furnish rubber boots and wet suits to work in during rainy periods.

I have just mentioned a few of the problems that a nurseryman must contend with to get a workable force. The nurserymans definition for a labor shortage takes on a new meaning when he puts his labor force to work.