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September/October 2016
VOL. 33 / NO. 6

Where Have All the Turf Equipment Technicians Gone?

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Are Qualified Turf Equipment Technicians a Thing of the Past?



By **Stephen Tucker**,
*Equipment Manager, Four Seasons Resort Orlando
at Walt Disney World® Resort*

It seems like every year, at the end of the summer, I sit back and evaluate the golf and turf industry and think about where we are. I notice things are not getting any easier. Today, I find myself looking for an assistant technician, as my last one has moved up, and it's not going to be easy. Typically, I have found someone with mechanical promise on the grounds crew and just transferred him into the shop and trained him, but even

that is more difficult these days.

In addition to the expertise issue, almost all of the equipment technician programs around the country have shut their doors, so we are left searching other industries, which are also hurting, trying to steal someone over to our industry. This is also easier said than done because, in order to steal qualified technicians, you need to have a nice carrot to dangle in front of them. Letting them know that the job requirements consist of grinding reels, electrical troubleshooting, hydraulic troubleshooting, welding, painting, equipment operation, organization, repairing small engines and diesel engines, etc., etc.—for some reason this tends to be a little overwhelming. Just about 10 years ago, the “work on the car with your dad” era, which defined my childhood, ended. This was the time in kids’ lives when they learned that they liked to work on things. Now, we are in the “take the car to the shop” era, and those kids will never discover whether or not they like to fix things

If that isn’t enough, while the golf market is slowly coming back in most places, the costs are rising, with labor being one of the most expensive pieces of that puzzle. Qualified technicians are in the driver’s seat these days because there are so few around, and that has, and will continue, to raise the pay rate. That is good for existing technicians, but when we reach out to find some help, it’s a ghost town. As an example, one of my consulting client’s is now paying \$15,000 more than he has paid in the past to employ a well-qualified equipment manager. It is not only difficult to find them but also today’s equipment is more sophisticated, and expectations continue to rise.

As an industry, we need to figure

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out how to fix the problem. In 2007, I called a meeting with industry leaders who traveled to Lake City Community College (now Florida Gateway College) in Lake City, Florida, to discuss this issue before it became serious. (That program has since joined the growing list of closures.)

We had some great ideas to put the spotlight on technicians, and that has helped get us to where we are today with GCSAA. Now, equipment technicians are featured in regular columns in industry magazines are being mentioned more in the “Big Three’s” publications, but it hasn’t helped to get new blood into our industry. We tend to cover our eyes to the issue until it becomes “our problem” or until the new answer becomes, “We will just pay more.” While some clubs have that luxury, many do not. This is the situation we currently face: We have to raise wages until we can get more willing and qualified technicians in the door.

At the end of the summer, there were 67 jobs for technicians on Turfnet alone! That doesn’t include

the lower-paying positions that are utilizing Craigslist and multiple other local advertising options. I think it is important that, as an industry, we look at this growing issue. My facility will do what needs to be done to hire someone, but that doesn’t help all the other clubs that are hurting from a lack of talent in the shop.

Solutions to the Technician Shortage

The first solution I suggest is something we were working on with a college in Missouri. A few years ago, I visited a technical college in Missouri armed with, at that time, our International Golf Course Equipment Managers Association (IG-CEMA) Certificate Program study guide. The intention was to provide the basic structure for a turf equipment management program. While in discussion with them, and due to my previous experience serving on the advisory committee at Lake City Community College, the one thing I have come to realize is people outside of the golf industry do not have

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the first idea about an equipment manager’s duties.

Unfortunately, I think that building a program with the “field of dreams” hope that “if we build it, they will come” was where our first mistake was made. The reality is that no one understands what the job entails, so how can we market it to potential students?

Then, when you look at the location of most of these colleges, they are not situated in highly concentrated golf towns; they are in small towns with little golf activity.

My suggestion to colleges that start equipment technician programs is this: Don’t put all your eggs in one basket, i.e., into the golf basket. Create a program for outdoor power equipment (OPE). That gives the program a broader audience of potential candidates. The basic education requirements are the same for both professions—just on a little different scale and with a few specialized needs for the golf industry, such as grinding. The first year curriculum would address OPE and would include all the crossover education that could then direct a student to the more specialized areas for the second year, such as marine, motorcycle, golf, etc.

Colleges with low student admissions could attract a core base of students starting out in OPE before directing students to specialized classes. Instructors could help steer students



into a specialized direction based on their interests during their first year. This program structure would provide a greater chance of marketing success.

My next solution involves assistant golf course superintendents. I believe the market is saturated. Even with fewer students enrolled each year, the superintendent role isn't for all of them. There should be a career path from assistant superintendent to equipment manager.

While I don't see many assistants who are mechanically inclined, they should be able to take classes, at local colleges, local shows or even the Golf Industry Show, to pick up those skills. This would open the doors a little further, as far as options for these employees. Even if they chose to return to a superintendent position, the equipment manager experience would prove invaluable.

During my time as CEO of IGCE-MA, it became clear that the average age of technicians was around 50–55 years old. As they retire in the coming decade, we are going to have a real issue. I recently received two calls in one week from superintendents looking for technicians, and I don't see those stopping. We have to do something, and coming up with solutions to the issue, I think, is a great start! But, it's a conversation that needs to continue. 🌱

Stephen Tucker is a 1999 graduate of Lake City Community College (now Florida Gateway College). He has served as an equipment manager for the last 17 years. Currently at Tranquilo Golf Club @ Four Seasons Orlando, he is the former founder and CEO of the International Golf Course Equipment Managers Association, and the owner of Turfaddict.com. Tucker also provides turf equipment management consulting services around the United States and Canada at clubs such as Bluejack National, Bellerive Country Club and The National.

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